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Teacher Retention and Attrition: Views of Early Career Teachers

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Introduction

The provision and maintenance of quality teachers in the profession is a pressing issue. Concerns have been raised that teacher experience and knowledge may be lost to the profession through attrition and retirement (Ramsey, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001; Williams, 2002; McGaw, 2003; Lonsdale & Ingvarson, 2003; Skilbeck & Connell, 2003, 2004). Teacher attrition comes at a cost to individual teachers and to the community (Korthagen, 2004; Connell, 2007; Rinke, 2007; Buchanan, 2009; 2010; Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan & Russell, 2012). Hence there is a need to investigate the experiences of early career teachers (ECTs) to consider how these experiences influence ECTs' decisions about staying in or leaving the profession. For teacher educators, knowing about ECTs' experiences provides insights that enable them to enhance teacher education programs and better prepare teachers for their first years of teaching.

This paper reports on an aspect of a large-scale longitudinal study on early career teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. The overarching research question was: Why do some early career teachers choose to remain in the profession and why do others choose to leave? This paper describes and analyses the experiences of teachers participating in the study and highlights implications for teacher retention.

Review of Related Literature

The aim of this study was to understand more fully the ways in which beginning teachers negotiate the transition from university to school environment as well as map the terrain from novice to accomplished teacher. Studies on this transition to the first years of teaching have indicated a move by teachers from "an initial buoyant state of energy and enthusiasm to a reality zone of day-to-day school life that is ... confronting" (Manuel, 2003a, 144). Goddard and Foster (2001) and Schuck, et al. (2012) have reported similar teacher transitions in Canada and Australia respectively.

The experiences of ECTs have been extensively researched in the literature and studies indicate the problem of attrition is considerable. Manuel's (2003a) research study used teacher-centred data in a bid to address the "alarming attrition rates of [beginning] teachers ... in their first three to five years of their service" (p. 140). Ewing and Manuel (2005) observe that, based on OECD data, up to one third of teachers in Australia and other developed countries leave within the first five years.

Accurate Australian figures are difficult to obtain because each state and territory

education department gathers its own exit statistics and there is often a reticence to publicly reveal the data, in particular, concerning the number of years of service of those leaving the profession. Manuel (2003a) notes the lack of data on attrition available in Australia. However, a survey of 1351 beginning teachers conducted by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) indicated that 24% of teachers felt it was likely they would leave teaching within 5 years (APPA, 2006). The Australian Education Union (AEU) found in a survey of 1200 ECTs that 45% indicated that they did not believe they would still be teaching in 10 years' time (AEU, 2006). Paris (2010) suggests statistics for Australia of 30-40% attrition in the first five years, but she does not indicate the source of this statistic. However, she makes the point that the situation was of sufficient concern to prompt a parliamentary enquiry into teacher education in 2007.

Further insights about attrition are provided by smaller-scale studies. For example, O'Brien, Goddard and Keeffe (2007) found that by their second year of teaching 29% of the teachers were thinking about leaving teaching and 10% indicated they had already made the decision to leave. The major factor for these teachers was burnout. Plunkett and Dyson (2011) suggest that attrition rates for teachers do not differ markedly from those in other professions but suggest that the implications for the workforce are greater. They highlight the problem of "possible compromise of student learning" (p. 33) to the general productivity costs associated with attrition in any profession. McGaw (2002) points out the need for qualitative research to address the quantitative problem of teacher retention and attrition.

Studies about beginning teachers' views of their first years in the profession (Buchanan, 2006; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Fetherstone & Lummis, 2012) highlighted the following issues: adjusting to full-time teaching demands, managing colleague and parent relationships, understanding the cultural contexts of the school and coping with the clash between expectations of pre-service teaching and the realities of in-service teaching. Manuel's (2003a) report suggests a range of strategies identified by the teachers in his case study, which, "they consider to be a first step to overcoming some of the major difficulties experienced during the first year out" (p. 148). These recommendations include release from full teaching load, harnessing the rich resources of professional teaching associations, funding to participate in meaningful professional development over time, additional support for new teachers in hard-to-staff schools, pastoral care and substantial links between universities, education authorities and schools. Manuel (2003a) points out, however, that these findings cannot be generalized and that "not all beginning teachers experience the kind of hardship that leads to a decision to leave the profession" (p. 144). Other studies have also explored ECTs' positive experiences as they evolve from student teachers to novice educators. For many ECTs the experience of being a beginning teacher is neither traumatic nor upsetting (Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Brown, 2008).

Positive experiences among ECTs were often associated with having a supportive and empathic mentor. Carter and Francis (2001) and McLoughan (2004) examined mentoring in large-scale (n = 465) and small-scale (n = 7) studies respectively. Carter and Francis (2001) concluded that positive experiences and continuing professional learning were associated with mentoring that was collaborative and encouraged reflection in the workplace. They added that partnerships between schools and universities were also valuable for professional learning.

In spite of the many studies indicating positive experiences, Cherubini's (2009) literature review on ECTs' experiences over the last 35 years points out that new teachers seem consistently to resign themselves to negotiating the tension inherent within disjointed teaching experiences. A consequence of this tension is that new teachers may abandon those pedagogical practices that resonate with student emotional, creative and intellectual development. Cherubini (2009) describes,

An unmistakable subtle and overt sense of tension that potentially exists in the transition from pre-service student to professional teacher ... recurrent descriptions of beginning teachers' initial circumstances imply quasi-Darwinian overtones ... while being forced to make sense of the moral and ethical fiction that threatens the fragile identity formulated during teacher education (pp. 92 - 93).

Goddard and Foster (2001) analysed teachers' experiences using a critical constructivist approach and reported how 'neophyte' teachers move through different phases with the "transitions occurring at varying rates and triggered by experiences particular to the individual practitioner" (p. 362). Further, these phases or themes were able to provide a means to better understand the relationship between effects of the experience and the broader issue of high attrition rate among the neophyte teachers. The authors also called for researchers to "seek out those neophytes who show resilience and who do more than simply survive their first years to stay in the profession" (p. 362).

Schuck, Brady and Griffin (2005) identified school culture as a major determinant of early career teachers' satisfaction. Where the school culture was supportive and encouraging, these characteristics appeared to be a critical variable for helping ECTs to cope with the rigours and challenges of their new careers. Communication was crucial. ECTs often struggled to discover both the written and unwritten rules and protocols of the school.

Perceptions of success and sense of worth are consistently noted in the literature as being associated with the retention of beginning teachers. The literature highlights the importance of ensuring that beginning teachers feel valued and that they receive the support needed to experience sustained success in their teaching (Blase, 2009; Cockburn, 1999; Dyson, Albon & Hutchinson, 2007). Challenges to be addressed include:

- Assisting ECTs with issues of retention and recruitment by understanding and appreciating their reasons for becoming a teacher, including their background and their own schooling. This understanding, together with a "genuine spirit of consultation and collaboration might raise the morale of the profession as well as induce the more disillusioned to remain" (Cockburn 1999, p. 235).
- Recognising the profession of teaching at all levels. The teaching profession should be represented by an independent collective self-regulating organization of teachers (Dyson, Albon & Hutchinson, 2007). This recognition will help to attract and retain the best teachers, who will then instil and promote quality learning for their students.
- Considering how teacher education programs may support new teachers' experiences Potari, Sakonidis, Chatzigoula, & Manaridis, 2010. The challenge is to create programs that will prepare the beginning teacher for the intricacies of life in the classroom (Bean, & Stevens, 2002; Cavanagh & Prescott, 2008; Ensor, 2001).
- Forming long-term partnerships among various stakeholders (teachers, teacher employment bodies, schools, universities and other teacher education bodies) so as to promote positive experiences among the ECTs (OECD, 2005). The literature also favours teachers building their own professional networks (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) with the support of local schools and education departments and thereby co-constructing a collegial and facilitative learning environment.
- Enacting recommendations from the OECD (2005) report, *Teachers Matter*, that criteria and processes used to allocate beginning teachers should ensure that they are not concentrated in the more difficult and unpopular locations. In addition, all beginning teachers should participate in structured induction programs that involve: a reduced teaching load; trained mentor teachers in schools; and close partnerships with teacher education institutions (pp. 205-206).

The literature draws attention to the differing needs of younger and of more mature ECTs. For example, when considering the policies relating to early career teachers, Skilbeck and Connell (2004) emphasise the importance of matters such as: motivation and preparation to teach; school leadership and environments; recognition of quality teaching; career advancement prospects; and the attraction of particular fields of teaching and school locations (pp. 29-30). Mayer (2006, p. 67) suggests the teaching profession of the future should consider opportunities for ECTs to advance their careers in the profession, and find autonomy and flexibility in their work lives. The formation of professional learning communities in schools to support and provide a collegial and enabling context is also noted to be beneficial in retaining ECTs (Blase, 2009; McLaughlin, 1997; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Suffice it to say that stresses related to the early years of teaching and beyond contribute significantly to decisions to resign. Fetherston and Lummis (2012) for example, refer to resignation pathways, and, in a discussion of burdensome workloads, observe that “fatigue generated by unaudited human resource expectations eventually creates serious wellbeing issues among teachers” (p. 12).

The experiences of ECTs are inextricably linked to their teacher preparation. Accordingly, it is essential for teacher educators to be aware of, and analyse, these experiences so that they can modify their courses to ensure relevance and support for graduates in their early years. A number of longitudinal studies investigating the transitions from teacher education programs to the early years of teaching have been conducted with the purpose of improving teacher education by understanding the experiences of ECTs (see for example, Kosnik & Clift, 2009). Such studies indicate the importance of research by teacher educators in the area of retention and attrition, and lead to valuable feedback for their own teaching in teacher education programs (for example, see Schuck, 2002).

Manuel (2003b) illustrates the importance of her study for preservice teachers and teacher educators because everyone in the profession should hear the voices of the new teacher:

‘to know about their expectations and their aspirations; to understand how they have constructed and interpreted this thing called teaching; and to make an authentic and visible space for the new teacher to enact their vision of what it means to be part of the teaching profession’ (Manuel, 2003b).

When teacher educators understand the experiences of the ECT, their preparation of preservice teachers for the rigours of teaching can be more realistic. Being able to incorporate discussion about the challenges of early years of teaching and how to survive those challenges is an essential component of teacher education (Lang, 1999).

Studies also indicate ways in which support can be provided to ECTs by their teacher education programs. Peer support networks within the student body can be established while the ECTs are still at university (Prescott, 2011). The environment of support is useful during the university professional experience program but takes on an added dimension once teaching begins. Online networks with ECTs, mentors and teacher educators are also found to be valuable (Schuck, 2003).

This review of relevant literature indicates that there are clear strategies for enhancing the early years of teaching, in terms of both the support received in the workplace and the contributions of teacher education programs. However, these first years for teachers remain volatile in terms of quality. It is clear that the decision to remain in or to leave teaching is influenced by many factors, including the experiences of teachers during their first few years in the profession. This article focuses on the qualitative research conducted in the longitudinal study described above. It addresses the research question: What are the

experiences of ECTs that may influence their decision to stay or leave the teaching profession?

Methodology

This qualitative study was based on a theoretical construct of situated theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated theory focuses on learning in context, in this case, learning to become a teacher in an on-the-job context, and forming a decision as to whether to stay in or leave the profession.

The project team strove to maximise dependability and credibility of the findings that emerged. Dependability is enhanced when data gathered in a variety of methods prove to be corroborative and confirmative. The credibility of the findings is strengthened by the longitudinal nature of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings were rendered more credible by peer debriefings, to strengthen inter-rater reliability.

Data Collection

Interviews reported in this article were but one of the data collection instruments used. Other data collection processes in the broader project included: a tracking survey (in which respondents furnished 'vital statistics', such as their school's location, their gender and the like), and a best-worst survey (Burke, et al., forthcoming), which provided the relative importance of different factors in teachers' decisions about staying in or leaving the profession. The interview component of the data collection provided the data of interest in this paper. ECTs participated in up to 3 interviews over the period of 4 years, and the interviews were designed to collect rich data regarding their progress over time.

Interviews incorporated the selection of an image, from a set of images, which acted as a personal metaphor that best described the respondent's teaching experience. Respondents were also asked to indicate their position on a grid indicating levels of support and challenge. The personal metaphors and the participants' self-placement on the support/challenge grid served as stimulus material that captured the respondents' interest and prompted them to analyse their feelings and experiences, thus providing more detailed responses than direct questions might have engendered. The interviews allowed participants to expand on the choices they had made in terms of the grid, and their metaphors, and allowed for triangulation of the patterns that emerged, as well as a member check of previously furnished individual information.

The interviews were semi-structured. In the first set of interviews, participants were asked to describe why they entered teaching (and, if applicable, why they left the profession). They were asked what aspects of the image had led them to choose this particular photograph to describe their experience. They were also asked about particular challenges they were facing, and any support they might be receiving in meeting these challenges. They were asked to illustrate this, where appropriate, with descriptions of critical incidents they had encountered in their teaching. In the second interview, participants were asked if they would still choose the same image or whether their choice had changed. They were asked to explain their reasoning for this response. Similarly, their position on the grid was investigated for any changes occurring. An important question concerned any changes in their experience. In the final interview, teachers were asked about their experiences as above. They were also asked if they had any advice for a beginning teacher, based on their own experiences.

Participants

Participants for the project were drawn from ECTs who had completed their degrees in 2005 and were in the 2006 graduating cohort. Teacher education graduates from all New South Wales (NSW) teacher education programs were approached to participate. Altogether 329 ECTs indicated by email their willingness to participate in the project. These participants were asked to respond to a tracking survey once a year for the duration of the four-year project. The participants did not provide any identifying details for themselves other than an email address.

The first tracking survey included a call for volunteers to participate in interviews over the course of the project. They were asked to provide a first name and contact number if they were willing to be approached. Of the 122 ECTs who volunteered for the series of interviews, 54 were selected. These interviewees were chosen to ensure diversity in secondary and primary experiences, type of school, geographical location, and university program from which they had graduated. However, 12 of these participants did not make themselves available for the first interview, resulting in 42 remaining interviewees. This number diminished each year of the project and fell to 14 by the time of the final interview.

Telephone interviews were conducted with the participants. This approach had the benefit of being conducted while the respondent was in a familiar environment of his or her own choosing, and minimised the time required to participate, both important for new teachers. They are also held in real time, which allows for interaction and clarification during conversations. Schuck and Segal (2002) found that telephone conversations, with an empathic but detached researcher, allowed the participating teachers to express their emotions and experiences about critical teaching incidents in ways that were, in many respects, cathartic outpourings. The phone call, then, was both an effective means of data collection and a means of support to beginning teachers. As many of the teachers were dispersed across the state, the ease of contacting them for telephone interviews was of additional benefit.

Interviews were conducted in the first, second and fourth years of participants' teaching (2006, 2007 and 2009). The findings from these interviews are designated 06, 07 and 09 respectively, in the extracts that follow. There were 42 teachers in the first year. By the final year of the study these numbers had declined to 14 participants. We hypothesise here that those teachers with the fewest complaints about their work situation may have been most likely to withdraw from the study. This circumstance may have had the effect of skewing data towards the negative.

During the interviews, participants were asked to indicate their reasons for becoming teachers, and to discuss work-related encouragements and discouragements they had encountered, their intentions regarding staying in or leaving teaching, and the issues that influenced their decisions.

Analysis

The analysis of each set of interview data was conducted using constant comparison data reduction methods to identify common themes. Four members of the research team annotated transcripts with themes arising in that transcript. Inter-researcher coding agreement was then checked. Any discrepancies in the coding were resolved through discussion among team members. Categories of themes were identified after the first set of interviews and these were supplemented after analysis of interviews 2 and 3, using the same process of coding and inter-researcher agreement. From these three sets of analysis, six broad categories were

identified in terms of how the ECT saw his/her teaching experience. These categories were:

- Collegiality and support
- Student engagement and behaviour management
- Working conditions and teaching resources
- Professional learning
- Workload
- Isolation

The status of casual teachers also arises in some of the above categories. We then revisited the transcripts, to search for specific examples of responses linked to each of the six categories so that a clearer picture of the ECTs' descriptions of their experiences could be determined.

Limitations

We concede here the influence of the observer-expectancy effect (Kocakaya, 2011) and of the Hawthorne effect (e.g. Levitt & List, 2011), both of which explain influences of a study on participants, and the possibility that data might be influenced by changes beyond the contextual scope of the study. In addition, the self-selective process of those participants who decided to remain in the project for its duration may have influenced the nature of the data collected.

Findings

The six themes outlined above are discussed below and are supported by illustrative quotes from the interviews, each one typical of the majority of participants. Care was taken that the quotes represented both positive and negative views of the ECTs' experience. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants.

Collegiality and support

Our analysis shows that the quality of collegial support ECTs receive makes a substantial difference to their ability to manage their teaching. ECTs find it discouraging to be in the company of colleagues who are unsupportive or inconsistent in their attitudes and behaviour. Barry, a mature-aged Industrial Arts secondary teacher said:

'The biggest problem for me now is other teachers' slack and unprofessional attitude and how this impacts upon other people who just want to be doing their job. There are others who are extremely professional and I seek solace in their presence ... teachers don't impose school rules across the board. This impacts on how classrooms operate. The frustration is more to do with teachers than students.' (06)

By contrast, when experienced colleagues share their expertise and their resources generously, ECTs hear how other teachers cope with the demands of the job. This collegiality can serve as a morale-booster to newcomers, both in terms of new knowledge, insights and perspectives gained, and in terms of a welcoming gesture to the profession and to the school. We hypothesise that such experiences might predispose 'wavering' teachers to remain in the profession.

The ECTs valued having mentors who were interested in their progress and who offered help and acknowledgement without being asked. This responsibility was sometimes a difficult ‘juggling act’ for those charged with mentoring – the fine line between over- and under-support, and the varying needs of their early career protégés. Bill observed:

The other HT [Head Teacher] beats around the bush a little bit and is not that clear or articulate. I find that difficult because as a new teacher, I would prefer him to say what exactly he wants and I don't always know this. So, I have two different people that I am working under with two different teaching and management styles. So, this has been a bit more difficult. (07)

On the other hand, Keith, a mature-aged IT and Special Needs teacher in a very challenging school, felt very well-supported, and as a result was positive about his teaching:

‘I love the job, though things are a bit harder than I expected because of the school I am in. ... My mentor has always been hard on me: didn't believe in mollicoddling me. So I wrote programs, developed the curriculum; the lot. This gave me a very good insight of what teaching is about.’ (06).

The benefits of mentors appear to be profound for new teachers. Christopher, a mature-aged teacher in a primary school, seemed to remain in teaching as a result of the support he received. He recounted:

‘A major shock was the behaviour of the children, particularly in low socio-economic areas. During my early days working as a casual, I had a few traumatic experiences. I was kicked and punched and I was sworn at. ... Another time, a chair was thrown at me. I immediately got assistance from other teachers for help. They were overwhelmingly helpful and very supportive of me. ... I almost left teaching.’ (06)

It is interesting to note that in some instances, our ECTs were becoming mentors in their second year of teaching.

Student engagement and behaviour management

Student engagement and the related concept of behaviour management are a cause of considerable concern to ECTs, particularly in their first year of teaching. A consistent complaint is that ECTs were unprepared by both their theoretical studies at University and their Professional Experiences (practicums) for the problems of managing unruly classrooms.

Participants in interviews also complained that within schools there are often inconsistent processes for managing the behaviour of children. Less experienced teachers can sometimes feel that they are ‘fair game’ for students, when the Principal and teachers at a school exercise inconsistent disciplinary procedures, or when the school executive does not support the teacher's behaviour management decisions. Policies on student discipline were seen by some teachers as an impediment to their capacity to manage inappropriate behaviour. Charles, a high school teacher, indicated that he had heard ‘on the grapevine’ that the education authorities had:

... tied the hands of schools in regard to expulsion of students with bad behaviour records and these students know that they can get away with murder.... a teacher cannot place a student on afternoon detention due to the fact that the student will miss their bus. (06)

Problems with discipline are exacerbated by real or apparent lack of support from colleagues and senior staff. Denis, a mature-aged teacher, reported:

I have found the classroom management challenging at times, particularly early on in the year. As for support, I have felt at times I have had none and mostly very little at a school level. It has been sink or swim and communication within my school is basically non-existent. If the school was a private business it would go broke! I feel I have been lucky that I have 20 years' work experience behind me and have used strategies built up through this period to overcome obstacles. (06)

Linda, a recent graduate teaching in a non-government school, reported the following incident:

Two boys were taken away from class (for punching me) today and then brought back. However, there was no explanation given to me. I find there is no support from the Principal. I have spoken to him a couple of times but he has a very softly-softly approach and nothing gets done. Communication is lacking. Also, as a principal, he needs to show students that he means business and must have a more disciplined and strict approach rather than merely talking to them. I have also asked him to come to my class but he hasn't done so till now. (06)

Vijay, an IT specialist who was fast-tracked a BEd, observed:

There is very little support given to me as a beginning teacher. I have been given a full workload of 30 periods per week. But, there is no in-school mentor whom I can ask for any urgent questions or support. After my requests, they arranged one external mentor, but that was also for just one day per week for five weeks. ... My HT also looks after the school's intranet etc. So, I am not getting enough support from him either ... Allocate a person in the school who can provide proper support for the beginning teacher. Plus, the beginning teacher should be given less workload, as it could be helpful to cope with the new things in the school environment in the first year of teaching. (06)

At the time of this study, a statewide policy was implemented to ensure that all ECTs have access to a mentor. Unfortunately, Vijay's reported experience suggests that the support was too restricted to meet his needs.

Teaching students who are not interested in learning is also a problem. Engagement with learning or lack thereof was closely related to behaviour of students as the following quotation shows. Lynette, a mature-aged computing and special education teacher in a difficult-to-staff school, reported:

I see students with very high rates of non-attendance, drug use by parents, coming from violent homes and traumatic backgrounds. Lots of parents are very young or single mothers having a really hard time, with education not important and parents not interested. ... As a result, students as young as seven years and up can be very violent due to their upbringing and 'don't care' attitude (and they really mean it). Even kindergarten classes can be very difficult to control. Classroom discipline is a major issue. (06)

Learning how to deal with parents can also be a problem for inexperienced teachers. Participants complained about some parents' lack of interest on the one hand or their hostility on the other. They also reported their discomfort at being effectively child-minders for some students in later years of high school, who were staying at school even though they and their parents had little apparent interest in their education. Brian, a secondary Science teacher, said:

It's less about teaching science and much more about teaching social skills. (06)

The problems of classroom management are exacerbated for casual and part-time staff. Lauren, a primary school teacher, recounted:

Because I am part-time it is difficult for me to follow up students who misbehaved because I was either not at the school to give them detention or I had playground duty at lunch so I could not make them do detention with me ... I did not expect teaching to be as difficult as it was and it was the students' poor behaviour that made it so hard. (09)

Brenda, a casual teacher, commented:

I love teaching but behaviour is a big problem. Getting them to be quiet and setting the tone for the whole day is a big challenge. Also, students can disrupt the whole class. (06)

Mai-Lin, who has now left the profession, recalled of her teaching days,

Students wouldn't listen to me; I couldn't control the class but I didn't think things would get out of hand this much to make me leave ... I needed to establish myself more.

She added,

I don't at all mind the workload as I love teaching. However, I found that real teaching is only 20% and the rest is to do with other issues. (06)

It appears from our respondents' accounts that student engagement and student behaviour are significant factors for teachers, especially new ones. Problems with classroom discipline are seen to lead to a feeling of powerlessness on the part of teachers. Lack of support from the school executive and parents can exacerbate this problem.

Many ECTs felt that their pre-service education underprepared them for dealing with discipline and parents. Behaviour management, and other issues of perceived or actual lack of support were particularly keenly felt by casual teachers.

Professional learning

Some ECTs noted in their interviews that they valued the opportunities they receive for professional learning outside their school environment. They explained that learning off-site is less distracting than on-line learning or attending workshops and seminars at their own schools. As well, teachers find it more amenable for meeting and learning from other teachers with concerns similar to their own. They highlighted the value of meeting with peers and of not having interruptions to the sessions. Off-site professional development may be particularly useful for teachers who have few or no colleagues teaching the same subjects or grades at their school. Pauline, who teaches a language other than English (LOTE) at a secondary school, prefers:

... to attend external workshops and conferences, because I get the opportunity to network with teachers from other schools. This is beneficial because I can share and pool resources and also get exposed to new ideas and approaches to teaching. Workshops and conferences were good because they also supplement my small faculty. (09)

Other examples of professional learning that ECTs valued came through professional conversations with their colleagues, supervisors and mentors. They also benefited from observing others teach or co-teaching with more experienced teachers. Learning 'on-the-job' is characteristic of many professions and ECTs seem to feel the development of their abilities is reliant on learning from others.

Workload

One of the difficulties most commonly reported by ECTs is the amount of work they have to do in their first years of teaching, in addition to finding their feet as new professionals, and, sometimes, teaching outside their area of expertise. We note that during the conduct of this study, the employing authority enacted provision for additional release from face to face teaching time for ECTs. Thus, our participants were not beneficiaries at the time. Nevertheless, our ECTs' calls for such a reduction support the need for this policy.

Neil, a new graduate teaching in a small school, argued:

The challenge is teaching and preparing for subjects that I am not familiar with and not trained for (I am trained in the science area). Hence, I spend a lot of time developing everything I need for the subjects by myself. (07)

Penelope, a mature-aged history teacher, recommended:

a lighter load — the expectations of an Aboriginal Studies teacher needs to be thought through, especially the role of linking with the community. How are you supposed to do this when you are trapped in your school all the time? I am supposed to be meeting with another Aboriginal Studies teacher to help her and share ideas and this has to be done when we both have free periods, which is a rarity. Basically, 50 minutes is very little time for networking. (07)

The above is just one example where teachers' particular talents are called upon for extracurricular and/or administrative reasons. In her first two years, one ECT, Josephine, was called upon to coordinate the school's entry in a performing arts competition. In her third year of teaching, Josephine left for another system.

For many teachers, it is the amount of work rather than its level of difficulty that is overwhelming. Oliver, a secondary Science teacher, said:

It's not that I am finding the work difficult. It's just that I am working a lot harder and taking work home etc. Also, last year, the issue was more to do with classroom management. This year, I have got a hand on the classroom management and it is the workload that is the issue, such as marking and writing reports. (07)

Many of the ECTs were expected to take on a range of new subjects, or direction of a large project such as the performing arts competition (as in Josephine's case). All of these responsibilities occurred concurrently with trying to adjust to demands related to behaviour management, getting on with staff and working with parents and community. Most of the ECTs spoke of a need for reduced workload.

Isolation

Real and perceived isolation can be debilitating for any teacher, particularly one new to the profession, and hungry for advice, ideas and support. We identified four categories of isolation that impacted on the ECTs who participated in the study; physical, geographic, professional, and emotional isolation and they are described briefly below.

Physical isolation is the feeling of being alone in the classroom, without the support of another teacher, or being in the company of colleagues who may be withholding their encouragement, or who may have none to give. Bill, a mature-aged music teacher used these words to describe his sense of isolation at his school:

What I like least is being surrounded by people who have taught for a long time and with so much negativity ... (06)

Casual teachers in particular may experience physical isolation when they have a reduced number of opportunities for system-wide structured communication, compounded by little assurance of a continuing position. Casual teachers may be working in a multiplicity of locations, demanding a very high level of familiarisation with processes, policies, names and other information in order to function effectively in each circumstance.

Geographic isolation usually refers to deployment to a rural or remote school. Professional development opportunities at such schools require considerable travel, there are fewer opportunities for collegial interaction outside the school, and socio-economic factors may lead to students and their parents having higher priorities than their children's progress at school.

Being displaced from 'home' is also a significant issue for teachers. Isolation is not restricted to small communities. The city might be very lonely for somebody who grew up in a small town. Such displacement from home may be an important component in the mix of issues being faced by early career teachers.

Professional isolation refers to those occasions when a teacher may be the only teacher of a subject in a school, be teaching out of his/her field of expertise, of mature age, or simply unable to obtain the resources needed to teach as well as possible. Physical and professional isolation are closely intertwined. These comments from Lauren, a primary school teacher, illustrate this:

It was a personal decision for me to leave teaching as I found it too stressful ... having more support with team teaching at the start would have been beneficial. (09)
Some of the respondents felt 'lost in a big system'. Jane reported feeling like a faceless number and not very welcome or valuable. (06).

Emotional isolation is the feeling of separateness that comes with struggling on one's own, of not succeeding and not admitting to needing help or wanting to ask for it. Lucy, who left teaching to go into administrative work, put it this way:

I quit because of my fear of failure. I did not feel that I had the inner strength to be a classroom teacher. I felt that I needed to have a stronger personality to manage my classroom and because of this I felt that I could not teach long-term. It was commented that I could have put on an 'act' for the students and come across as a tough teacher, however I said that I wanted to keep it real with the kids and I did not want to be seen as someone who put on an act. (09)

By contrast, Yvonne, a mature-aged primary teacher, appreciated her Principal's kindness and acknowledgement in sending a personalised thank you note to her. She said:

...at the end of each term the Principal had a thank you card placed in my pigeon hole encouraging me and letting me know that she appreciates the challenges I am facing and how pleased she is with the way I am meeting them. This sort of encouragement makes you feel supported and appreciated. (06)

When asked what advice they would give new teachers, the responses of several participants are echoed in Bill's comments:

Don't wait for support; always ask for it. ...Speak to many different teachers; every different perspective helps and you can take what you want. (07)

For some, the interviews provided an opportunity to voice their concerns, to engage in a larger community and potentially overcome issues of isolation.

Discussion

A school conducive to newcomers is characterised by high levels of support and collegiality (OECD, 2005). Regrettably, in the most (by whatever means defined) 'demanding' schools, the emotional and other resources of existing teachers are likely to be more scarce and unavailable to the newcomer. Such a school might be characterized by high turnover rates, which means a higher ratio of inexperienced to experienced teachers, including executive. The OECD report indicated that beginning teachers should not be concentrated in the more difficult and unpopular locations. Part of the necessary support appears to be a firm and consistently practised discipline policy. We accept that in some schools applying such a discipline policy appears to require more persistence, and meets with more resistance, than in others.

Peer collaboration, including peer observations and feedback, also appear to be of great value. In supportive schools, ECTs will face a number of complex challenges and demands, as they will in any school, but the collegial, supportive atmosphere will help the ECT to move from surviving to thriving (Cavanagh & Prescott, 2008).

More broadly, we ask what keeps teachers in the profession. Most teachers enter the profession with a desire to be good teachers; to help their students learn and contribute to the next generation. During their early years, as they become better teachers they also become increasingly likely to stay in the profession. The only characteristic common to every participant in this study who remained in teaching was that they reported that they were becoming better teachers and that teaching was becoming gradually more manageable for them.

We recognise that teaching is a difficult and challenging profession that is arguably never mastered. Most ECTs have some weaknesses, and the more challenging their teaching situation is, the more likely it is that they will find it difficult to experience the sense of personal achievement that effective teaching can bring. For example, ECTs almost universally struggle with the management of the behaviour of their classes, particularly in their first year. The struggle when they start varies in intensity, but many report being stressed, needing to work hard late at night and having a sense of helplessness - at least with some classes some of the time. If this state of play endures, it is hard to imagine that many would remain in the profession for the long term.

Fortunately, for most, circumstances improve. The overwhelming evidence of our longitudinal study is that, for most, the satisfaction from teaching improves as the ECTs gain experience. They want to teach. They want to be good teachers. As they learn to be better teachers this experience of personal professional improvement together with the resultant improvement in their classes contributes to their desire to remain in the profession.

Two broad factors appear critical to the retention of teachers: the opportunity for professional learning; and the contribution of their work environment (including support, collegiality and possibly physical environment) to their sense of self-worth as teachers (Blase, 2009). Some, whom we could call the 'supported stayers', find themselves in supportive environments: valued and welcomed by colleagues; supported by a proactive mentor; and regularly assisted by experienced teachers. This circumstance contributes to their professional learning as well as their sense of collegiality and belonging in the school (and perhaps the profession more widely). Under these conditions ECTs are likely to become better at teaching more quickly and experience more success more often than those in unsupportive environments - and contribute more to their schools.

Professional learning *in situ*, involving good feedback and advice, with opportunities to learn by collaborating with colleagues, makes an important contribution to the experience of ECTs as they become immersed in the complex tasks inherent in teaching (Wang 2009). Professional learning with others at their school is critical. Their professional learning is further enhanced by sustained discussion with peers at workshops and sessions led by experts - particularly where this focus is on perceived key predictors of success, such as effective behaviour management. Such meetings, with time away from their school to reflect and confer with peers, may also contribute to the morale of ECTs. Their desire for input from experts outside their school suggests that the solutions to all their problems cannot be found within the knowledge base of a single school. Furthermore, having the tools to teach well is important. Acquisition of such tools includes access to shared teaching resources and materials in their school as well as to modern teaching technologies.

Some ECTs find themselves in less supportive environments than those described above; these teachers could be called 'resilient stayers'. For reasons that are unclear, this group may be over-represented in the sample of teachers who continued participation in this study from start to finish. We speculate that it may have been a function of the sampling process in that those who were having negative experiences may have been likely to choose to continue voicing their views over the four years of the study. On the other hand, our recent experiences with ECTs participating in interviews and focus groups suggest that they value

the opportunity to talk about their experiences, because discussing them helps them to cope with the difficulties and perhaps the isolation that they face. For those who felt less well assisted by colleagues and systems, the research process may have provided support. Such influences would contribute to an over-reporting of negative experiences in this study.

The views expressed by these ECTs underscore the needs that they feel are unmet, and the recommendations they have to improve their lot. Most of these teachers reported that when they began teaching they were highly motivated to teach, with a strong focus on helping young people to achieve and succeed in life. These teachers add to our understanding of the work environments that may influence their thinking about staying or leaving. For example, they express frustration at what could be broadly described as isolation, poor communication, unprofessional working conditions and excessive workloads. The main issues raised by our ECTs demonstrate the importance of relationships, and perceptions or realities of congeniality or hostility from those already in the school: collegiality and support, student engagement and behaviour management, professional learning, and isolation. Availability of teaching resources is also symptomatic of professional relationships.

Their largely negative experiences demonstrate their need to gain access to the factors appreciated by the 'supported stayers'. Specifically, they seek the support and environment conducive to becoming better teachers. They speak of the hard road they have walked, often with little or modest assistance, and elaborate on how difficult it has been to get to a stage where they derive satisfaction from teaching. They began with an altruistic focus on making a difference for their students, but during their first year they regressed to concentrating on themselves, their survival and coping with stresses such as: a burdensome teaching load, difficult classes, resistance to learning and, sometimes, ambivalent colleagues. For most of these teachers it is not until their second year that they begin to speak of 'things improving' and then they still talk of how much there remains to do.

The key question here then is: why do these teachers who feel relatively unsupported remain in the frequently difficult teaching situations they describe? Some of the evidence suggests that they feel they have made a substantial investment in this career and are loath to nullify that investment by leaving. Importantly, the evidence suggests that over time they do experience success and satisfaction, but it is likely that, under the conditions described, these particular teachers are also in possession of significant resilience that allows them to cope with or survive the prolonged difficult period or 'dry spell' as they learn their profession.

Unfortunately, it proved very difficult in this research to maintain contact with those who had actually left the profession. A few corresponded with the research team with stories of despair and disillusionment, but none of the leavers participated in the study for its full duration. However, the findings from the 'supported stayers' and 'resilient stayers' provide valuable insights as to the factors likely to determine whether teachers choose to stay in the profession or not.

Teacher educators can gain valuable insights from studies of the kind done here. These understandings may be useful in enhancing teacher education programs and ensuring that they address crucial issues. Implications for teacher educators include the necessity to prepare pre-service teachers for the multiplicity of circumstances they may face in the profession. Supportive networks comprising teacher educators, ECTs and mentors are also a way of enhancing ECTS' experiences. However, as Fetherston and Lummis (2012) point out, it is impossible for teacher education programs to equip beginning teachers to deal with every possible classroom eventuality. Teacher educators can provide some general guidelines in terms of how to manage various situations or categories of problems, such as classroom management, unsupportive managers and the like. We also suggest that teacher education can also probably offer insights into the role that personal resilience can play in dealing with such circumstances and perhaps suggest ways of building such resilience (Schuck, et al. 2012).

Conclusions

Policy initiatives currently aim to improve teacher education through accountability, development of standards and reductionist models of quality teaching. In many countries, teacher education is increasingly focused on sets of deliverable outcomes, while debates on how best to prepare student teachers continue to rage. These standards include competencies that teachers ought to have. On this basis there is little to disagree with. However, they fail to describe the attributes critical to the survival of the experiences described above, and which will stand in good stead as lifelong members of the profession. These outcomes do not bring to the fore attributes that beginning teachers need, in order to survive and thrive in the profession.

There is little that teacher educators and teacher education can do to modify the conditions that ECTs will face in their schools. We can, however, prepare them for such circumstances and support and assist them in managing their expectations. Recent literature suggests that teacher educators should focus on developing their students' capacities for resilience and empowerment (Johnson et al., 2010). Others suggest that teacher education programs will continue to have limited success in preparing students to teach, until they adequately prepare their students to reflect on their teaching (Schuck, et al., 2012). Our findings indicate the importance for early career teachers of: resilience, reflection, responsiveness to students and the school environment, relationships and resourcefulness.

This paper argues for teacher education programs and school leaders to focus on developing and supporting the five attributes listed above, in their graduates and beginning teachers. It further highlights the importance of support for teachers that will help them through the challenges of the early years. A teacher 'helpline' might be one way of offering such support across distance and with anonymity. Finally, we contend that teachers need recognition and affirmation, and that this process facilitates the development of the resilience that is essential if teachers are to thrive in the profession.

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