“On the Job, Now What?”

The influence of workplace culture on beginning teachers’ professional learning: accounts from five teachers

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Abstract

The early years of a teacher’s work are critical for developing the knowledge and skills of an expert teacher. The ‘XXX’ study examines the experiences of 57 newly registered teachers employed by New Zealand primary and secondary schools. The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which schools employing beginning teachers are able to enhance the professional learning of their newest members. Vignettes from five teachers illustrate (i) the importance of workplace cultures making time for structured conversations about how to improve learning and teaching and (ii) the roles played by more experienced teachers in retaining high quality teachers.

Keywords
Culture, teacher learning, career development, induction, retention, job satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

In their recent book on teachers’ early careers, Goodlad and McMannon (2004) observe, “. . . we pay a severe price for our neglect of the teaching career” (p. 9). They argue that schools need to attend more rigorously to the first five years of teachers’ work. Completion of an initial teacher education programme is only the beginning of a teacher’s professional learning journey. The rest is the responsibility of the profession and those who work alongside the newest members in school settings. This work includes providing new teachers with formal support through structured induction programmes as well as with opportunities to talk more informally as the need arises on a day-to-day
basis. Goodlad and McMannon also argue that the socialization of new teachers is important not only during the first two years of their induction period (the minimum time required for full teacher registration status in New Zealand) but also for up to the first five to eight years. Their claim is in line with Berliner’s (1994) view that these early years are critical for developing the knowledge and skills of an expert teacher. Eberhard, Reinhardt-Mondragon, and Stottlemyer (2000) similarly favour longer induction programmes for new teachers. They argue there is an increased likelihood of teacher retention when opportunities to observe model teachers and work with effective mentors extend into the second or third years of teaching.

However, despite this provision, the Phase One findings of the XXX study (XXX, 2006), which also informs this present article, showed that beginning teachers receive varying levels of induction support. One group of these teachers (54%) described systematic and supportive induction experiences. A second group (26%) said they taught in schools that provided minimal or unsupportive induction. They said they were left alone to work out how to teach or had colleagues who provided no emotional or teaching support. The third group of teachers (19%) reported receiving guidance in an ad hoc way, usually from individuals. There was certainly, they said, no planned programme. This article illustrates this range of support for professional learning by using as illustration vignettes relating to five of the teachers in the XXX study. However, prefacing these vignettes is a brief outline of the XXX study and a review of literature on the conditions other authors consider necessary to support the professional learning of early-career teachers.

**THE XXX STUDY**

This study is a longitudinal project designed to track the experiences of 57 newly registered teachers in primary and secondary settings. XXX (2006) provide an overview of the project’s design and present the findings of its first phase. The teachers participating in the study all have full registration status. The aims of the study are to examine the teachers’ views on their motivations and opportunities to strengthen their learning, both inside and outside their classrooms, and to identify the characteristics of workplace learning environments that positively shape these teachers’ learning.
particular interest is the opportunities these teachers have to engage in focused conversations with other teachers about how to improve their teaching and learning. Selection of the sample of teachers involved a two-stage process. The first step was to ask the initial teacher education providers for the names of teachers from their 2002 cohorts whom they judged to have the potential to become strong teachers. The next step was a validation of these names by the principals of the employing schools. A focus on teachers who would make a strong contribution to the profession was appealing since evidence from the literature suggested that it was these teachers who were most likely to leave teaching relatively early in their teaching careers (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wycroft, 2005).

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Three categories of conditions become evident when reading the literature on the effectiveness of early career learning opportunities. These categories relate to cultures that promote conversations about learning and teaching, structures that make it possible for teachers to have these conversations, and the roles that more experienced teachers play in hindering or promoting the professional learning of beginning teachers.

1. The “‘Right” Kind of Culture

For teachers, the culture of a school has implications for learning the principles and practice of teaching and for overall job satisfaction. McLaughlin (1993, p. 99) maintains that the nature of the professional community that exists in a school is more critical than any other factor in influencing the character of teaching and learning for teachers and their students. Nieto (2003) supports this argument by advocating that schools provide intellectually and socially challenging environments for new teachers. She focuses, in particular, on the need for schools to provide a culture that prevents teachers from feeling isolated in their practice. Such a culture, she maintains, is one in which “teachers read together, reflect on practice, develop curriculum with a local, situated quality, and become conscious about the development of a learning community” (p. 76). Nieto goes on to say that these forms of collaboration are vital if new teachers are to solve the problems of their practice. This is because collaborative discourse allows teachers to
build critical and long-standing relationships with colleagues, and these relationships, in turn, produce a sense of community. These characteristics receive endorsement from earlier work by Little (1982), in which he points out the strong alignment between collegiality and opportunity for all teachers to talk about teaching and learning practices.

The teaching environment of beginning teachers is also of interest to Bobbitt (1993), who, in citing Stallion and Zimpher (1991), reminds us that beginning teachers are typically assigned the same full complement of teaching duties as their veteran colleagues from the first day in their jobs. That their learning generally involves working behind closed doors is a further complication. Bobbitt highlights the need to consider the level of difficulty of teaching assignments for beginning teachers alongside the level of support available to them.

The phrase “collegial workplaces” receives frequent mention in the literature on teacher learning. This expression is primarily used in relation to the ways teachers talk with their colleagues and in considerations of whether this talk leads to improved teaching and learning practices. For example, in Australia, Jarzabkowski (2002) notes that research on teachers’ social interactions typically focuses on linking the collegial practices of teachers to students’ learning outcomes, and neglects the social benefits of teacher collegiality for the teachers themselves. Her investigation of workplace relationships in an urban primary school in Western Australia reveals that it is largely through social interaction that teachers can express need and offer one another support, but that they are unlikely to do either unless they perceive the environment in which they teach to be a safe, trusting one. According to Jarzabkowski, an environment in which teachers are unable to talk regularly with others, express emotions and feel supported in the job is detrimental to teacher learning. Teaching, says Jarzabkowski, is not just a matter of feeling confident with the content of what is to be taught, but of being nurtured within a community of learners in a manner that allows the development of pedagogical expertise.

In Britain, Nias, Southworth, and Yeomans (1989) found that collaborative school cultures were ones where teachers welcomed opportunities for talk about their work and
made time in their working day for this talk. Their work supports Little’s (1982) contention that four types of talk promote collegiality amongst teachers: talk about the craft of teaching; opportunities to observe one another teaching; joint planning; and teaching one another, as well as assessing one another, on what they know about teaching, learning and leading. These elements were all central to the development of a “quality learning circle” for eight teachers in a New Zealand setting (Lovett, 2002a, 2002b). Lovett’s work also showed that accepting that talk is important for teachers’ learning is only part of the answer. Workplaces must be structured to provide time for professional talk so that it is seen and accepted as a “possible” and valued part of each school day. For many teachers, as Lovett’s work shows, time for such talk continues to be left to chance encounters, and its lack is a source of frustration for them.

2. Organisational Structures

According to Barth (1990), schools have the capacity to improve themselves if the “conditions” are right. In his opinion, what needs to be improved about schools is their culture, the quality of their interpersonal relationships, and the nature and quality of learning experiences (p. 45). Improvement therefore rests on paying closer attention to pedagogical knowledge, namely, the ways of working with colleagues, and on determining how interactions can support the continuing professional development of teachers. Teachers' content knowledge is enhanced by an awareness of pedagogical factors. Barth purports that when teachers and students are collaboratively engaged in learning, each energizes and contributes to the learning of the other. If teachers new to the profession are to be retained, Barth continues, careful attention is needed to ensure they are supported in their learning and development as teachers. Therefore school structures and personnel need to make sure that collegial ways of working are encouraged at all levels.

Further endorsement for organizational structures that maximise collaborative problem-solving are promoted by Shank (2005) in her plea for teachers to have common workspaces and tasks and common planning time. She argues that common workspaces are invaluable for helping new teachers make sense of teaching and even goes as far as
advocating communal office space and classrooms. For Shank, new teachers who work in close proximity to their colleagues are better placed to ask for and receive help when questions arise from their everyday teaching. Common workspaces combined with common planning time increase the likelihood of spontaneous conversations and collaborative problem-solving focused on teaching dilemmas. This flow of collaborative energy means teachers can make joint decisions about their next teaching steps within protected yet public places. Frustrations can be aired and successes and challenges shared, thereby making the learning of new ideas a reality and a wider range of skills, strategies and knowledge possible. Cultures that encourage collegial learning of teachers beyond their initial period of induction show teachers what is needed to sustain their motivation, commitment and job satisfaction. Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko (2006) remind us that emotional support from more experienced colleagues can determine whether teachers stay in teaching and what kind of teachers they become.

3. Roles Played by More Experienced Teachers

As part of their work with the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (Massachusetts, USA), Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu (2001) draw attention to the roles more experienced teachers play in the professional development of beginning teachers. The researchers’ study of 50 first- and second-year teachers in Massachusetts’ public schools revealed three types of professional cultures or subcultures within the schools, each of which differed in the ways the more experienced teachers identified and addressed the learning needs of their early career colleagues. Kardos et al. labelled these cultures veteran-oriented, novice-oriented, and integrated. In the veteran-oriented cultures, the veterans decided what the new teachers needed and paid scant attention to the particular needs of the beginning teachers. In the novice-oriented cultures, the experienced teachers largely left the new teachers to their own devices and gave them little guidance on how to teach. The integrated cultures had in common an expectation that all teachers, whatever their experience level, are learners and so contribute to one another’s professional learning. Talk about the craft of teaching was not only frequent but valued and modelled by the principals of the schools and members of the project team.
Another study that notes the importance of context and professional culture is the 10-year-long joint inquiry into teaching and teacher development conducted by Bullough and Baughman (1997). This study shows that a teacher’s story of her professional learning was bounded by the culture of her places of employment and by the nature and extent of support provided by colleagues. The power of context showed up when Kerrie, the teacher, changed school. The experiences at her new school altered her perceptions of her impact and usefulness as a teacher to the extent that she suffered a loss of expertise that in turn undermined her self-confidence. Left to find her own coping strategies, she viewed the challenges she experienced as failures on her part. However, the researchers identified the culture of the school as the main reason for these failures because it was not one in which the more experienced teachers were expected to provide the necessary scaffolding to help beginning teachers work through their challenges.

School principals also contribute to the professional learning of their teachers. McLaughlin and Yee’s (1988) study of 85 teachers in five diverse northern California school districts highlights the roles principals have in creating and sustaining cultures that encourage learning for teachers and students. In particular, principals were instrumental in building individual capacity for the collective good. Moreover, school cultures in which all teachers took responsibility for the problems of colleagues tended to have principals who modelled strategies for continuous improvement aimed at binding members within communities of learning. For McLaughlin and Yee, “a collegial environment provides multiple opportunities for interaction and creates expectations of colleagues as regular sources of feedback, ideas and support. A collegial environment has the potential to enhance both the level of opportunity and level of capacity for teachers, because it serves as a critical, essential source of stimulation and motivation” (p. 35). Similar endorsement comes from another report relating to the Massachusetts Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. Here, Johnson (2004), in association with members of the project’s team, concluded that schools organized for teacher and student learning have principals who are instructional leaders. Such leaders, according to Johnson and the project members, not only develop personal relationships with new teachers but also
ensure that the infrastructure of their respective schools provide sufficient resources, support and clarity of expectation for new teachers to do their jobs well.

Fiszer (2004) takes the issue of how more experienced teachers support the learning of new teachers a step further by looking at how teachers best learn. His study of 27 teachers from three elementary schools in Los Angeles County included teacher focus groups, in which the teachers recorded how they viewed their learning experiences. Fiszer said one comment made by all the teachers was that this was a topic they were seldom asked to discuss. The recommendations Fiszer put forward from his study support a professional development model that includes peer observations, dialogue, and feedback to enliven the profession for both new and experienced teachers. In New Zealand, these features are included in the advice and guidance programme for beginning teachers as they work towards full registration (New Zealand Teachers Council & Ministry of Education, 2004). Eberhard et al. (2000, p. 38) similarly maintain that induction and mentor programmes designed to develop a “reflective teacher” enhance more rapid movements for new teachers along the learning continuum from survival to maintenance to impact. An increasing number of New Zealand schools are now extending mentoring and peer-coaching arrangements to all teachers, having realized that reflective practice is an on-going activity for all teachers regardless of their levels of experience. The appointment of specialist classroom teachers in New Zealand secondary schools is assisting this development. Each of these teachers has an allocation of four hours per week to mentor other teachers, and each is required to give special attention to provisionally registered teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005). Acknowledgement of the principles of adult learning is another important consideration in decisions about how more experienced teachers can best contribute to the learning of newer teachers. Issues of ownership and of learning agendas and timeliness, and the link between actual experiences and the levels of empathy and sensitivity displayed by the more experienced teachers when offering professional advice and guidance are relevant here (Lovett, 2002b).
As Feiman-Nemser (2001) observes, the task of preparing and supporting the professional learning of new teachers is particularly challenging and requires a range of approaches and strategies on the part of more experienced teachers, such as those just documented. According to Feiman-Nemser, the variety of school contexts and the varying levels of support given mean solutions must be tailored to suit; there are no ready-made solutions. While initial teacher education programmes provide a direction for this work, the continuance of that work depends on the adequacy and strength of each school as a learning community (p. 1037). The following vignettes of five beginning teachers illustrate this variation at the school level and emphasise what matters for the professional learning of beginning teachers.

**VIGNETTES**

Vignettes are presented to highlight the variations of professional learning cultures from five of the 57 teachers in the larger study. These vignettes are intended to represent a descriptive account of these early career teachers’ experiences of professional guidance, support and ongoing learning as teachers and should be viewed as mini case studies. The descriptions are sourced from two interviews and a questionnaire with each teacher. These interviews canvassed the teachers’ reasons for choosing teaching as a career, their satisfaction with their initial teacher education preparation and induction experiences at their employing schools, and details of their successes, challenges and frustrations in developing their expertise as teachers. The selection of the five teachers was determined by factors such as gender, age, school sector and size of school, previous employment and the extent to which they had received active support from colleagues in their professional learning journeys. (Selection in relation to the support criterion was based on the self-reports of all the teachers involved in the larger study.) The vignettes serve to highlight features that either contributed towards or hindered the teachers’ professional learning and development. These vignettes of Lucy, Jack, Haden, Ajay and Tan1 represent the range of professional learning culture from the larger study.

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1 The names used in this article are pseudonyms.
Lucy

Lucy teaches in the primary sector and is in the 26 to 30 age group. She has worked in three lower decile\(^2\) schools since graduating from her initial teacher education provider in 2002. She claims to have always wanted to teach and had prior experiences of part-time work with children with disabilities and babysitting in her neighbourhood. Lucy is happiest in her current school and enjoys strong collegial support and positive feedback from the principal and other staff. She did not enjoy the same sense of collegiality and shared vision for learning in her previous schools. For example, at one of these schools, she was very aware that she had different expectations of the children.

> In my classroom, it was a really neat place to be. I just—I loved it, but the culture of the school ... was just doing my head in, I couldn’t, sort of, couldn’t integrate what I felt as a teacher and my beliefs, and what I wanted teaching to be about. I didn’t fit with how the school was run and what they expected of the children, you know, because what I expected of them and what the school expected were completely different.

Lucy did not let this experience deter her from a career in teaching and deliberately made a move to another school where she hoped she would feel more comfortable: “I thought if I’m going to be a teacher, I need to find the right of kind school that’s going to support what I believe and what I want to do.” She went to a school that had invited her to fill a relieving position and has been there ever since. Having had contrasting experiences of professional learning cultures, Lucy is clearly appreciative of her current school’s culture but also acknowledges that her previous experiences did shape the person she is now: “I think it did make me … more clear about what I wanted to do and who I wanted to be as a teacher.”

During her period of provisional teacher registration at the other schools, Lucy said she would have liked more advice and guidance than she actually received. She described being left to “sort it out” herself and referred to the “predicament” of other beginning

\(^{2}\) All New Zealand schools are assigned a decile rating according to the socioeconomic status of the area each serves. Decile 1 is the lowest socioeconomic rating.
teachers at the same stage of development. Even though she had an allocated tutor teacher, the formal support was lacking. She said,

> It would have been nice, you know, particularly for my tutor teacher, to have just been there a bit more. They didn’t sort of really know what was going on in the classroom at all. Like no one seemed to be really interested in my programme. I think I got observed once in two terms.

Lucy stated she is firmly interested in strengthening and developing her classroom practice but does not intend developing leadership or management responsibilities or moving to another school. She said she initiates her own learning and is able to do this because her classroom is situated in a block between two more experienced teachers who welcome questions and interactions. She is therefore able to “pop in and out” of their classrooms and ask for advice, especially for strategies to cater for her more able children. According to Lucy, her principal also shows an active interest in her personal and professional welfare by making classroom visits and commenting on her unit plans and evaluations.

Lucy rates herself as a competent teacher but acknowledges she still has much to learn about how to teach. In her role as an associate teacher, she admits she is constantly reflecting on the extent to which her teaching is meeting the needs of her learners. An accomplished or expert teacher in her opinion is someone who has experience and runs an interesting and well-organized programme and is also someone to whom others can go for sound advice.

In terms of professional learning, Lucy is immersed in the school’s topics of information literacy and the identification of gifted and talented learners. She values opportunities to observe other teachers in action both within her school and beyond. Above all, Lucy likes talking about what works in the classroom. Having gained some confidence in her teaching role, Lucy is now looking beyond her classroom and taking more notice of her colleagues. She appreciates being able to seek help from other staff when needs arise.
Lucy describes her predominant mode of learning as self-initiated rather than determined by others.

**Jack**

Jack teaches in a Decile 6 boys’ secondary school and said he is in the 31 to 40 years of age bracket. Since graduating, he has been employed at the same school. His entry into teaching came after time spent travelling overseas and working in the wine industry as a sales representative. Family friends had always said he would make a good teacher, but he had taken time to reach this decision himself.

Jack admits his one-year initial teacher education programme was the hardest year of his life but that it also prepared him for what teaching was like. In talking about his learning on the job, Jack repeatedly mentioned working with other colleagues, sharing strategies and engaging in professional reading. This collaboration involves groups from within his school and beyond, through one-day in-service courses.

Jack said that during his induction programme his colleagues shared some teaching resources and responded to his concerns as they arose. He nonetheless considered his school lacked an organized programme of support and said he had wanted much more feedback on his teaching. “I would have liked more observations … It’s quite a lonely place in the classroom and not a great sense of how you are getting on in the classroom. It didn’t worry me much, but if I had been struggling, it may [have].” Jack was pleased to report that the situation had improved for the next cohort of beginning teachers at his school, with the establishment of a more organized advice and guidance programme, to which he himself had contributed. As a new teacher, Jack said that as a beginning teacher he had wanted affirmation and confirmation that he was “on track” and that colleagues would be readily available to share successful strategies.

Jack also wants opportunities for advancement in his school. He had worked with another teacher to develop a gifted and talented programme and had won the position of Year 9 dean. He welcomes 360-degree feedback from his students and is thinking of Master’s
level study in the near future. He describes himself as ambitious and eager for new challenges.

Haden

Haden is teaching in a Decile 4 girls’ secondary school. In age bracket 26 to 30, he had immigrated to New Zealand from the UK some years earlier. He had explored other careers before pursuing teaching, but was not entirely sure why he ended up as a teacher. He said others had suggested teaching to him because they thought he had good interpersonal skills. However, he also remarked that, at university, he had studied history as an extra subject, and found a passion for it, a passion he wanted to share with teenagers.

When recalling his experiences of his schooling, Haden admitted he had been bored as a learner. He said his view of what teachers did had altered with time, and particularly after he had been on teaching practice in a range of schools. He recalled history teachers who had inspired their learners so much that their students wanted to read and ask questions. This made him realize that the role of the history teacher was not just a transmitter of key facts and dates to learn but about skills and finding ways to engage and support students in their learning.

Haden considers himself fortunate to have been surrounded from early in his teaching career by teachers willing to offer him resources and helpful hints about classroom management. He is also pleased to have begun teaching with what he considered to be a thorough understanding of achievement standards and NCEA,3 having perhaps more knowledge of these than some of his more experienced colleagues. He said that when his department had to write the assessments for NCEA Level 2, his input was welcomed. He also recalled the ways in which his attention to broader issues complemented another teacher’s attention to detail and the meaning of words. For Haden, opportunities to

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3 The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is the main national qualification for secondary/high school students in New Zealand.
engage in developmental work with colleagues had shown him how he could be a member of a professional learning community rather than a teacher working in isolation.

Haden’s comments about his work also revealed how, at another level, the school’s management team worked with beginning teachers as a group. During his early days as one of 10 beginning teachers at his school, Haden said he received support through regular meetings with the deputy principal. In his first week, these meetings, each about 15 to 20 minutes long, occurred daily, and their purpose was to answer “burning questions”. In subsequent weeks, these meetings were scheduled twice a week. Haden said they were particularly beneficial because the deputy principal had knowledge of all the students in the school and their dispositions towards learning. This expertise was further strengthened by support from a very hard working and accessible head of faculty, who was willing to answer questions about what to teach and about resources and the pacing of lessons. Haden appreciated being able to observe other teachers working with his form class, even though these lessons involved different teaching subjects, because he saw other classroom management techniques being utilized. During these early weeks, Haden also valued informal “pop-in visits” by his head of faculty, often with short notice, to check books and talk with the students about their learning. This, he said, was very unlike his experience of more formal initial teacher education (ITE), where observations and assessment involved goal setting and a written report.

Like other beginning teachers, Haden had faced challenges with his classroom management. He had been conscious of his difficulties in keeping students in their seats, completing work and doing something worthwhile for the full range of abilities evident among the students in his care. Despite finding his workload “huge”, Haden is now actively experimenting with group work and extending his approaches to teaching. However, he is aware that after gaining full registration, he is in danger of becoming “institutionalized” rather than supported as an individual. Haden concluded by saying the pastoral care he had received from his colleagues had always been timely for his learning.
Ajay teaches in a Decile 6, co-educational secondary school. He is in the 20 to 25 age group and is a first career teacher. Like Haden, Ajay had a clear mission to help others learn. Previous employment with school-age children had opened his eyes to the ways in which people can share knowledge and ideas. He said he had “enjoyed communicating a message and seeing the light bulbs switch on and kids … seeing them make connections and feel like they were learning something new.” While prompted by a family member to consider teaching, he said he was also attracted to the profession because it seemed to offer “room for self-improvement”. He had discovered, much to his surprise, that teaching was a job that kept him “on his toes, going a 100 miles an hour”, was “not boring” and was one in which he did not have somebody “breathing down his neck, telling him what to do”. While he remembers his first two years as being somewhat daunting, he was grateful to have been placed with a “fantastic head of department”, who worked alongside him and gave him time and space to develop his own teaching identity.

However, Ajay is presently in the situation of teaching the maximum hours allowed in the collective contract and he describes his stress levels and workload as neither manageable nor acceptable. Poor compensation from salary and then requests to take on additional responsibilities were prompting him to reconsider his commitment to teaching. A further disappointment is the lack of feedback he receives from colleagues. He said:

*I’m not blaming anyone that I work with closely because they are doing what they can … You just don’t get the feedback on where you’re at and that’s not very fulfilling … So often you’re looking in the mirror. You can see what you want to see and you don’t see what others would see, and so I think that needs to change.*

Ajay considers he is “surviving teaching” more through his own efforts than through being in a supportive professional culture. His difficulties appear to be compounded by not having ready access to teaching resources and having to go from his classroom during his non-contact time to an unappealing space some distance from it. His comments reveal him as clearly disillusioned with teaching and biding his time until he can find another
job. Isolation is also a contributing factor, as his colleagues are, according to Ajay, all very independent and rarely share ideas. Ajay finds even the professional development slot in staff meetings disorganized and infrequent—“somewhat flaky”. He positions his situation as a sharp contrast to another high school of his acquaintance where the teachers meet one day a week from 8.30 to 9.30 a.m. to focus on teaching and learning discussions centred on effective classroom management, preparation, and learning experiences. Knowing that he has the potential to be an even stronger teacher, Ajay is clearly frustrated that the culture of his school is stifling his professional growth. He said that while his head of department thinks highly of him, he still overloads him with too many different classes a week, which means he is always taking work home to finish. Rather than enjoying his work, he is increasingly resenting the 50+ hours a week it takes him to keep abreast of his work commitments.

Tan teaches in a Decile 9 primary school. She is in the 20 to 25 age bracket and is someone who has always wanted to teach. She remains passionate about her teaching and is aware that she has been particularly fortunate in her choice of school and the support offered. The culture of the school makes learning a priority, evident from her description of syndicate meetings:

My syndicate’s very positive. You know, we’ll share ideas at meetings. We will do all sorts of things, and the more you share, the more you talk about, you know. About children that might not be achieving or that are achieving and you want to extend them ... that professional dialogue, talking dialogue in our syndicate meetings and just on a casual basis, is really motivating, because you think, “Oh well, I haven’t really tried that,” and that could be what that child needs.
Tan said she has had many opportunities for professional learning and for developing her own leadership skills, including being lead teacher for the Numeracy Project. This work has required her to work with other teachers and to give presentations at staff meetings and a parent evening. She explains that all teachers, through their participation in several professional development contracts, are required to observe one another demonstrating specific strategies and then provide formative feedback. She claimed that these shared discussions about student work had helped to foster collective understandings of the qualities she and her colleagues were trying to foster in their students’ work.

Tan also acknowledged the impact of the personal and professional feedback she has received from the principal, syndicate leader, parents and children. When she moved from one syndicate to another, she had appreciated receiving, as public acknowledgement of her work, a big bouquet of flowers at the school’s concert. Such affirmation, she said, is cementing her commitment to teaching and nurturing her aspiration to further develop her expertise.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Each of these vignettes draws attention to the need for teachers to have regular opportunities to talk with one another about the craft of teaching, to observe others teaching and to share in the planning and evaluation of children’s learning. Lucy, Tan, and Haden all appreciated the willingness of their colleagues to talk about children’s learning and the next steps they could make in their teaching. The frequency and depth of these conversations sustained their enthusiasm for teaching because they would always find something new to try. Among the five teachers, Tan’s experience was the one consistently closest to the Kardos et al (2001) category of an integrated learning culture. At Tan’s school, learning permeated every activity. Syndicate meetings were stimulating and professional occasions that provided frequent opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and of teaching strategies. Tan’s emerging strengths, as a young teacher, had received acknowledgment through her being given opportunity to take a leadership role

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4 The Numeracy Project is a professional development programme funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Its aim is to improve the teaching of numeracy in the primary school.
in curriculum development. Haden had enjoyed elements of an integrated culture through his experience of developing NCEA assessments with a group of colleagues. It was clear that he wanted even more collaborative work when he spoke of the weekly professional development time at another school.

Jack and Ajay shared some of Haden’s frustration with their current levels of isolation. While they had enjoyed moments of collaborative work with colleagues, such opportunities were infrequent. Ajay, in particular, considered that his developing expertise as a teacher could be attributed more to his own efforts than to those of his colleagues. His experience placed him, among the five teachers, as closest to the novice-oriented culture. Jack was similarly critical of the support he had received, stating that support typically came only when he requested it. The absence of any formal advice and guidance programme was a disappointment to him.

The five vignettes demonstrate that the learning culture of a school matters for the development, retention and job satisfaction of early career teachers. Elements of a supportive culture include professional talk about what to teach, observations and feedback on actual teaching episodes and organisational features such as the adequacy of teaching assignment, workspace and resource allocation. Feiman-Nemser (2001) cites work by Bush (1983) to argue that the conditions under which new teachers work during their first years of teaching have a strong influence “on the level of effectiveness which that teacher is able to achieve and sustain over the years; on the attitudes which govern teachers’ behaviour over even a forty-year career; and indeed, on the decision whether or not to continue in the teaching profession” (p. 1024).

It is clear from these vignettes that the professional learning of new teachers could be enhanced if further work were done to explore why those responsible for nurturing the professional journeys of early career teachers are not always satisfying the expectations of these teachers. For example, lessons learnt from the 2006 initial cohort of specialist classroom teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005) could provide some timely advice for other teachers responsible for classroom observations and feedback and contribute
towards the promotion of more integrated learning cultures. Responsibility for improving the quality of advice and guidance for early career teachers needs to be at both the local and national levels. The nationally funded “specialist classroom teacher” initiative (Ministry of Education, 2005) has the potential to make a difference to the secondary sector, and it could also be helpful in the primary sector. Schools may find direction from the eventual findings of the New Zealand nationwide “specialist classroom teacher” pilot programme. Insights from this review (currently underway with Cognition Trust) could provide fresh ways of supporting teacher learning in general and on how to improve the frequency and quality of more focused conversations about teaching and learning matters for all teachers, not just beginning teachers, in particular.

Closer attention to the ways in which veteran and novice teachers might work together regardless of their differences in levels of experience may provide a pathway to more rewarding and satisfying learning conversations. This is where context matters because individuals need to be connected to significant others who can challenge, question, scaffold and assist them to higher levels of achievement (Nias, 1986). More experienced teachers owe it to the next generation of students to ensure that newer teachers are socialized into and energized by a learning profession.

References


