

Educate – Mentor – Nurture: Improving the Transition from Initial Teacher Education to Qualified Teacher Status and Beyond

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Abstract

Teacher recruitment and retention concerns across the world remain a high priority to ensure the best possible education opportunities for children and young people (UNESCO, 2017). Related to recruitment and retention, but also important in its own right, is the wellbeing of early career teachers. This study investigated the wellbeing of early career teachers in England and Australia to examine how best to provide early career support as a foundation for professional growth and longer-term retention. Survey responses from 67 newly qualified teachers in England and Australia, and five semi-structured interviews, provided rich insights into new teachers' experiences, highlighting the overwhelming nature of the transition experience as new teachers struggled to adjust as they moved from the relative safety of the initial teacher education context to the reality of work in schools, in particular managing considerable workload which continued beyond the initial transition phase. Vital to successful transition were ongoing linkages between initial teacher education providers and employing schools, a supportive community of practice and bespoke mentoring. This has important policy

implications, emphasising the need for personalised approaches to transition with high-quality mentoring during the first few years in the profession. An ‘educate – mentor – nurture’ model is proposed, to enable smoother and more supportive transitions, leading to professional growth and wellbeing.

Key Words

early career teacher (ECT); initial teacher education (ITE); mentoring; teacher wellbeing; transition

Introduction

There is much to learn from research into key transition phases in school level education and, if ‘transition practices are to be viewed as inclusive and effective, they must cater for the complexity and diversity of school entrants and consider coherent strategies’ (Petriwskyj, 2013: 45). This comment refers to the transition between early years’ provision and primary school, but has relevance for all stages of educational transition, including the trainee (pre-service) teacher making the transition to newly qualified teacher (NQT) and beyond. Just as teachers are expected to ensure smooth transitions for their pupils, inclusive, effective and coherent strategies are essential to ensure the wellbeing and professional progress of new entrants to the teaching profession, to reduce high attrition rates which are prevalent worldwide (Buchanan et al., 2013; Guarino, Santibanez & Daley, 2006).

Trainee teachers and NQTs are defined groups which could prove helpful in identifying effective frameworks for initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and induction support.

However, this belies the diverse personalities and experiences of early career teachers (ECTs) in the first five years in the profession, as they manage a range of complexities in varied school environments, including meeting the needs of diverse learners and adapting to a constantly changing educational landscape (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). Against this backdrop, high levels of stress in the profession are reported globally, particularly in relation to managing a demanding workload (Chang, 2009; Hargreaves, 2000; Kyriacou, 2001; Savill-Smith, 2019). Indeed, occupational stress appears to be particularly high for ECTs (Jalongo & Heider, 2006) and reports indicate that up to 50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Allen & Sims, 2018; Burghes et al., 2009; Foster, 2019; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, Queensland College of Teachers, 2019), with fewer teachers aspiring to promotion or considering teaching as a lifelong career. Vesely et al. (2014: 82) indicate that a significant reason that many ECTs leave the profession within five years is that they are ‘particularly ‘vulnerable’ to the multitude of stressors found in the early years of their careers’, such as negative work/life balance (Teacher Wellbeing Index, 2019). Therefore, a better understanding of effective transition between ITE and the early years of teaching must be a priority to promote wellbeing and longer-term retention in the profession.

Drawing on research in England and Australia, this article amplifies the voices of ECTs and examines the implications of their experiences for effective transition from ITE to NQT and beyond. This article argues for a more nuanced approach by policy makers and concludes with recommendations for practice.

Understanding Transition

Teachers are essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 targets (UNESCO, 2016: 54) for education, focusing on inclusion, equity and lifelong learning, and they should be ‘empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient and effectively governed systems’. A growing body of research highlights factors which hinder or nurture a teacher’s professional wellbeing (Johnson et al., 2015; Jones & Gordon, 2019; McCallum & Price, 2016), including large-scale empirical studies on teacher retention (Kelly et al., 2019; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). However, fewer studies focus on the voices of ECTs and it is vital that they are heard (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). In framing this paper, the literature review draws on writings about transition for learners across different stages of education, reflecting on four key areas to inform the work of those involved in supporting the transition for ECTs into the profession.

Firstly, transition across all phases of education, from kindergarten to higher education (HE), should be considered as much more than a one-off, ‘quick fix’ event or short sequence of activities (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Petriwksyj, 2010; Thomas, 2012). As part of this process, some schools share relevant transfer information (Smith, in Howe & Richards, 2011). This approach is largely non-existent in the transition from school to HE and under-developed for ECTs embarking on their first teaching positions.

There is clear consensus that the process of transition starts well before the ‘event’ itself and that both old and new institutions play an active role to ensure a smooth and positive transition in the short- and long-term (Evangelou et al., 2008; Jindal-Snape, 2010). Given the widely-documented issues around retention, an extended period of well-defined transition, with appropriate supporting documentation and professional support, is essential for ECTs. Indeed, a Department for Education (DfE) document in England on preparing trainee teachers

to manage pupils' behaviour effectively acknowledges that 'this content will need persistent and sustained consolidation for the entire career of the teacher, long after the initial training period' (DfE, 2016: 4).

An individual's self-efficacy, described as 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required' (Bandura, 1997: 3), is relevant for an understanding of transition. Referring to school-age learners, Pietarinen et al. (2010) argue that pupils' sense of their own agency has a significant influence on coping ability during the process of transition. Research on educational transitions for older learners found that self-confident individuals tend to be more pro-active and persevere in the face of difficulty (Hsieh, Sullivan & Guerra, 2007). The importance of self-efficacy is also highlighted in successful transitions to HE, particularly in relation to academic retention and success (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Thomas, 2012), and this is significant when considering transition experiences of ECTs.

Successful transitions involve coping with change, and protective factors (such as supportive professional relationships, a sense of belonging to a school community and positive self-esteem) can prevent or mitigate poor developmental outcomes (Day & Gu, 2014; Garmezy, 1985; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Closely linked to notions of self-efficacy and agency, it is noteworthy that teacher autonomy is lowest among ECTs (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020) as this may have an impact on professional satisfaction and retention (Lynch et al., 2016).

Literature reveals an important link between self-efficacy and a sense of belonging in educational transitions. For example, greater confidence and lower levels of anxiety are noted for learners who experience a positive transition in terms of social integration (Vinson et al.,

2010; Waters et al., 2014). As Thomas (2012: 6) notes, ‘the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students’. A sense of belonging for ECTs is engendered by positive working conditions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011), the commitment of senior school leadership and the support of mentors to developing the emotional (Eraut et al., 2004) and interpersonal preparedness of ECTs for their work within a professional community of practice (Oberski et al., 1999). Indeed, the importance of the mentor / mentee relationship and school culture emerged strongly as key influences on transition in this research.

An extended and carefully structured transition process over several years, promoting self-efficacy and a sense of belonging, should enhance personal development and academic progress. Many authors refer to ‘bridging the gap’ in the transition from primary to secondary school, including pastoral aspects of transition with some well-planned induction activities to ensure positive social integration for learners (Barber, 1999; Galton et al., 1999; Howe & Richards, 2011). However, there is considerable criticism of the academic progression of learners at important transition stages with the academic achievement of many being limited or indeed reversed (Galton et al., 2003). This might also be true for ECTs where their immediate administrative needs are met in moving to a new school, but less tailored attention is placed on their continuing professional development (CPD) needs. This may impact on the ECTs’ sense of professional wellbeing and satisfaction, underlined in recent findings into the impact of CPD on retention in the profession (Fletcher-Wood & Zuccollo, 2020). A clear focus on both the pastoral and professional requirements of ECTs requires personalisation to complement any ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy approach.

These findings from all levels of education provide clear guidance on what should be part of an inclusive, effective and coherent strategy to support ECT transition, and it is important to consider whether the recent policy environment in England and Australia has recognised these important factors since data collection for this research in 2017. For example, the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework in England requires providers to ensure that trainee teachers learn how to manage workload and wellbeing, by ‘(p)rotecting time for rest and recovery’ (DfE, 2019b: 31). In addition, the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019a: 4) acknowledges that ‘(t)eachers deserve high quality support throughout their careers, particularly in those first years of teaching when the learning curve is the steepest’. A review in Australia recommended ‘that teacher employers maintain responsibility and strengthen their role in providing access for early career teachers to high quality induction and mentoring, to support their transition into the workplace and the profession’ (Education Council, 2018: iii). Subsequent submissions to inform the Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession (Laming, 2019) in Australia identified the need for improved induction, mentoring, ongoing professional development and collegial support for ECTs. Furthermore, these are global concerns and most OECD countries state that the early years in the profession are critical to teacher supply and retention (Paniagua & Sánchez-Martí, 2018). Whilst such policies reflect support for ECT transitions more broadly, more in-depth interrogation among ECTs is needed to research first-hand experience of the transition phase. The voices of the participants in this research provide a tangible lens to reflect on recent research and policies and to provide recommendations to inform future practice.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was taken for the overall study to reflect the complexity of experiences among ECTs at many levels – contextual, social, psychological and emotional. The approach was underpinned by a socially constructivist epistemology, as the research explored the experiences and perspectives of ECTs (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Two ITE providers (one in Australia and one in England), with a shared commitment to embedding wellbeing in their teacher preparation programmes, collaborated on a research project to seek perspectives of ITE graduates in relation to their wellbeing in the initial years in the teaching profession. Ethical approval was secured from university committees and a comprehensive online survey, which elicited both quantitative and qualitative responses, was developed collaboratively to examine themes including respondents’ understanding of professional wellbeing and career aspirations.

In framing this article, qualitative responses which related specifically to questions about the period of transition from the ITE context to qualified teacher (see Figure 1) were examined to identify the support and challenges to an ECT’s wellbeing and professional satisfaction. The motivation behind this approach arose from previous research into the resilience of ECTs (Gordon, 2020) and a concern to identify improvements to the transition phase from ITE to the early years in the teaching profession.

- How would you describe your transition from initial teacher training to being a qualified teacher working in a school?
- What three strategies helped you in this transition?
- Describe a scenario when you felt that your wellbeing as a teacher was supported.
- Describe a scenario when you felt that your wellbeing as a teacher was compromised.

Figure 1. Survey questions on theme of transition

The anonymous and voluntary survey targeted former trainee teachers who had completed their ITE programmes in the previous five years. The research teams in England and Australia contacted alumni of their postgraduate and undergraduate ITE programmes by email invitation from academic tutors or the alumni services database. Overall, 67 graduates responded to the survey, 42 who trained in England (7 men, 35 women) and 25 who trained in Australia (4 men and 21 women). 57 (85%) respondents were currently in teaching positions with 25 (44%) in fixed term or temporary roles and 4 (7%) in supply teaching roles.

Survey respondents were also invited to participate in interviews to probe research themes more deeply, and interested respondents provided their contact details for this purpose at a second online collection point. In-depth semi-structured interviews (via telephone and Skype) were conducted with five volunteer participants (three from England and two from Australia). The interviews lasted between 30 - 60 minutes and were conducted by one researcher to ensure consistency. Thematic coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to review the data and identify emerging themes from open-ended responses in the questionnaire and interviews which were transcribed in full. Acknowledging the debate about thematic coding as a rigorous approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Denscombe, 2010), the approach proved appropriate for identifying and reporting on emerging patterns in rich data, particularly to 'isolate' relevant comments from participants about the transition phase. Clear links relating to educational transition outlined earlier in the literature review were evident, but there were also revealing themes around mentoring and workload, which merited particular attention in the discussion of findings and to inform future practice.

Findings and discussion

Participants shared multifaceted insights into their transition experiences as ECTs and these have been grouped into four key themes, starting with the initial transition phase and focusing on professional collegiality, mentoring support and workload.

Initial transition phase

Many online survey respondents described the transition from ITE to NQT as ‘rather’ (21%) or ‘very’ (28%) overwhelming. Given that 54% of the respondents had been teaching for less than two years at the time of the survey, this is noteworthy, particularly as the ITE providers in this study place significant emphasis on teacher wellbeing. One respondent commented on feeling well prepared for work *‘but it was rather overwhelming’*, highlighting an area of concern as ITE providers strive to ensure that trainee teachers are prepared for the reality of work, but also need to measure impact of their interventions over time.

Asked to identify three key strategies that helped them in the transition to the workplace, 24 respondents referred specifically to prior experience of ITE, including teaching and learning strategies and resources from university course and placements. If these careful preparations during the ITE phase are not providing the necessary tools to manage the transition to, and retention in, the workplace, then alternative approaches may be needed to support ECTs to make more effective links between ITE experience and their roles as NQTs and beyond. One possible action would be for the ITE provider to share more explicitly the approaches taken during the initial training period with the employing school, so that there is a better understanding of prior experience and practice in ITE (DfE, 2018).

One survey respondent in Australia highlighted the ‘quick fix’ nature of some transition support: *‘The school I’m in now do an initiation pack ... a bit of a booklet and a few key things for new teachers to know. It’s a nice system, but it still seems a little bit like - Here’s a pack, and off you go with a pat on the bum’*. The importance of transition documentation was echoed by others, but indicates the risk of superficial induction masking the complexities and needs of the new teacher, where bespoke support to ensure a smooth transition is needed. A comment from one interview respondent in England about the involvement of all key stakeholders in the transition phase from ITE to NQT is enlightening in this regard:

During my first training year, the university-based year, I felt incredibly supported. And I wonder if one of the reasons for that was because my ... my accountability, if you like, was split, or rather my care was divided. I had my school-based mentor, but I also continued to have my university-based tutor.

This participant reflected on the potential benefits of maintaining a more formal link with the ITE provider during the NQT year to provide additional support beyond the specific school context, to *‘have a secure safe space to vent about the system, within the system’*. This underlines the importance of activism for ECTs to develop their agency and understanding (Sachs, 2016) as part of transition approaches that are coherent, personalised and more than a ‘quick fix’.

Professional Collegiality

When describing their understanding of wellbeing, many respondents identified a strong sense of belonging which echoed the literature cited earlier around transition phases in school contexts. One respondent commented that *'feeling part of a community'* was a key aspect of wellbeing as a teacher, linking to Gu and Day's (2013: 22) research findings that 'conditions count'. These conditions may relate to school environment, but respondents overwhelmingly related conditions to positive professional relationships with colleagues. A fragile teacher identity and the negative impact of poor relationships were shared on a few occasions, including one teacher who was content in her current fixed-term role, but nervous of moving to another school, as she had negative experiences from one of her ITE placement schools.

One issue merits particular attention in the context of belonging, as respondents were asked about the status of their first teaching posts. In England, four respondents (9%) took on a supply teacher post and 22 respondents (48%) began their teaching careers in a fixed term or temporary position. It is not unusual for NQT posts in England to be advertised on a one-year fixed-term basis as this has historically signalled the completion of the award of qualified teacher status. However, the lack of permanent employment appeared to be a more significant issue among respondents in Australia. This is an issue for policy makers at system level (Education Council, 2018) as lack of employment certainty may have an effect on ECTs' sense of professional belonging, as well as potentially impacting access to high quality CPD (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018).

A sense of collegial positivity emerged from ECTs working in schools with a group of new teachers. This was particularly evident in England, but it must be noted that many of these respondents were employed in large schools in London, whereas some of the Australian respondents were based in more rural contexts. This raises the important question of how to

provide a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) for ECTs in more rural settings to share their interest in professional learning with others. Factors which enhanced school culture for ECTs included social events, action research groups, structured professional development programmes, and support and encouragement from senior school leaders. However, being part of a cohort of ECTs does not guarantee the required individualised support: *'a fair few teachers starting at this school at my level at the time, I felt part of a cohort ... and that comes with its sense of belonging. On the other hand, I felt out of my depth and like everybody else knew what they were doing and weren't having my particular difficulties'*. This underscores the need for personalisation, through high-quality mentoring which focuses on pedagogical excellence and developmental needs, to ensure that individual ECTs do not feel isolated by a 'one-size-fits-all' policy approach.

Power of mentoring

Closely linked to professional collegiality, the power of mentoring to enhance the transition phase represented the most significant difference between respondents in England and Australia. Mentoring support among respondents in Australia was more variable, perhaps due to the number of fixed-term contracts where accountability for professional progression may be less defined. As one new teacher commented: *'I know there are some things in place now where new teachers get extra NIT time, non-instruction time. But I never received that personally. So it was just into the fire a little bit'*. Another Australian teacher commented: *'I know that every teacher has got their line manager ... but I think there should be something like a mentor. Like a mentoring teacher'*. Most ECTs in England referred to a comprehensive programme of support with *'weekly meetings, personalised support, positive approach'*,

although *'all this stopped at the end of NQT year'* which illustrates a short-term approach and may explain limited impact on retention in the longer-term.

These comments highlight the importance of ongoing high-quality professional mentoring for ECTs, with *'people who choose to be mentors, rather than chosen'* as stated by one Australian respondent. This raises complex issues around status, relationships, training, effectiveness, recognition and reward for skilled mentors (Mackie, 2020). High-quality mentoring must be integrated into longer-term professional development of new teachers, including during the NQT year and beyond. A longer-term commitment at a systemic level, as part of a coherent and personalised approach to the mentoring of ECTs, merits further research to monitor impact on ECT transition and retention in the profession.

Workload

Definitions of wellbeing provided by participants showed a clear connection with self-efficacy discussed earlier in the literature review, for example: *'healthy and sustainable balance between work and life outside work'* and *'a sense of control and clear positive perspectives for the future'*. The use of the word 'balance' in 15% of the respondents' descriptions demonstrates the very real challenges of maintaining balance alongside a considerable workload. As one respondent commented *'(I) tried to teach myself ... to have a cut-off point'* as a way of avoiding inevitable burnout.

The responses from both contexts reveal an important perspective on workload, as the interconnection between personal and professional life comes under pressure: *'So I didn't get overwhelmed in the sense that I failed to perform ... I was working incredibly long hours. I*

actually missed a friend's wedding once because I had so much work to do. So yeah, overwhelming in terms of sheer quantity of stuff to deal with'. This respondent was valued in school and making very good progress, so the overwhelming nature of the job was not linked to performance but rather to sheer volume of work. This is echoed by another respondent:

To be honest, my decision to leave was entirely down to workload ... There was actually no other factor in that I really liked the kids, really liked the job and I was doing very well, it was purely workload. And I think it's a mixture of the government and individual schools to blame for that. I didn't see enough likelihood that it would get significantly better in the next couple of years to want to stay.

Questions are raised by this research about how many promising new teachers are leaving the profession, not due to their ineffectiveness as ECTs but in response to the heavy workload and perception of their future in the profession. A sense of guilt and sacrifice emerged from respondents in both Australia and England: *'there were some times that I thought I was letting them (pupils) down slightly because I still wanted a life' and 'I want to do a good job so I want to work that much. But I know that I have to sacrifice parts of my life because of that too. So, it's become a considered sacrifice, but it is a sacrifice nonetheless'*. Such comments serve as a wake-up call to a complex profession which is serious about valuing ECTs and retaining teachers in the longer term (Ball, 2013; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sachs, 2016). A distinction, and connection, must be made between an unpredictable and demanding system and the broader question of a fragile ECT identity in the profession (Barnett, 2000), particularly in the early transition phase.

Conclusion

For children and young people, as well as for ECTs, there is a danger of simply repeating well-rehearsed approaches to transition which become formulaic and overlook the individual. This is significant when policies, such as the Early Career Framework (DfEa, 2019: 4), have been launched ‘to build on high-quality Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and become the cornerstone of a successful career in teaching’. It remains to be seen whether any policy is sufficient to nurture ECTs in the profession, moving beyond a compliance-driven ‘quick fix’, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to a real driver of quality for ECT support and retention. This research highlights the need for more formative and personalised approaches to complement formal structures and frameworks, developed in a pragmatic and personally meaningful way. These should include more explicit links (transition paperwork, for example) between ITE providers and schools, the development of networks and communities of practice, and greater priority given to high-quality mentoring support for ECTs, not least to support new teachers with managing workload. Such an approach should encourage the development of critical reflexivity and agency among ECTs, able to negotiate inevitable professional challenges and unpredictability with confidence (Britzman, 2006). Indeed, as Kelchtermans (2009: 265) notes: ‘Vulnerability ... is not so much to be understood as an emotional state or experience ... but as a structural characteristic of the profession’.

Above all, the ‘recruit – burnout – replace’ model (Allen & Sims, 2008: 20) must be replaced with a ‘educate – mentor – nurture’ model, as ECTs deserve empathy and bespoke consideration to avoid neglect by policy-framed assumptions. In one instance, a new teacher resigned and was surprised by the negative reaction of the head of department, commenting: *‘They are the real ones suffering in the system, the heads of department’*. A renewed focus on ECT development may allow the whole profession to thrive.

The article concludes with the heartfelt words of one respondent who chose to resign at the end of the NQT year due to excessive workload and disillusionment with the professional culture. His comment that he *'tried to be a good educator rather than just one that survives'* is reminiscent of Petriwskyj (2013) that transition practices must cater for the complexity and diversity of school entrants (including ECTs) if our education systems are to be inclusive and effective. This will be essential in Australia and England, but also more broadly, if the Sustainable Development Goal targets for education globally are to be realised.

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