

Conditions that Support Early Career Teacher Resilience¹

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There are serious concerns around the sustainability of teaching and teacher education given the attrition rate of early career teachers. In Western countries we know that between 25% and 40% of beginning teachers are likely to leave the teaching profession in the first 5 years (Ewing & Smith, 2003; DETE, 2005). Clearly, there is a need to better understand the experiences of early career teachers and to investigate, in new ways, how the problem of teacher attrition can be addressed.

This paper is based on a collaborative qualitative research project between the University of South Australia, Murdoch University, Edith Cowan University and eight stakeholder organisations including employer groups and unions in South Australia and Western Australia. The aim of this study is to investigate the dynamic and complex interplay among individual, relational and contextual conditions that operate over time to promote early career teacher resilience.

The methodology for the study was a critical enquiry drawing on the traditions of narrative enquiry and critical ethnography. In 2009, 59 beginning teachers from the two states were interviewed at the beginning and end of the year. Towards the end of the year interviews were also held with a member of the leadership team in their schools. Data were also collected from a series of Roundtables held in each of the two states and attended by representatives from stakeholder groups. NVivo8 was used to manage a thematic approach to data analysis. Preliminary analysis has identified five major themes or domains that support early career teacher resilience. The themes relate to (a) relationships, (b) school culture, (c) teacher identity, (d) teachers' work, and (e) system policies and practices. In this paper, we present these themes as a framework that can be used to examine policies, practices and resources that promote early career teacher resilience.

Introduction

Research on early career teacher resilience is particularly significant at this time given the current economic, social and political context which surrounds the teaching profession. There is no dispute that these are tough times to be a teacher. Many factors have been identified as impacting on teacher wellbeing and competence including an expectation that teachers continually adapt and keep up with different types and functions of families, changes in work patterns, as well as new and different information and communication technologies (eg Pillay et al, 2005). As teachers' work has continued to expand and increase in complexity, the public profile and standing of the profession has fallen (MCEETYA, 2003). For these and other reasons, many Western nations are experiencing difficulties attracting new teachers and retaining them once they are in the profession (Moon, 2007).

This paper reports the findings of the first phase of a longitudinal study that investigated how early career teachers negotiate and deal with challenges to their personal and professional wellbeing during their first years of teaching. The research aimed to investigate the dynamic and complex interplay among individual, relational and contextual conditions that operate

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over time to promote early career teacher resilience. Furthermore, it aimed to develop a framework that can be used to examine policies, practices and resources that promote early career teacher resilience.

Background

Considerable research has investigated the problems teachers encounter early in their careers. For over three decades, researchers have sought to identify the causes of such problems and to make recommendations to address them. In some cases, graphic metaphors have been used to convey the seriousness of teachers' situations as they 'battle' to survive 'in the trenches' (Bezzina, 2006). An overview of Australian and international research reveals several recurring themes:

- teachers' pre-service education does not equip them with sufficient knowledge, skills and dispositions to meet the demands of classroom teaching (Ramsey, 2000; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Roehrig & Luft, 2006). This is particularly so in the area of classroom management (Robertson, 2006);
- early career teachers confront a serious mismatch between their 'idealistic motivations' and the daily realities of classroom teaching (Abbott-Chapman, 2005);
- too few early career teachers experience a quality induction program (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007). Most are left to 'sink or swim' and learn by 'trial and error' in their first year of teaching (Howe, 2006);
- there are both personal and contextual conditions that influence the retention of successful early career teachers (Peters & Le Cornu, 2007a, 2007b);
- school structures and cultural practices are 'deskilling teachers and robbing them of the enthusiasm to proceed with their job creatively' (Kanpol, 2007, p. 1); and
- school leaders are frequently too busy or lack the skills to effectively support early career teachers (Quinn & Andrews, 2004; Andrews, Gilbert & Martin, 2007).

The consequences of this are high levels of individual stress and burnout (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Goddard & O'Brien, 2004; Noble & Macfarlane, 2007) which lead to unacceptably high levels of early career attrition (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). The frequently proposed 'solution' to such teacher shortages is to 'fix' the problems that bedevil early career teachers and lead them to leave the profession. However, such a beguiling and simplistic response has not worked in the past and is unlikely to be effective in the future because it adopts a deficits perspective by focussing on problematic behaviour rather than enabling behaviour; it casts early career teachers as lacking agency and competence; it fails to acknowledge and take account of the dynamic and complex interactions between individuals and their social and geographic contexts that lead to positive outcomes for teachers; and its intervention focus is primarily on manipulating 'variables' or 'factors' rather than on promoting social interaction and the development of relationships (McKenzie, 2005).

What is lacking in the literature currently is an in-depth understanding of the interplay of personal and contextual factors around early career teachers' experiences. We believe that resilience affords a new lens through which to examine the complex issues of retention of beginning teachers and new teachers' learning. By resilience we mean 'the process of,

capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990, p. 425). However, we are adopting a socially critical orientation to resilience where we not only acknowledge the psychological dimensions of resilience that help to explain some differences in human agency, but also the broader social, economic and political forces on human experience (see Johnson & Down, 2009).

Methodology

We used a critical enquiry drawing on the traditions of narrative enquiry and critical ethnography. At the beginning and end of the 2009, we held semi-structured interviews with 59 primary and secondary early career teachers across Western and South Australia. Additionally at the end of year, we interviewed a member of the early career teacher's leadership team where possible. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to produce over 1800 pages of interview data. We conducted thematic analysis at two workshops held over five days. Five dominant themes or 'domains' were identified. Additionally, we used NVivo8 software to create more fine grained coding categories within each of the five domains which we have called 'conditions'. The outcome is a *Draft Profile of Conditions Supporting Teacher Resilience*² (see Appendix).

Findings

Preliminary analysis enabled us to identify conditions that support early career teacher resilience which we have grouped into the following five major domains: (a) relationships, (b) school culture, (c) teacher identity, (d) teachers' work, and (e) system policies and practices. The domains and their corresponding conditions provide a framework that can be used as a heuristic to consider how the resilience of early career teachers can be supported and enhanced.

Relationships

Relationships refer to the social networks, human connections and sense of belongingness experienced by early career teachers. Within this domain, three main conditions were identified that enhance the resilience of ECTs. That is, it is important to (a) promote a sense of belonging, acceptance and wellbeing, (b) foster pedagogical and professional growth, and (c) promote collective ownership and responsibility. There were many indicators in the data that supported these conditions. For example, it is important that personal and professional relationships are fostered based on mutual trust, respect, care and integrity. The significance of relationships with family and friends in providing a social and/or support network was clear. For example, one ECT reported; *'Mum was a huge help as well. In the first 6 months I'd send her every note that I was sending home to parents or the newsletters I'd wrote'* (ECT: Caroline). The ECTs' professional relationships included relationships with other teaching staff, support staff, leaders, students and parents. Data analysis showed that positive

² It should be noted that Phase Two of the study will be conducted in 2010. The profile will be trialled with seven schools to 'check out' the veracity of the Draft Profile for the purpose of confirming and/or modifying the Profile in the light of experience. Illustrative examples will be sought from the schools to provide detail to the profile. The two Roundtables, which were established early in 2009 (one in South Australia and one Western Australia) will also review the Profile. The Roundtables comprise of representatives from the participating Universities and eight industry partners. They meet four times a year throughout the life of the project and provide sources of data in the form of field notes and/or transcripts of proceedings and Roundtable documentation. Their responses to the Draft Profile will enable an interpretation of the emerging data from as many perspectives as possible.

staff relationships and emotional support were vital in ECTs' lives. They reported coping better when they experienced support from colleagues such as being asked about their welfare, being offered help and mixing freely with other staff in the staffroom. Conversely, they had a much harder introduction to teaching without their leaders' support or where they were left very much on their own. The impact on ECTs of this latter situation is evident in the following; *'I feel like I've been left on my own to fend for myself and I do believe it has something to do with the fact that this school doesn't take on beginning teachers very often'* (ECT: Tracy). The findings support those reported in the literature about the significance of supportive relationships on ECTs' attitudes and resilience (eg Flores & Day, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007; Peters & Le Cornu 2007a; Manuel, 2003).

School Culture

School culture refers to the values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, behaviours and relationships that characterise the daily rituals of school life. Within this domain, four main conditions for ECT resilience were identified: (a) promote a sense of belongingness and social competence, (b) develop educative, democratic and empowering processes, (c) provide formal and informal transition/induction processes, and (d) develop a professional learning community.

It was clear that schools that operated as professional learning communities provided conditions that promoted ECTs' sense of belongingness and connectedness. According to McLaughlin (1997) professional learning communities enable teachers to provide support and challenge for each other to 'learn new practices and to unlearn old assumptions, beliefs and practices' (p. 84) and actively shape their own professional growth through reflective participation.

This study highlighted the importance of ECTs entering school cultures that were focussed on providing a supportive learning environment for teachers as well as students. The critical role played by such a culture is captured by Conway and Clark (2003) who suggested that, 'the immediate culture of teaching and learning to teach that first year teachers experience is critical in fostering or frustrating a reflexive stance toward teaching' (p. 478). ECTs provided many examples of being encouraged and supported to undertake professional development, engaging in collaborative problem solving and having their suggestions listened to and working in year level and cross site learning teams, or with mentors. Christy explained:

It was really okay, because they gave us mentor teachers so each new teacher had a mentor teacher who was going to look after them....I ended up with two of them. And they both gave me resources and said this is the first topic you're going to teach, you're going to need this, you're going to need that, let's go over to the lab, meet the lab technician, or lab co-ordinator and the pair of them looked after me really well. (ECT: Christy)

It was also evident that school principals played a critical role in developing school cultures that were supportive of ECTs, a finding echoed in other studies of beginning teachers (see for example McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006; Flores & Day, 2006; Wood, 2005). Wood (2005) used the term 'culture builder' to describe 'a site administrator (who) organizes and supports institutional activities that promote professional relationships among novice teachers' (p. 45). One principal who played such a role described operating within an ethos of community and care by doing *'lots of things that celebrate us as a community'* such as celebrations of birthdays, regular *'drinks and nibbles'* and leadership *'affirmations'* in the form of small gifts and cards to acknowledge individual staff contributions (Leader: Peter).

Teacher Identity

Identity refers to ‘the ongoing and dynamic process which entails making sense and (re) interpretation of one’s own values and experience’ (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220). Successfully negotiating teacher identity is pivotal to becoming a resilient teacher. During this process teacher identity is actively constituted, through experience, in a range of personal, professional and structural discourses. Three main conditions that enhance ECT resilience were identified in the data: (a) to understand the discursive nature of personal and professional identities; (b) be reflexive; and (c) enable the development of a strong sense of agency, efficacy and self-worth. It is not an easy process for many ECTs as explained in the following; ‘*Being a beginning teacher and on a contract, you want to feel like you know what you’re doing, or appear like that to other people*’ (ECT: Julia).

To develop strong personal and professional identities in ECTs it is necessary to understand their discursive nature. Personal and professional identities are inextricably interconnected as can be seen; ‘*I definitely feel you know, that it’s important to have that little bit of me in the classroom*’ (ECT: Norah). Moreover, they are socially and culturally produced in context which is one of the reasons why a supportive school culture is so important for ECTs. The data from our study showed that the ECTs who demonstrated strong emerging identities and were therefore more resilient were those who had a high level of personal awareness, viewed themselves as learners and were reflexive. This had a positive effect on their self-confidence and their sense of personal agency. For example, one ECT suggested beginning teachers should ‘*Stay true to yourself, embrace what you learn, don’t take things personally*’ (ECT: Amy). The more resilient ECTs in our study were also those who understood the importance of their own wellbeing in regard to their motivation, how well they coped and their competence. They worked very hard at nurturing their wellbeing and tried to establish a realistic work-life balance by eating well, having family time, exercising, not taking work home every night, making time for friends, playing sport, setting aside ‘no work’ time, debriefing, going to bed earlier, limiting the time they worked at school and making time for themselves.

Our study has highlighted the strong link between teacher identities and emotions, a finding consistent with the literature (Nias, 1986; Zembylas, 2003; O’Connor, 2008). Zembylas (2003) for example, stated; ‘Emotions inform and define identity in the process of becoming’ (p. 223). Our findings also reinforce Hargreave’s (2001) assertion that ‘emotions are bound up with individual experiences of the politics and power within the system’.

Teachers’ Work

Teachers’ work refers to the complex array of practices, knowledge, relationships and ethical considerations that comprise the role of the teacher. It acknowledges the ways in which teachers’ work is being reshaped in the context of a broader set of economic, political and cultural conditions. Four main conditions for enhancing ECT resilience were identified: (a) acknowledge the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of teachers’ work; (b) develop teachers’ curriculum and pedagogical knowledge and strategies; (c) provide support to create engaging learning environments; and (d) ensure access to appropriate ongoing support, resources and learning opportunities. It was clear from the study that this area provided one of the greatest challenges for ECTs as they found themselves taking sole responsibility for the learning program and classroom management. As one ECT explained; ‘*It never stops, I think I’ve got this down and then it’s hang on, I’ve still got to put this in...you never stop, you never stop learning.*’ (ECT: Sophie). Even those ECTs who felt their studies had prepared them

well for beginning teaching struggled with catering to the diverse needs of learners, managing student behaviour and reporting to parents. The ensuing feelings of ‘isolation, mismatch between idealistic expectations and classroom reality and lack of support and guidance’ have been identified as key features which characterize their lives (Flores, 1997; Huberman, 1991; Veenman, 1984, cited in Flores & Day, 2006).

ECTs fared best in schools that explicitly acknowledged the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of teachers’ work and had realistic expectations of ECTs and the amount of support they needed. Supportive structures included mentoring by colleagues working in similar year levels or curriculum areas, opportunities for collaborative planning of teaching, assessment and reporting and school wide policies and support systems for the management of student behaviour. For instance, one leader offered the following insight into supportive structures in his school:

I’m obviously always a part of the meetings and the induction with the new people and obviously I’m always on the panels when they are employed too, so there’s the initial induction then we meet with the them usually on a monthly basis particularly in the first term they’re here, we assign them a mentor; we make sure there’s someone that’s going to be there to look after them. (Leader: Peter)

Policies and Practices

Systems’ policies and practices refer to the officially mandated statements, guidelines, values and prescriptions that both enable and constrain ECT well being. Analysis of the data revealed that there are three main conditions for enhancing ECT resilience: (a) provide relevant, rigorous and responsive pre-service preparation for the profession; (b) creative and innovative partnerships and initiatives that assist smooth transitions to the workforce; and (c) implement transparent, fair and responsive employment processes.

It was clear that ECTs perceived some aspects of their pre-service preparation as supportive of their entry to the profession, as can be seen in this example:

Doing all of the learning theories and all that kind of stuff ... puts you in the right headset. I think if you can listen to it and take on board some of those things, you can actually look at things in a very different way as to what I would have before. (ECT: Ingrid)

In particular they mentioned the value of their professional experience in schools, their development of curriculum knowledge and preparation for planning and being a reflective practitioner. However, it was also clear that they felt the need for ongoing support and development in aspects such as managing highly disruptive behaviour, catering for the diverse needs of learners, reporting student progress and interacting with parents.

Those who reported a smooth transition into their first appointments acknowledged the importance of systemic processes such as clear employment guide-lines, early notification of appointment, support with housing and transport when moving to the country, access to system support personnel and professional development and continuity of employment. Some ECTs, who were employed for a full year, were also given additional release time: *‘I thought I wasn’t eligible for the 0.1, but it came through. So I take a day off every other week and I know the TRT that comes in. So being able to put a full day’s work into a specific area has been good’ (ECT: Ingrid).*

Unfortunately, many of the participants were in temporary contract positions and some had also experienced temporary relief teaching so did not qualify for additional release time. Some felt the temporary nature of their employment had a disempowering effect as captured in the following; *“When you’re on a contract...you don’t want to rock the boat too much”*. (ECT: Cathy). Some ECTs also felt constrained by the high levels of system mandated accountability measures they encountered in their schools. Finding herself in a school with a rigid testing regime, one ECT said of her students:

They find them (tests) frustrating, ... they like to have a little bit more time, and fully understand, rather than say “This is the test, and you’ve got 30 minutes and you need to finish it” you know, all of those sorts of things, and there is the pressure to perform, for us [teachers], for the school, for them [students]. (ECT: Lynda)

In 1993 Ball claimed that teachers’ work was being ‘overdetermined and over-regulated’ through ‘the imposition of a national curriculum and national testing and interventions into pedagogical decision-making’ (p. 106). It was clear that some ECTs felt that was still the situation today and perceived it as a threat to their resilience.

Overall it was very evident that improving ECT retention will require stakeholders such as teacher educators and system administrators to continue to work together to develop preparation, transition and retention strategies that respond to ECTs specific needs as they enter the profession.

Conclusions

The framework presented in this paper contributes to a greater understanding of the dynamic and complex interplay among individual, relational and contextual conditions that operate over time to promote teacher resilience. Based on our research to date, we argue that ECT resilience is enhanced when:

- **relationships** are developed that nurture a sense of belongingness and acknowledge the complex emotional needs of ECT’s. Such relationships are based on respect, trust, care, and integrity;
- positive **school cultures** are developed that actively promote collaborative relationships, professional learning communities, educative forms of leadership and dialogic decision-making;
- ECTs successfully integrate personal, professional and structural discourses in ways that sustain both a coherent sense of personal identity and emerging **teacher identity** over time;
- the focus is on understanding the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of **teachers’ work** rather than on individual deficits and victim blaming; and
- **systems’ policies and practices** show a strong commitment to the principles and values of social justice, teacher agency and voice, community engagement, and respect for local knowledge and practice.

This framework can be used by ECTS, school leaders and staffs, teacher educators, systems and policy makers as a heuristic to examine policies, practices and resources to promote early career teacher resilience.

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Draft Profile of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher (ECT) Resilience

(Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce, & Hunter, 2010)

Relationships

Relationships refer to the social networks, human connections and belongingness experienced by ECTs. In relational schools there is a continual focusing on the complex emotional needs of ECTs in the form of social exchanges that bring with them respect, trust, care, and integrity. ECT resilience benefits significantly when these values are evident.

To enhance ECT resilience, it is important to:

Promote a sense of belonging, acceptance, and wellbeing

- Foster relationships based on mutual trust, respect, care and integrity
- Give support to manage personal and professional challenges and conflicts
- Encourage help-seeking
- Create opportunities to be involved in professional, social and community networks
- Value support from family, friends and peers

Foster pedagogical and professional growth

- Value the personal strengths, assets and resources of teachers
- Provide explicit, constructive and timely feedback
- Give explicit affirmation

Promote collective ownership and responsibility

- Cultivate a generosity of spirit
- De-institutionalise relationships
- Employ a capabilities approach

School Culture

School culture refers to the values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, behaviours and relationships that characterise the daily rituals of school life. ECT resilience appears to flourish in those schools that actively promote collaborative relationships, professional learning communities, educative forms of leadership and dialogic decision-making.

To enhance ECT resilience, it is important to:

Promote a sense of belongingness and social connectedness

- Value and practice affirmation
- Encourage diverse perspectives and practices
- Foster trust and goodwill
- Minimise isolation

Develop educative, democratic and empowering processes

- Promote distributive leadership
- Take collective responsibility for teacher well-being and physical safety
- Work through problems respectfully
- Include all school personnel regardless of employment status
- Establish an ethical commitment to social justice

Provide formal and informal transition/induction processes

- Appoint mentors/coaches/buddies
- Provide on-going induction
- Apply equitable processes regardless of length and nature of appointment
- Promote understanding and appreciation of the different roles in the school

Develop a professional learning community

- Promote opportunities for risk taking and innovation
- Provide environments and resources that optimise teaching and learning
- Provide opportunities for collaborative learning
- Take collective responsibility for student behaviour, learning and well being

Teacher Identity

Successfully negotiating teacher identity is pivotal to becoming a resilient teacher. During this process teacher identity is actively constituted, through experience, in a range of personal, professional and structural discourses. Resilience is more likely when ECTs successfully integrate these discourses in ways that sustain both a coherent sense of personal identity and emerging teacher identity over time.

To enhance ECT resilience, it is important to:

Understand the discursive nature of personal and professional identities

- Recognise that teachers' identities are socially and culturally produced in context
- Be aware of the interconnectedness of personal and professional identities
- Understand the evolving nature of personal-professional identities
- Understand that emotions are an integral part of discursive practices

Be reflexive

- Accommodate new and different ways of thinking
- Challenge and develop beliefs, assumptions, values and practices
- Negotiate the contradictions, dilemmas and tensions of teaching
- Employ proactive coping strategies

Enable the development of a strong sense of agency, efficacy and self-worth

- Commit to the ethical and moral purposes of teaching
- Develop a high level of emotional intelligence
- Maintain a sense of hope and optimism
- Have space for identity work
- Nurture one's well-being and work-life balance

Teachers' Work

Teachers' work refers to the complex array of practices, knowledge, relationships and ethical considerations that comprise the role of the teacher. It acknowledges the ways in which teachers' work is being reshaped in the context of a broader set of economic, political and cultural conditions. ECT resilience is more likely when the focus is on understanding the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of teachers' work rather than on individual deficits and victim blaming.

To enhance ECT resilience, it is important to:

Acknowledge the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of teachers' work

- Attend to the physical, intellectual, relational and emotional dimensions of teachers' work
- Make provision for the emotional and tiring nature of teachers' work
- Negotiate multiple relationships in complex settings

Develop teachers' curriculum and pedagogical knowledge and strategies

- Provide opportunities for collaborative planning, teaching, assessment and reporting
- Allocate space and structures for teachers' intellectual work
- Focus on student diversity and difference
- Promote creative, innovative and intellectual work

Provide support to create engaging learning environments

- Take collective responsibility for management of student behaviour
- Develop practical skills and strategies to manage the physical classroom environment
- Share and demonstrate context specific strategies
- Model and promote autonomous and collaborative decision making

Ensure access to appropriate ongoing support, resources and learning opportunities

- Provide equitable and timely access to needs-based PD
- Support the development of pedagogical beliefs, values and practices
- Provide adequate release time

Policies & practices

Systems' policies and practices refer to the officially mandated statements, guidelines, values and prescriptions that both enable and constrain ECT well being. ECT resilience is enhanced when systems' policies and practices show a strong commitment to the principles and values of social justice, teacher agency and voice, community engagement, and respect for local knowledge and practice.

To enhance ECT resilience, it is important to:

Provide relevant, rigorous and responsive pre-service preparation for the profession

- Foster stakeholders' collective ownership for preparation
- Encourage diversity of pre-service professional experiences

Create innovative partnerships and initiatives that assist smooth transitions to the workforce

- Support professional development suitable to school context
- Acknowledge value of previous professional experiences in similar or same school
- Provide additional resources to complex settings

Implement transparent, fair and responsive employment processes

- Notify appointment in a timely manner
- Provide the potential for continuity of employment
- Appoint to roles and schools suitable to expertise
- Ensure access to timely and appropriate ongoing support, resources and learning opportunities
- Provide induction and ongoing processes for learning
- Provide additional release time to all ECTs
- Provide school leaders with professional learning to support ECTs