Valuing early career teachers: Putting the brakes on the exodus

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Abstract

The attrition of early career teachers has been identified as an international issue. This paper reports on an Australian study that sought to identify the lived experiences of beginning teachers in one independent school system in their first three years. Areas such as the teacher's job satisfaction and impacting factors were addressed. Data revealed that the main drivers for teachers terminating their teaching career in the first few years are connected to work/life balance, the level of support from administration, the teacher's mentor, and the level and appropriateness of the professional development they are permitted to attend.

Introduction

It is just two years since the then New South Wales Education Minister, Adrian Picolli, made the statement that tertiary institutions are training too many teachers for the demands of the education market (Ballantyne, 2016). An opposing predication however has come from Associate Professor Philip Riley, a researcher in teacher attrition, who has warned that Australia may well face a teacher shortage in the coming years because of the increasing rate of teachers leaving the classroom (Stroud, 2017). Obviously these two points of view are in opposition, but it is in the best interests of the education sector to try and understand why teachers – both new and experienced – are looking outside the school system for their careers.

This paper reports on a research project that sought to explore the experiences of early career teachers (ECTs) in one independent school system in Australia. The purpose is to contribute a greater understanding of the phenomenon together with provision of some possible solutions.

Background

The rates of attrition for beginning teachers are unacceptably high in most education systems in the western world (Heineke, Mazza, & Tichnor-Wagner, 2014; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Described as 'epidemic' by Gallant and Riley (2014), between 40% and 50% of teachers in North America, United Kingdom, and Hong Kong leave in the first five years after graduation. Longitudinal studies in Australia also reflect similar results (Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, Burke, & Louviere, 2013).

Recent research has discovered the reasons for this emerging problem of attrition, and they appear to be attributable to a number of factors. The considerable diversity of reasons for this attrition include: lack of mentoring (Hallam, Chou, Hite, & Hite, 2012); individual teacher's poor performance (Henry, Bastian & Fortner, 2011) and workload (Latifoglu, 2016). Further, researching attrition amongst novice teachers, DeAngelis and Presley (2011) discovered that the issue of attrition within the beginning teacher group tended to relate more to the individual school rather than being pervasive across sectors.

The experience of new teachers indicates that the first three years of teaching are the most difficult. Indeed, it is not surprising that Henry, Bastian and Fortner (2011) found that teachers in these first three years were less efficient than those with at least five years' experience. The effect of teachers leaving early in their careers would indicate that some of their most difficult work has already been done and that school systems are at a disadvantage in losing new career teachers who have invested 'personal capital'— emotional and financial; and had so much invested in them already by organisational

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entities—monetarily and in professional education, development and mentoring.

In Australia, the Bureau of Statistics has revealed that 53% of people holding teaching qualifications are not practising in the classroom (Stroud, 2017). It was also revealed that in 2014, 5.7% of teachers in Australia left teaching. While this may not seem like an excessive number, given that the total teacher workforce in 2014 was 440,000 (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016), this percentage represents an exodus of more than 25,000 teachers. This level of attrition comes with significant impacts. According to Ingersoll and Strong (2011) it can lead to acute shortages of teachers in particular geographical locations or key learning areas.

Also, the frequent and ongoing turnover of teachers causes disruption to students' learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011) and this needs to be considered, but further it is an additional financial cost to the school system (Fetherston & Lummis, 2012). Additionally, this level of teacher attrition has a negative impact on the morale of the teachers remaining at the school and on the whole school morale (Shockley, Watlington, & Felsher (2013).

There are several studies that have sought to establish reasons why teachers leave the teaching career. Fetherston and Lummis (2012) identified poor leadership but also inadequacy in: "building shared visions, being transparent, protecting staff, listening actively, communicating often, celebrating, enabling and the many other facets of managerial behaviour that constitute effective leadership these days" (p. 10). They further identify teachers who did not point to one particular reason but found that an accumulation of factors built up to a point where they decided the task was no longer tenable.

The increasingly difficult task of maintaining student engagement and the connected issue of behaviour management are ongoing issues for teachers and more so for those in their first year of teaching who are still working out policies, processes and expectations. Not mentioned yet, but of paramount importance is the amount of work new teachers have to do in their early years of teaching "in addition to finding their feet as new professionals, and, sometimes, teaching outside their area of expertise" (Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, Burke, & Louviere, 2013, p. 121).

Other issues that early career teachers report as having an impact on their tenure in the classroom include a lack of comprehensive, systematic induction programs such as classroom observations with feedback and coaching, and professional development tailored to the novices' need (Henry, Bastian & Fortner, 2011). Another recurring theme

is often a perceived lack of administrative support (Menon, 2012).

Buchanan et al. (2013) discuss the isolation a new teacher can feel in the workplace. This can be professional isolation or emotional isolation where the teacher feels separated from the staff and struggling on their own. They may be experiencing a perceived lack of success but not wanting to acknowledge it, or to ask for help.

This research sought to establish the feelings and experiences of beginning teachers in one independent school system in Australia.

Method

Having noticed that the attrition of early career teachers in one independent school system appeared to be paralleling that found in education in general, it was decided that teachers who graduated in the years 2013, 2014 and 2015 would be asked to participate in a study that would identify the demographics of the teachers, their perceived level of administrative support, their experience of mentoring and their induction and orientation experiences. Their intent to remain in teaching was also sought. By surveying graduates over three consecutive years, a sample from each of the first three years of teaching was made possible, assuming students went directly into employment.

A mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was preferred, beginning with a survey that also included opportunities for comments. This was to be followed by telephone interviews for those who indicated they would be interested and willing to respond in this way. An invitation was posted to each beginning teacher at his/her school, assuming that all might be currently employed.

One hundred and nine invitations were sent out. At the time of posting, ten of the beginning teachers had already left the system; and a further twelve had changed their names or moved schools, leaving a potential of 87 responses. An online survey via Survey Monkey enabled respondents to be completely anonymous, if desired. The survey questions were designed to reflect issues already raised in the literature and discussed in the background section of this paper.

Findings and discussion

The first section of the results is reported within three categories of demographics: the sample, perceptions of administrative processes and level of personal mentoring received. Job satisfaction, attitude to tenure, and evaluation of professional development experienced are individually discussed as specific topics of interest emergent from their early teaching profession experience.

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1. The sample

The study included 17 first year teachers, 15 in their second year and 12 in a third year, being 44 in total, expressing a response rate of close to 50%. Of these, 50% were primary teachers, 48% secondary teachers and 2% early childhood educators. The participants were at schools across Australia, and of those who responded to this optional item, 48% were from New South Wales, 24% from South Australia, 21% from Queensland and 7% from Western Australia.

2. Administrative process perceptions

Twenty five percent (25%) of early career teachers did not generally feel supported by the principal, though there may be isolated times when they did feel supported. This is a key piece of data, given that lack of principal support has been shown to be a critical factor in early career teachers leaving the profession. It needs to be remembered that whether the teacher has in fact been supported or not is not relevant to the study because it is the perception of lack of support for the teacher that is a key factor in teacher attrition. With regard to the staff handbook, policies and procedures, 77% of the participants had access to this information though three of the respondents (7%) said it was either very sparse or out of date. Twenty percent (20%) of respondents reported that they had not had a formal induction into the school. Though 91% of students acknowledged that they had been given reduced teaching loads in their beginning years, this was often infringed upon with extra curricular tasks and several students who reported a reduced load, still felt burdened by the overall requirements.

3. Personal mentoring

Though 91% of early career teachers reported having a mentor, several participants noted that although they had a mentor officially, often their mentor was too busy or stressed to provide needed support. In fact, 62% of respondents reported ad hoc meetings with their mentors, leaving little more than a third who had regular meeting times. A buddy teacher assisted 80% of respondents, but in small schools they were often the same person as the mentor. The most concerning result here is that 20% of respondents had never been observed and given feedback, and 59% had never had their daybook checked.

Establishing good habits of preparation is likely to forestall poor teaching, as well as boredom and inappropriate behaviour by students. It should be noted that many respondents see ad hoc as appropriate, and not overly controlling. However, unfortunately ad hoc supervision tends to be associated with the occurrence of problems—when poor practices or lack of preparation have already occurred, creating below expectation outcomes, and potentially a crisis.

Job satisfaction

Respondents to this study were asked to rate the enjoyment level they experienced of their teaching position in their first year on a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 represents 'no enjoyment at all' and 5 represents 'extreme enjoyment'. The results are shown in Figure 1. It is disturbing that there are almost as many teachers reporting on the negative side of neutral as on the positive side. The top three experiences that generated the most enjoyment for the participants were: other school staff who were supportive, friendly, kind, helpful, respectful and who socialise together; the students; and the actual teaching and seeing the students improving.

The range of issues that caused the respondents' difficulties however, were greater in number and more diverse. Table 1 illustrates some of the issues and the number of early career teachers who listed each of them.
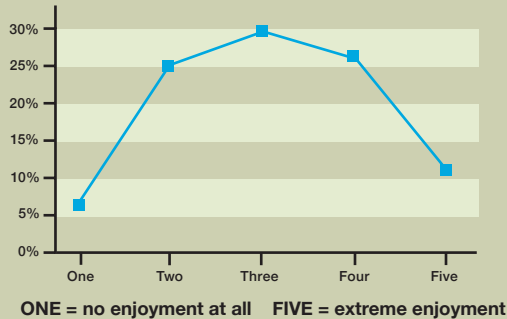
Tenure as a teacher

A sample of the respondents had already left teaching (n = 22). When asked why they had left, the answers included: a negative workplace, further study, workload, and a generous offer in another career. Individually, these respondents were quite reticent about returning to teaching. There would have to be some changes for them to consider teaching again.

Only 34% of current early career teachers reported that they intended a long term career in teaching, while 45% did not see themselves staying more than 5 years. While this was only a 'snapshot' of these young teachers' future planning, however their prediction is alarmingly close to the earlier quoted 53% of qualified teachers not currently teaching in Australia.

Some of the more qualitative comments made by the respondents surrounding reasons for a premature departure from the classroom can clearly be placed in two main themes: *work/life balance* and not feeling *empowered* or *supported*.

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Figure 1: Teacher responses to their enjoyment of their first year of teaching

ONE = no enjoyment at all   FIVE = extreme enjoyment

Table 1: Specific difficulties experienced by early career teachers

Theme/topic	n	%
Differentiation/special needs	23	52.3
Behaviour Management	18	40.9
Assessments	15	34.1
Reporting	14	31.8
Time management (personal/professional) / lack of release time	12	27.3
Lack of programs in place/outside subject area	12	27.3
Mentor issues (too busy, stressed or not supportive)	9	20.5
Working /communicating with parents	6	13.6
Staff relations	4	9.1
School's data management system	2	4.5

Professional development

The teachers who participated in the study reported mostly positive experiences of the professional development activities attended. In fact, out of the 60 professional development sessions teachers commented on, only 10 reported them as being 'somewhat useful', or 'not very useful'. The types of professional development early career teachers expressed preference for, and a desire for more information and experience in, were: creative assessments, behavior management, differentiating for special needs, innovative content delivery, and the use of technology in learning.

Summary of recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from this research.

- That principals and school system directors (where they exist) should ensure they develop a positive relationship with early career teachers as soon as they start at the school.
- That the mentor ensures the beginning teacher is welcomed and supported in the school and that regular (weekly or fortnightly) meetings are arranged.
- That there is a formal school induction program for new teachers which is subject to formal supervised system evaluation.
- That beginning teachers are visited by the principal in their classrooms and affirmed for their work several times in the first term.
- That mentors observe, give feedback and check planning and paper work regularly.
- That professional development is provided regularly and that it is aligned to the teacher's needs.

Future research directions or recommendations

There is an argument to say that enough research has been done to give schools, principals, and mentors a comprehensive idea of what is required to keep early career teachers in the classroom. This study, though more specific in its outcomes than earlier studies, still identifies the same broad issues that new teachers struggle with. Given that these issues are known and published, it would be worthwhile to do individual case studies of schools that have focused on developing solutions to one or more of these issues, and to research and report their effectiveness.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this study are no surprise and the issues that have been identified in this study as contributors to early career teachers leaving teaching, can be addressed within each school's structure and organisation. The real need is for education authorities to acknowledge that the level of attrition amongst early career teachers is not a positive thing for education systems and consequently, to make early career teachers an even higher priority in their schools in terms of emotional and physical support, as well as further developing academic support. **TEACH**

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