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The influence of support for early career teachers on their decision to remain in the teaching profession

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Introduction

In 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) published two documents relating to the work of early career teachers (ECT); 'Early Career Framework' and 'Reducing workload: supporting teachers in the early stages of their career'. These were welcomed, especially as retention in the early phase of a teacher's career has historically been lower than for their more experienced peers (Guarino et al., 2006). This research-based article focuses on how, in spite of issues with high workload, student behaviour management, and a lack of support from senior leaders and colleagues (Perryman and Calvert, 2020, Ainsworth and Oldfield 2019), some ECTs sustain resilience and gain a strong sense of satisfaction from their work.

Described as times of survival (Huberman, 1989) and 'reality shock' (Veenman 1984 in Perryman and Calvert 2020), research continues to orient ECTs as passive and powerless in the face of rigid school cultures and unforgiving policy contexts (Hulme & Menter, 2014). As a result, increasing rates of ECT attrition have received high media profile in England, with four in 10 new teachers reported to leave the profession within a year (Pells, 2017). Indeed, Foster (2019) reports that since 2011 in England, more teachers have left teaching each year than have entered it. However, despite these challenges, some ECTs remain. This demonstration of resilience and job satisfaction within an arguably unforgiving professional climate provided an opportunity to consider the challenges faced by many ECTs and their influence on decisions to leave or remain in teaching.

Research design

Research was conducted with graduate teachers from a higher education institution (HEI) in the Midlands region of the UK. The main aim was to critically analyse experiences and perceptions of ECTs and the role of continued HEI support.

Questionnaire

Having gained approval from the University Ethics Committee, ECTs were contacted by email and asked if they would participate in an online questionnaire. This strategy collected participants' perspectives of the benefits and challenges of being an ECT, preparation for the role and the impact on their professional lives.

Participant teachers

A total of 49 ECTs completed the questionnaire. The findings allow us to represent the voices of ECTs in this context and, as such, are a contribution to other collective voices in this research area. In terms of characteristics, the majority of participants (n=42) were female. Four teacher preparation routes were represented including the PGCE (n=32), the 3-year BA (Hons) (n=10), School Direct (non-salaried) (n=6), and Assessment Only (n=1). The vast majority were in the first three years of teaching with over a third (n=17) in their first year and nearly half (n=21) in their third year.

Key findings

How do the expectations of early career teachers compare to the realities of the profession?

Yinon and Orland-Barak (2017) noted that realistic expectations can help teachers decide to remain in the profession. However, an adverse mismatch between expectations and reality arguably contributes to disaffection and subsequent attrition (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). When participants were asked about their expectations, the majority focused on the *'all-consuming'* nature of the job and notions of *'idealism'*. Just over half (n=27) reported that the job was worse than anticipated, saying that they expected:

- children to be energetic, engaged and willing to learn;
- to enjoy working with children and make a difference;
- to improve the children's education;
- that they would teach with confidence and gain respect.

Responses also suggested that ECTs expected more pastoral support from colleagues and the senior leadership team than they received. One ECT stated that *'Teaching staff are busy and have other priorities. It's difficult but as much as they want to help, the help isn't always forthcoming'*. Others commented on the *'...lack of empathy and support from colleagues'*.

These teachers also expected more freedom in planning and creativity in the classroom, with one participant reporting they had *'no room to think outside the box'*. This was coupled with the expectation that they would be encouraged to develop their own teaching style. One teacher commented that they had *'less time to focus on developing personal quality of teaching than expected'*. However, on a more positive note, some ECTs (n=13) felt that they had improved their personal skills and appreciated the challenge and feelings of reward:

Managing my own classroom and workload has been a lot better than I thought. I have relaxed and understand the expectations of my class and school and see this as part of the job, rather than something I am being told to do.

What are the challenges experienced by early career teachers?

Participants listed three areas of challenge. Administration and workload were key challenges for over three-quarters (n=42) of ECTs – *'there's too much admin, paperwork, unnecessary meetings and always having to justify myself'*. In addition to the general workload and hours expected of them, the cycle of assessment and requirements of statutory tests, plus other *'extra admin'* were identified. One ECT stated that the *'workload overshadows the good moments'*. Challenges when teaching focused on additional needs and behaviour management for nearly two thirds of participants (n=32) - *'It was challenging to establish behaviour management and routines'*. One teacher stated:

'I was equipped to teach everything except strategies to teach SEN kids. That had to be learnt through trial and error'

These external stressors, such as pupil behaviour, relate to lower job satisfaction (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019) which is also influenced by psychological variables such as self-efficacy (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Caprara et al, 2006). In spite of this, several authors (Gallant & Riley, 2017; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Smith & Ulvik, 2017) have stated that relationships with students and associated challenges have not influenced teachers' decisions to leave the profession. In fact, the opposite has been found to be the case, with these relationships being positive and rewarding (Yinon & Orland-Barak, 2017).

How does support for early career teachers influence their motivation, resilience and job satisfaction?

Areas for which support was most readily available commonly identified by more than half of participants were:

- assessment (n=33);
- behaviour management (n=30);
- dealing with parents (n=29).
- planning (n=29).

This arguably reflects more immediate pressures upon ECTs. Support for relationships with colleagues, which can provide a vital source of teacher self-esteem, motivation and job satisfaction (Kelchtermans & Piot, 2013; Vangrieken et al, 2015), was also mentioned. A number of participants also received support for subject knowledge whereas only a minority stated support for time management and work-life balance. The fact that few ECTs were receiving this support suggests that the emphasis on reducing workload communicated by the Department for Education documentation has not yet filtered through in all contexts.

Nearly all of participating teachers reported a medium to high level of resilience in their role (n=47) and the majority (n=42) stated they hoped to still be teaching in three years' time. However, just under half (n=23) said their resilience had decreased since qualifying. Ensuring ECTs become 'resilient stayers' (Buchanan et al, 2013) remains key if these teachers are to remain in the profession. Johnson et al. (2010) suggest a supportive school culture, including mentoring, may increase resilience. This echoes the concept of 'third space' mentoring (McIntyre & Hobson, 2016) in which mentees discuss their 'professional learning and development needs' (p. 1). Despite advocacy for this third space, the number of ECTs leaving the profession remains high and the challenges noted above arguably remain key factors in this decision.

Implications for practice

Within the participating University, this research resulted in additional opportunities for ECTs to discuss issues through webinars linked to workload, mental health and wellbeing, assessment, working with additional adults, and time management. In addition, drop-in sessions ('ECT surgery') which centred on teachers' questions and reflections, provided pastoral support. Further, a number of key actions relevant to any initial teacher preparation course or ECT context arose.

Expectations: The need to prepare for and understand that teachers' actions in the classroom are strongly affected by the social, cultural and structural conditions in the school as an organization is crucial in managing expectations. This can help ECTs to understand the demands on teachers and schools and arguably de-personalise their experiences. This understanding can help them to gain more realistic expectations, 'relax' as in the words of our participant quoted above which can subsequently improve retention. Input of this nature could be provided as part of a school's induction for NQTs with regular conversations held during subsequent mentoring or performance management meetings to embed this perspective.

Coping: Crucially, to develop strategies for the complex processes of professional collaboration, the dynamics of school culture and the quality of collegial and teacher-pupil relationships need to be considered. Noted above, positive relationships with pupils are a factor in aiding retention. Finding ways to explicitly celebrate these between teaching teams and in staff meetings can enable teachers to reflect on this aspect. This could help to offset some of the negative associations with difficult behaviour which our participants mentioned were challenges they faced. This can improve job satisfaction and aid retention and may also improve ECTs sense that they are not alone, increasing resilience.

Resilience: Many support programs focus almost exclusively on the dynamic between the teacher, trainee and pedagogy/curriculum content. Focussing attention on increasing resilience, especially of ECTs, to cope with challenges may result in a more long-term commitment to the profession. As mentioned above, helping the ECT to manage expectations and increase coping, possibly through sharing of experiences with colleagues and an ethos of celebration alongside embedding social and cultural understanding, can help to develop the resilience needed to cope with the challenges faced.

Research engagement: It is vital for all teachers to engage in theoretical understanding of teaching, pedagogy, relationships, and child development to help them make sense of the daily situations encountered, as well as how they are located within the complex system of the school. Thorough and critical engagement with research-based concepts is the most powerful way to do this. Schools may facilitate this by bringing research evidence directly into discussions which lead to decision making, perhaps in staff meetings and meetings centred on performance management as teachers seek to improve or change an area of their practice, ‘encouraging them to challenge their established ways of thinking and acting’ (Cain,2019). Research cannot ‘replace professional judgement’ but ‘it can render it...less reliant on untested personal experience and cumulative professional wisdom’ and inform thinking (Cain et al 2019). Engagement with research may thus potentially lead to greater empathy and understanding of the social and cultural network the school exists within (Cain 2019) which in turn may aid them in managing their expectations and increased coping. This in turn may help them to contextualise their challenges (mentioned above) and gain perspective, which can aid resilience. Engagement with research may also lead to valuable practitioner enquiry in the classroom which can also help to explore priorities on school development plans which are unique to each school. This is supported and discussed in more detail by Coldwell et al (2017) in their evaluation of evidence-informed teaching for the DfE.

In conclusion, whilst mindful of the wider accountability demands and policy environment that schools operate within, there are things that a school can do to aid the retention of ECTs. Useful questions for schools to consider are:

- To what extent does your school explicitly celebrate positive relationships between teachers and pupils? Do you encourage this between teachers so that ECTs may gain perspective on the challenges they face?
- In what ways do you engage ECTs in a wider network of schools so that they can compare with other settings and subsequently understand more about the social and cultural context of the school they work in?
- In what ways do you seek to enhance the personal resilience of ECTs?
- How could you bring research evidence into professional discussions in your school, which can help to challenge thinking, develop perspective and lead to bespoke classroom enquiries?

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