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The perceptions of beginning secondary teachers about their professional learning experiences in the Solomon Islands context

Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato

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ABSTRACT

The thesis was designed to investigate the professional learning experiences of beginning secondary teachers (BSTs) in the Solomon Islands context. The study interpreted and documented lived experiences of a cohort of BSTs who graduated from the Diploma in Secondary Teaching programme at the School of Education, Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SOE-SICHE) in 2007. The aim of my study was to understand how prepared the secondary teacher graduates from SOE-SICHE felt at the end of their teacher education programmes, the kind of professional support they needed as beginning teachers, and whether Solomon Islands secondary schools have adequate professional support systems in place to promote early career learning and development for beginning teachers. Existing studies on teacher learning and development have been conducted mainly in economically developed western countries, which are significantly different from a developing Pacific Island nation such as the Solomon Islands. This study is the first of its kind to be conducted in the Solomon Islands. The findings add to the body of knowledge in the field of teacher learning and professional development experiences of beginning teachers from this Pacific Island, Melanesian, socio-cultural context.

The research took an interpretive qualitative case study research approach, drawing on social constructivism and socio-cultural theoretical perspectives to make meaning of the professional learning experiences of beginning secondary teachers in the Solomon Islands context. The study explored the experiences of the BSTs in the five secondary schools where they were posted, in light of the personal and contextual factors that influenced their perceptions about their initial teacher education, induction, and professional learning experiences. The primary sources of data were a questionnaire and three in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data analysis process was based on an interpretive qualitative research methodology as adopted in the study.



My findings suggest that the BSTs felt inadequately prepared in some aspects of their teaching roles, and needed guidance and support from their school communities. The lack of formal induction and planned professional development opportunities for beginning teachers in the five secondary schools involved in this study deprived them of the kind of advice and guidance needed by new teacher graduates at the beginning of their teaching careers. The findings also suggested that beginning teachers had little opportunity to observe, reflect and learn from their teaching practices because they were assigned the same teaching load as their experienced colleagues from day one. The BSTs also taught under difficult conditions: a general lack of teaching resources, crowded classrooms, and a general lack of specialised classroom facilities and equipment for subjects such as science. Such teaching conditions were a major source of anxiety for the BSTs during the first two years of their teaching careers.

I anticipate that the findings of my study will help improve initial teacher education and teacher professional development practices in the Solomon Islands. My thesis argues for developing secondary schools as professional learning communities, or 'villages of learning' that promote and encourage reflective dialogue, ongoing professional conversations, and collaboration between education authorities, school principals and teachers, to enhance teachers teaching practices and promote students' learning outcomes.