A longitudinal evaluation of the Career Change Program at Victoria University 2005-2011

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Abstract

The Career Change Program (CCP) is a DEECD initiative offering an alternative teacher education program for hard to staff schools across Victoria. Schools select their own candidates thereby gaining the skills and abilities most needed. Successful candidates commence on an instructor’s wage with the support of a supervisor and mentor within the school. As a WIL teacher education program, the CCP embraces the skills and experience of individuals with an industry background as they complete either a Bachelor of Education (VET Secondary) or Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education at Victoria University. The use of praxis inquiry ensures that reflective practice and workplace assessment underpin the WIL that takes place. Quantitative and qualitative data gathered over 8 years reveal the experience of these ‘beginning’ teachers as they study and enter the profession simultaneously. The findings of the study most pertinent to the WIL approach of the program are a higher rate of retention for CCTs, early appointment to positions of responsibility, and schools able to utilize the knowledge, skills and experience of CCTs gain the most benefit. Using the voices of participants in the program, the elements of this teacher education program which have strengthened the capability of these graduates becomes apparent.

Introduction

The Career Change Program (CCP) is an initiative of the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) designed to offer an alternative teacher education program to place teachers in hard to staff schools across Victoria. Successful candidates commence their teacher education whilst teaching on an instructor’s wage with the support of a supervisor and mentor within the school. As a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) teacher education program, the CCP embraces the skills and experience of individuals with an industry background as they complete either a Bachelor of Education (Vocational Education and Training (VET)/Secondary) or Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education (GDSE) over two years at Victoria University. For those candidates undertaking the Bachelor of Education (VET/Secondary) a credit of two years for a trade qualification plus 8 years industry experience has been negotiated with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). They also have the benefit of gaining the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) and a Graduate Certificate in VET as they are being specifically trained to teach VET in Schools. The program uses work integrated learning by placing the student teacher in a teaching position within a school and locating the focus of the teacher learning in the teaching experience gained in the classroom. This Praxis Inquiry model of teacher education was developed in the School of Education at Victoria University (VU) as a partnership between the School of Education, the Teacher Development Unit at VU and the VIT. The recruitment of industry professionals via salaried teaching integrated with a teacher education program has provided over 200 teachers who have successfully participated in the CCP from 2005-2011. A longitudinal study on the outcomes of the CCP for graduates was conducted by Victoria University in 2011 and this paper reports on those outcomes. This longitudinal study provides a framework for on-going improvement in the future development of similar programs. The findings of the study which are most pertinent to the WIL approach of this teacher training are a higher rate of retention for CCP than for mainstream teacher graduates, CCTs are assigned positions of responsibility and leadership very early in their careers as teachers and schools that are able to utilise the knowledge, skills and experience of Career Change teachers benefit the most.
Aims

This study sought to:
- Examine, analyse and interpret the relationship between Career Change teachers’ (CCTs) experiences of teaching and learning and the curriculum of the CCP
- Identify the professional learning processes and practices of Career Change teachers as they develop as teachers
- Determine the success of the CCP in terms of
  - retention rates
  - career advancement through positions of leadership
  - teachers’ satisfaction with their career choice

Method

Multiple data collection activities were employed at both the program and participant level. DEECD data relate to retention rates and positions of responsibility. Data from three previous surveys and semi-structured interviews with small groups of Career Change teachers and mentor teachers give insight into the CCTs’ experience of their work integrated learning. In addition, all graduates from the original 2005 cohort and some from other early years whose contact details were still current were invited to a research forum held on 14/10/2011. The majority of the original 2005 cohort attended and additional CCTs from other early years who responded to the invitation also attended. A Principal whose school has consistently employed CCTs was also invited to this research forum and attended.

Analysis

The literature in relation to alternative teacher education programs identifies three major variables – the integrity of the program, the quality of the implementation and the level of individual support. The first variable is the integrity of such programs based on (i) how coherence between practice and theory is matched by flexibility in delivery (Darling-Hammond 2007; Feiman- Nemser 1990) and (ii) how the trainee teacher’s competence, practical knowledge and theoretically based understanding are integrated (Gore 1995, Kruger et al 1999, Lovat & Smith 1995). Darling-Hammond in her interview states ‘an interesting and little-known fact is that the better prepared teachers are, the longer they're likely to stay in teaching’.

The integrity of the CCP is enhanced through the use of the praxis inquiry model. Kolb (1984) a recognised authority on the central role of experience in the learning process, recognises that the paramount importance of reflective practice in interpreting and understanding experience forms the bridge between academic learning and practice in the workplace. Reflective practice based on work experience mitigates the inherent danger of mere acceptance of established practices. In understanding the need to explore theory-based knowledge in practice CCP students are at an advantage as being placed directly in a school which provides CCTs with the opportunity to document the authentic practices they experience in schools. Documenting practice has two purposes: it directly supports CCTs’ coursework in the B.Ed(VET/Secondary) and GDSE; and it also is the basis for enhancing CCTs’ understanding which occurs when teams of student teachers, mentor teachers and teacher educators engage in thoughtful inquiry into, analysis of and reflection on practice.

The second variable identified is the quality of such programs. Given that there is variability in outcomes for both traditional and non-traditional programs, attention should be paid to the quality and nature of teacher preparation as well as implementation (Ball, Wilson, 1990 in Dill, 1996, p947; Darling-Hammond, Chung, Frelow, 2002, Moore, Cherdednichenko 2007, Griffiths 2007). Haberman suggests that given the multitude of alternative programs and the great variance in ‘traditional’ models, it comes down to an issue of ‘quality control’, with the focus on ‘(1) selection, (2) faculty, (3) content, (4) method, and (5) evaluation’ (Haberman, 1990, in Dill, 1996). Haberman adds that traditional criteria used to select candidates into traditional teacher training programs is based on who will pass the exams to satisfy licensing criteria. He argues, however, that admission criteria should instead predict who will be effective in dealing with diversity and students at risk of dropping out of the system. The selection of candidates for the CCP is undertaken by the schools themselves ensuring they gain the best fit for the needs of the school. In the early years of the program this was somewhat problematic as there was no standard consideration given to the ability of the candidate to undertake the higher level study of a Bachelor Degree. This was communicated to DEECD and the selection process was streamlined to promote consideration of both the ability to handle difficult students and the ability to deal with study at undergraduate level.
Assessment for the CCP was generally designed as learning in the workplace projects exploring the concept of theory in practice. CCTs were asked to produce a portfolio of artifacts as evidence of their growing teaching capability and to reflect on the development of their knowledge through experience. It is acknowledged that learning emerging from applying theory through practice-based analysis in the workplace is likely to have greater utility (Chisholm Harris Northwood Johrendt 2009). Epstein (1994 p92) agrees believing that work-based experiences are more compelling, more likely to influence behaviour, ‘produce permanent shifts in feeling than abstract knowledge drawn from text or lecture’. The central role of experience in the learning process is acknowledged by a number of authors (Kolb,1984; Sims & Sims,1995; Hoult, 2006; Knowles 1980). The CCTs agreed as testified in these statements.

You really seemed to understand that we were getting a lot of our knowledge and practice on the job and (you) showed us you recognised the value by not over loading us. I put lots of what I learnt directly into practice (CCT 2005)

The emphasis on being a reflective practitioner enabled me to refine my methods, behaviours and content as a normal course of action. It has enabled me to be reactive to student abilities and to embrace individualised learning plans and create student centred learning environments. (CCT 2006)

The content of the course was developed specifically for the CCP cohort and has been monitored for quality through a system of evaluation, peer review, and a full course re-accreditation process which occurred two years ago. This process of peer review and course re-accreditation focused on content and method of delivery. As an example, as the program has evolved over its 7 years and in response to student feedback, there has been a greater emphasis in content on aspects such as classroom management and lesson delivery.

As part of the program, CCTs undergo 4 weeks of intensive face-to-face training prior to entering the classroom. In a survey of CCTs undertaken in 2008, the averaged response to those who felt they were ‘Well prepared’ or ‘Reasonably well prepared’ to enter the classroom rated between 46% to 49%, ‘As well as could be reasonably expected’ 43%to 46%, ‘Not at all prepared’ 7%. The individual response to this initial preparation varies according to previous learning experiences and levels of self-efficacy. A strong sense of efficacy will foster an expectation of being able to deal with the issues of potential failure and struggle engendered through a career change (Bandura 1994). In contrast, those who generally doubt their capabilities may doubt their ability to deal with the difficult issues of teaching no matter how much pre-training they have. In general there is recognition, as the statistics verify, that ‘reasonable expectations’ of the summer school pre-training have been met. However, the program has received criticism from a few individuals who felt the need for specific curriculum content that would cover all possible scenarios for subject, year level and diversity within a class. This is an expectation that cannot be met even in mainstream teacher education.

The third variable identified is the level of individual support required not only for successful induction into the school and teaching but also for mastery of the academic requirements (Moore, Martino & Cherednichenko, 2005, Moore, Cherednichenko 2007). A high degree of personalisation is also emerging as a factor in levels of support offered by university staff (Bolhuis, 2002; Moore, Martino & Cherednichenko, 2005). The geographic isolation of CCTs meant that the exigencies of distance are an obstacle to regular attendance at the university. For this reason attendance is broken into blocks of time ranging from 3 weeks to 3 days at regular intervals throughout the year. However, the intensive interaction over these sessions is felt to be a positive for the CCTs. The intensity of group learning, both with each other and from each other, is supported by the establishment of a Community of Practice internet meeting place (Ning) where CCTs share experiences, ask for help, explore possible solutions and often clarify assessment tasks. All lecturers communicate with each other regularly on the progress of CCTs and encourage CCTs to stay in regular contact, responding to emails within a 24hour period. Maintaining support for CCTs through well-timed communication is vital to engaging the student living within the teacher.

Appointing a mentor within the school adds an extra dimension of individual support, although mentors often failed to fulfill their role. The data record the support offered by a mentor with whom they meet as required has fallen from 81% in 2007 to 48% in 2010. Alarmingly the opportunity for CCTs to meet with their mentor at a specific time each week has only increased from 5% (2007) to 9% (2009/2010). Greater assistance comes from colleagues who teach in the same method area. This has increased from 47% (2007) to 61% (2010). The year level coordinator in the school is seen as an avenue of support. Ideally the opportunity for CCTs to experience an initial period of induction at the school involving observation and supervision should exist but has only occurred in 5% of cases (2007) increasing to 16% (2010).
Discussion/Findings

DEECD data indicate a higher retention rate than for traditional teacher training programs. In an Age Education article (2011) a study at Monash University was reported as stating that between 25 and 40 per cent of teachers leave the profession within five years of starting, according to estimates in numerous surveys by teacher unions and education academics. An accurate national figure is not publicly available because exit statistics are kept and collated differently by individual education authorities in each state and territory. In contrast, of the 20 CCTs who completed the CCP in 2005, 19 remained in teaching, but not necessarily in the same school. Retention rates for other cohorts are: 2006 – 76%, 2007 – 96%, 2008 – 88%. This equates to a retention rate of 79% over a period of 7 years. Figures for subsequent years cannot be considered as teachers are still working under the terms of their contract which stipulates that they must remain with their school for 2 years after graduation. Schools with high retention rates have much in common including formalised mentoring, professional learning teams, a culture of collaboration and mutual support, a strong sense of community, strong leadership, a united sense of purpose and clear lines of communication.

Another positive indicator of the success of the CCP is the degree to which CCTs have quickly been elevated to leadership positions and positions of responsibility. A group of CCTs from the original cohort of 2005 and other early cohorts attended a forum on 24 October 2011. Attendees at the forum offered a representative sample of the program:

1. VCAL coordinator, daily organiser and VET coordinator
2. Leading teacher, Acting Assistant Principal
3. Leading teacher, Yr 8 Coordinator, Head of Junior School 2012, Acting Assistant Principal when Assistant Principal (AP) on Long Service Leave.
4. Leading teacher 3 years.
5. Careers Coordinator. Completed further post graduate studies- Education (Career development).
6. Acting Leading Teacher (3 ½ yrs), Junior School Coordinator, Professional Development coordinator. AP roles on some days.
7. Yr 8 Coordinator, Teacher and Learning Leader Technology, OHS committee. Undertaking course for Careers Practitioner.
8. Yr Level Coordinator 4 yrs
9. Yr 8 team and year level leader.
10. Acting AP 3 terms.
11. Peer coaching, VET coordinator, Member consultative committee, mentoring new graduates.
12. Leading Teacher Curriculum Development and Student pathways

The CCTs who participated in the Research Forum were able to describe a range of benefits they accredited to their life and work experiences. With 4-7 years of teaching experience they have begun to recognise there is a greater range of skills and aptitudes they can bring to the job than they initially identified. These skills include capacity for change, skills for effective communication, stress management, organizational skills, strong work ethic, lateral thinking, resilience, desire to succeed, awareness of industry standards, and an ability to identify with non-engaged students and develop strategies to re-engage them.

Conclusion

Victoria University values the development of graduate capabilities which transcend the technical and curriculum content of a course. The CCP is a benchmark practice in the University commitment to enable graduates to be work, career and future ready. The WIL approach of this teacher training program has facilitated a higher rate of retention than for mainstream teacher graduates, CCTs are assigned positions of responsibility and leadership very early in their careers as teachers and schools that are able to utilise the knowledge, skills and experience of CCTs benefit the most.

References


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