

From Preparation to Practice: The Experiences of Beginning Teacher in Kien Giang Province, A Remote Area of Mekong Delta Region in Vietnam.

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Abstract

This study examines the experience of beginning teacher in the Kien Giang province, an area located in one of remote areas of the Mekong Delta region in the south-west of Vietnam. Through focus group discussion and in-depth interview with 29 new teachers, the findings showed that the participants felt they were not well equipped during their training course. Participants knew little about the importance of relationships in learning, in collegial communities or with parents. The teaching experience during the courses had been in schools that contrasted greatly with the ones in which they were employed and they had no experience in dealing with the four main difficulties encountered in this remote area: motivating students, lack of educational resources, poor living standards and relationship with parents. However, those who did receive some support within the school environment were able to overcome the weakness of their preparation. The results indicated that beginning teachers in this area were in need of assistance from the stakeholders in the community such as school principals, Kien Giang Teacher Training College, teacher training and local authorities who need to work together to ensure the teachers receives ongoing support.

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Introduction

New teachers are the key to maintaining and improving the education system. Fullan (1993) stated that new teachers could be change agents when they were in well-organized schools which supported teacher development. Although unemployment is dropping sharply and the business sector is taking on more employees, Vietnam still does not have enough teachers. At current rates, Vietnam is facing a shortage of more than 8000 teachers (Thi, 2010). Hence, hopefully with the effective teaching workforce planning of the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam, about 8000 new teachers started a teaching career in 2011. Therefore, in the next few years, new teachers will be an important factor in the success of strategies for educational development or reforms if these strategies improve teachers' workloads and deliver gains in pay. These types of critical support will enable teachers to deliver high quality education, increase their job satisfaction and will subsequently result in the likelihood of them remaining in the school system (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003b).

Besides that the quality and relevance of instruction during teacher training remain low. Firstly, students at teacher training colleges do not obtain specific knowledge of the curriculum, teachers' guides or student textbooks for the subjects they will eventually be teaching in schools (Trang, 2010). In Vietnam, students studying to become teachers typically study general academic subjects in the first year, spending the second half of their studies concentrating on core units. Most of these units are not related to their specific teaching areas but focus entirely on theory. This is also a reason why some new teachers are often shocked when there are significant differences between what they learned at college and what they have to do as a teacher in a real school.

Secondly, the emphasis of the training is on theoretical knowledge rather than on guiding student teachers in how to put this theoretical knowledge into practice. Furthermore, most college teachers have never taught in a secondary school and may not fully understand the practical issues associated with classroom management and the delivery of instruction. Consequently, almost all students in pedagogy colleges and newly graduated teachers are lacking in basic teaching skills and pedagogy knowledge (Uyên, 2011).

No research has been found that conducted on the experiences of beginning teachers in the context of Vietnam, including induction programs. If beginning teachers face problems in their first teaching year without receiving support from their workplace, they are much more likely to experience great difficulties. Therefore, this paper focuses on understanding beginning teachers' experiences in their first year of teaching. This is why the focus of this study is to listen to the 'voices' of beginning teachers who have just graduated from the college where I teach. The impact of the new environment on them in terms of their perspectives toward difficulties, received support, and the preparation of Kien Giang Teacher Training College for teaching in the real world will be closely analysed.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative case study to

1. Identify the problems encountered by beginning teachers during their first year of teaching.
2. Discover the received support from the participants' perspectives in their first teaching year.
3. Evaluate the quality of the preparation provided by Kien Giang Teachers' Training College for trainee teachers.

Methods

In order to examine the research on the experience of beginning teachers in Kien Giang, Vietnam, a qualitative case study was employed. Stake (2000) states that in case study research, the case can be an individual, a group of people, an organisation, a program, an innovation, a process, a service or an activity. According to Creswell (2007), case studies allow the researcher to explore in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals. Yin (2009) also explains that when compared with other designs, case studies can provide 'holistic and meaningful exploratory characteristics' and 'descriptive' study reports, and that such a design focuses on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. According to Stake, (1978) case studies provide an opportunity to acquire insightful knowledge regarding an individual or event. These parameters suit the study of beginning teachers in Kien Giang province which the writer is undertaking to provide insight into the issues these teachers faced in their first year of teaching. This present qualitative case study allows to provide a better understanding these beginning teachers' situation.

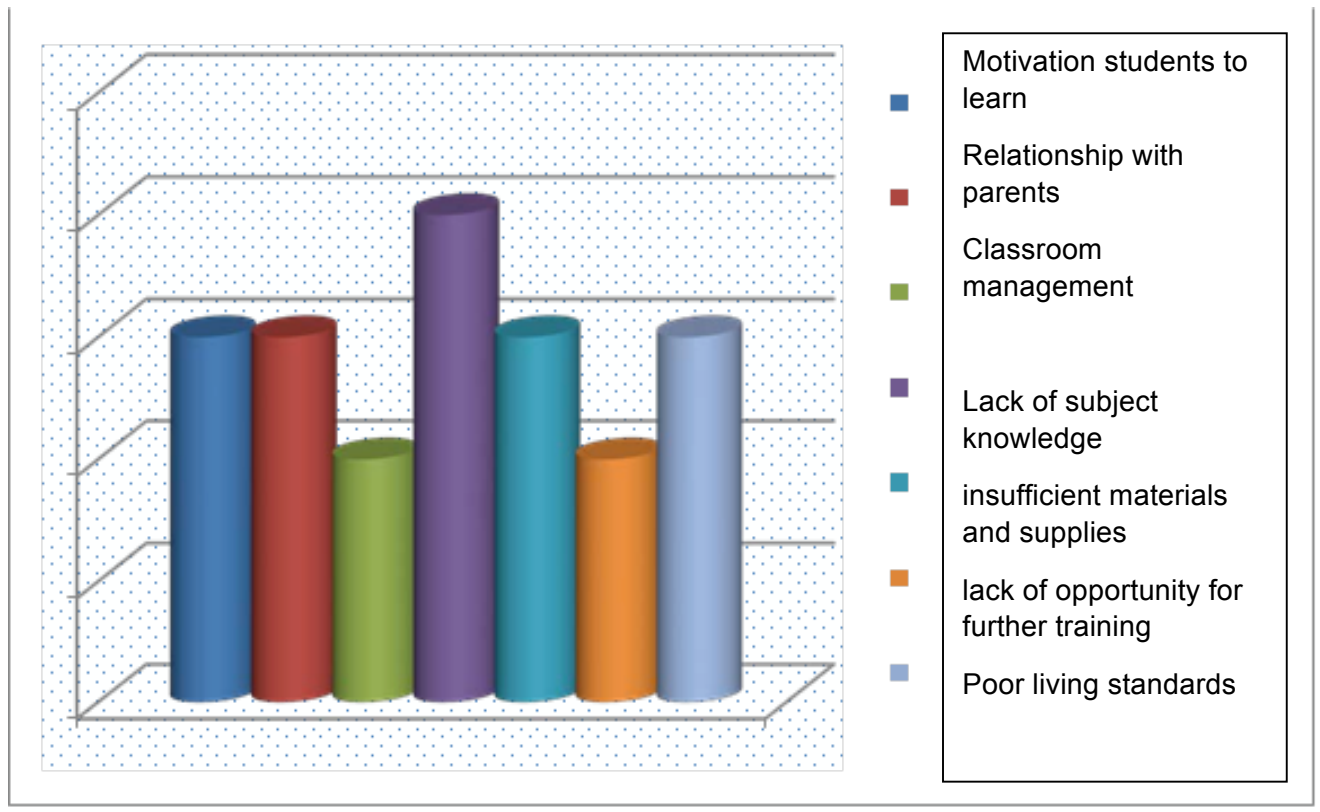
Result

In terms of searching for variation in beginning teachers' experience as much as commonality, the one-to-one interview data assists the writer with information at a deeper level with details of the experience told by five volunteer participants through their stories. The analysis of these data from one-to-one interview requires the identification of examples from the data that would illuminate the aims of the study. In the following we present the findings in relation to our research question. The findings are organised into the following themes: First teaching problem concerns, and valued support received, and the quality of preparation during teacher training college from five in-depth interviews. Some quotations from the original studies are used as validation

First teaching problem concerns:

Figure 1: shows the results of the seven themes on the perceived problems described in the five indepth interviews.

Perceived problems during the first teaching year

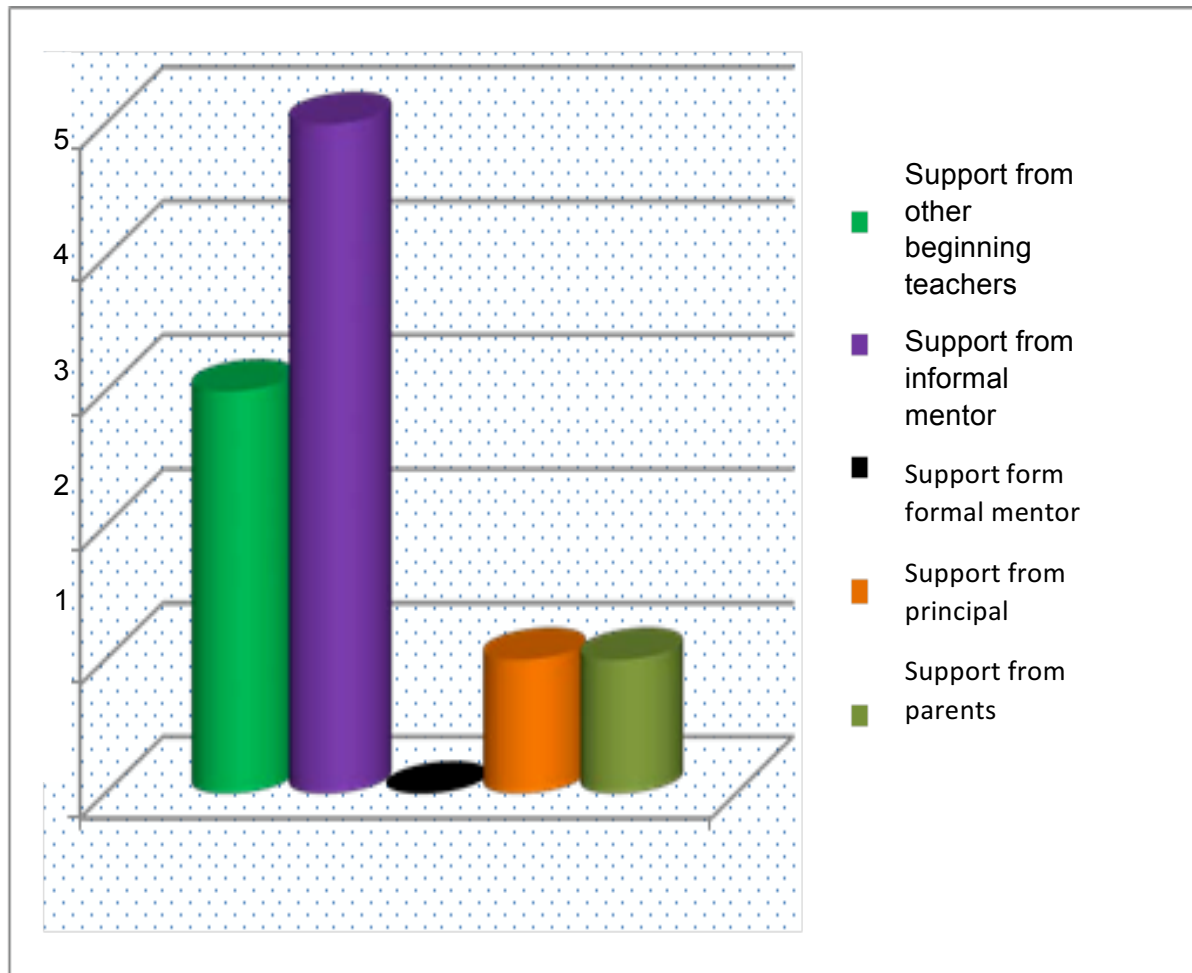


This figure summarises the interview results graphically, so we can see that there are three levels of concern. The most frequently mentioned concern is lack of knowledge (by which the teachers mean not only foundation knowledge, knowledge appropriate to teaching at the primary level, but also knowledge of classroom techniques and the regulations and practices common in their schools). The middle level of concern relates to student motivation and parental support, related to poor living standards of the community, and insufficient school resources with which to tackle these problems. The lowest mentioned level of concern relates to classroom management and lack of opportunity for further professional development.

Valued support received

Figure 2: shows the results of the five issues on the value of the received support as indicated in the indepth interviews

Received supports in five individual interviews

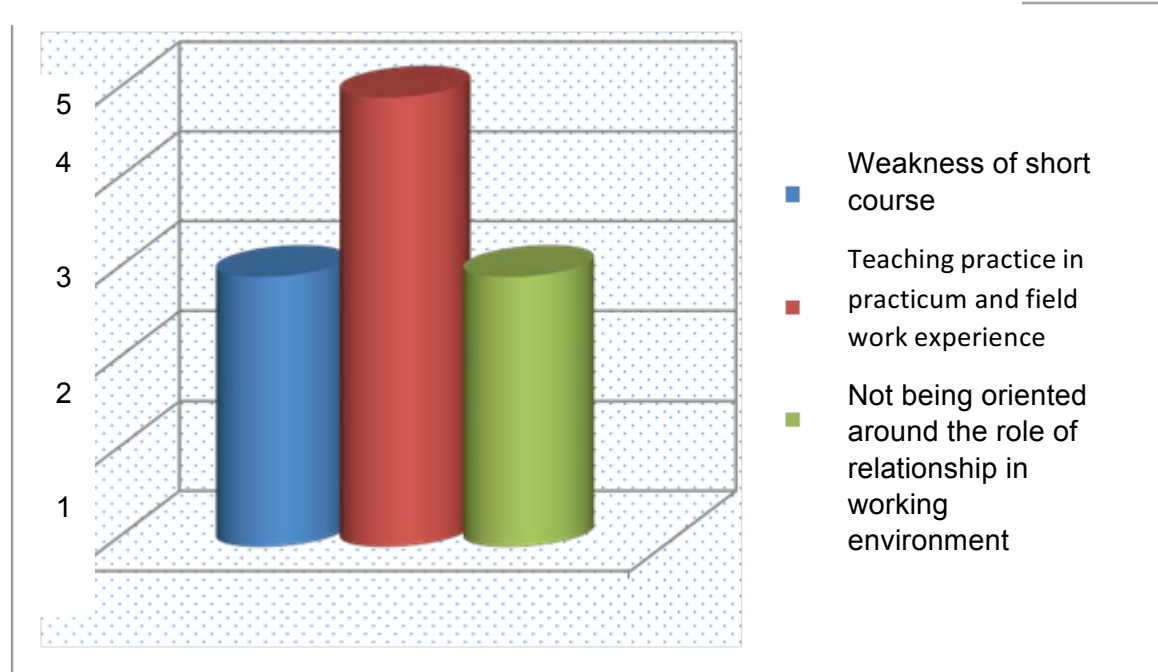


Support from informal mentors was identified by all five as a helpful source during the first teaching year. There was no participant who experienced gaining positive support from their formal mentors, but they experienced negative support from these formal mentors. This is also why they seek support from other experienced colleagues. Therefore, the theme about supportive formal mentors presents participants' negative experience. Support from friends was highly valued by the three participants (Chuc, Suong, and Dinh) and was identified as a useful source of support in their experience. Support from principal, as identified by Dinh, and support from parents as identified by Suong were also assessed as valued supports in their first teaching year

The quality of preparation during teacher training college

Figure 3: Five issues from the five indepth interviews on the quality of preparation in the teacher training college.

The quality of preparation in the Teacher Training College



when discussing the quality of the preparation of these participants for their first teaching year, the majority of participants expressed a common experience in the in-depth interview in three aspects: one was the lack of practice teaching, the second was the importance establishing good relationships in the work place; the third was the weakness of the short-course expressed in the experience of Chuc, Suong and Lan, it was the weakness of the short-course entailed their concerns about the lack of subject matter knowledge. The discussion about the problems of lack of knowledge about subject matter has been given in the previous section

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beginning teachers' experience in their first teaching year in Kien Giang province, a province located at the lower section of the Mekong River in Vietnam. To achieve this purpose, a single qualitative case study design was used to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experience of beginning teachers in their first year by collecting data from four focus group discussions, five individual interviews, and documentary evidence.

The first finding of this study revealed that these beginning teachers were concerned about their lack of subject knowledge, how to motivate students to learn, the lack of material and supplies, their relationship with parents and the poor living standards. The foremost concern of three participants, expressed in the individual interviews was their lack of knowledge of subject matter. The specific problem was for participants who had been trained as secondary teachers and who had completed only a two-

month course to gain a qualification to teach at the primary level. This course did not provide them with the sufficient knowledge to teach at the primary level. Therefore, they argued that it was the lack of training which made them incapable of teaching at this level. This finding indicated that the two-month training course for primary teachers was not successful and resulted in a lot of troubles for these beginning teachers. They also admitted that they sometimes felt apologetic for their incapability to fulfil their responsibility to students in terms of not being assured and confident about what they were teaching in their primary classrooms. This result is consistent with prior research which argues that beginning teachers need to be equipped with clear and detailed knowledge of subject matter to enable them to manage a class and teach effectively.

The second finding of this study relates to the two sources of support that the participants experienced and most valued, namely support from experienced teachers (from both outside and inside their schools), and from other beginning teachers. The participants' experience of supportive colleagues varied from context to context, as they were in different schools. Most participants highly valued the support they received from experienced teachers; however, only three participants were lucky enough to be teaching in their old schools and received strong support from their former teachers. This strong support helped them resolve many of their difficulties in their first year of teaching, although they faced other difficulties such as a lack of knowledge on subject matter and not being assigned a formal mentor. This finding confirmed the importance of the support from experienced teachers for beginning teachers in school cultures where "integrated cultures" exist. Communication between experienced and beginning teachers helped the beginning teachers to be more confident in sharing their successes obtained

The third major finding of this study concerns the participants' perspective of the role of KGTTTC in preparing them for their first year of teaching. This study revealed that the time allocated to practical teaching and field-work was insufficient, therefore during their practicum, trainee teachers did not have enough time to actually practice what they had been trained in relation to theoretical knowledge. Consequently they experienced many difficulties in undertaking tasks of head-teachers and also transferring the theory of teaching into practice in the first teaching year. In addition, this research also found that the practicum and field experience programs offered by KGTTTC did not expose participants to the full range of tasks and responsibilities expected to teachers and the demands of the real teaching environment were far beyond what they had imagined when they were training to become teachers. This resulted in many participants experiencing 'the reality shock' during their first teaching year.

Recommendations

For school principals :

Beginning teachers should be encouraged to conduct lessons with experienced teachers as they are often prone to be weak in classroom practices and more emotional support. The principal should acknowledge these two factors and encourage beginning teachers to conduct lesson observations

Principals in remote schools should be aware of the disadvantages of the local socio-economic environment in remote areas and should encourage more efficient support for teachers especially beginning teachers. Principal should also have sympathy towards and an understanding of the difficulties associated with mobility issues in relation to teachers travelling to work, due to poor transportation in remote areas.

Beginning teachers should have greater opportunities to attend training courses and develop their professional development

Teacher educators

The teacher training college should assist trainee teachers grasp the connection between theoretical knowledge attained in teacher training courses and how to put this knowledge into practice by giving practical examples of teaching in schools

During field-work and practicum, teacher educators should maximize all available opportunities in the limited teaching practice time to help trainee teachers better understand teaching and learning activities in the school, in particular, how to complete score books, and school report books

Local authority

Closely coordinating with principals at local schools to create the best conditions in capacity in terms of venues and budgets for school activities, in which including the organization of the network among beginning teachers from all schools.

Creating favourable conditions and encouraging poor families to make them feel more secured to let their children go to school.

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