

The experiences of early career teachers: new initiatives and old problems

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Abstract

The task of supporting beginning teachers has received considerable attention in recent years, and numerous initiatives have been implemented. In this paper we investigate the experiences of early career teachers (ECTs) in New South Wales, Australia, at a time when their employing authority mandated the provision of mentors and reduction in face-to-face teaching for ECTs. This paper draws on ECTs' responses to survey items asking about their experiences as ECTs. It emerged that many of the issues of the early years that have caused problems for ECTs remain intractable, or at least unresolved for some. The research indicates that despite support that has been mandated by some employers, we cannot be complacent about the transition of ECTs into the profession. There remains a need to address the elements of school environments that impact on ECTs' experiences.

Keywords: beginning teachers; early career teachers; induction; retention; mentoring and support

Statement of ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the relevant university and teacher employing authority for this study. Informed consent was given by all participants through their choice to anonymously respond to the survey.

Introduction

Despite much research on early career teachers (for example, Fenwick, 2011; Heikonen et al., 2016; Jakhelin, 2011; Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Manfield, Beltman, & Price, 2014), persistent problems face teachers entering the profession. Beginning teachers' lives have been scrutinised and studied over many years and an extensive literature reports on their challenges, their need for support and the consequent effects on teacher attrition and student learning (e.g. Ewing & Smith, 2003; Fantilli & McDougall, 2006; Gallent & Riley, 2014; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006; Author, 2015). In recent years, however, there has been considerable investment in supporting early career teachers (ECTs) in some regions. In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, for example, where this study was conducted, the department of education required each full-time beginning teacher to be assigned a mentor teacher and to be assisted by this mentor to gain accreditation, through professional learning linked to national teaching standards in an effort to address the concerns arising in the literature. Moreover, an additional hour of weekly release from face-to-face teaching was made available to ECTs, through the provision of funds to their schools from the department of education, to alleviate workload pressures (NSW Government Education, 2016). It is therefore important to investigate the experiences of early career teachers operating in school systems where such support is mandated by the system, to ascertain the effectiveness of initiatives, such as the provision of a time allocation and the provision of a mentor.

Studies emphasise the importance of good support early in a teacher's career not only to encourage them to remain in the profession but also so that they can proceed to become effective, experienced teachers (authors, 2013; OECD, 2011). Consequently, the next section considers literature on ECT support, as well as some of the well-documented studies that report on the experiences of ECTs. We subsequently explore the research question, "how well supported are ECTs in NSW, given the system-mandated provision of mentoring and

time allocation?” This paper explores the stories told by beginning teachers in NSW about their experiences in their first three years of teaching, at a time when these policy initiatives were being put in place to create supportive school environments for ECTs. We conclude with some lessons that can be learned from both our study and the literature to provide recommendations to support teachers in the early years of their career. This study was underpinned by a socio-cultural conceptual framework which recognises the importance of the micro-political culture of individual schools.

ECT professional learning and support

Attrition of teachers in the early years has been problematic for the profession, its members and, ultimately, for students (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The pathway through the early years can be challenging (Author, 2012; 2013b). Gallant and Riley (2014) outline a rather sombre pathway for at least some teachers, segmented into stages of early optimism, followed by a period of arrested development, and then disillusionment, prior to leaving the profession.

Although teachers have all undertaken a comprehensive teacher education preparation course before entering the workplace, a central aspect of becoming a teacher is the construction and assimilation of professional knowledge and practice that is acquired through professional learning and development (McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006). Teacher professional learning occurs in various ways – informal/formal; implicit/explicit; planned/unplanned. ‘Traditional’ learning support through formal induction programs and mentoring is recognized to be useful; however, collaborative, informal, unplanned learning with colleagues, school executive and former peers can also be highly valuable (McCormack et al., 2006).

While pedagogical support is essential for ECTs, Fresko and Alhija (2015) highlight the importance of also offering them emotional support. Teachers can be assisted in their early

years to develop professionally and to become highly accomplished teachers, enjoying high levels of self-efficacy (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011). Teacher professional learning assists both pedagogical competence and development of teachers' professional identities (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Given claims that the teacher is the most significant school-based variable contributing to student outcomes (Hattie, 2003), we need to invest strongly in the development of early career teachers.

School micropolitics can substantially mediate beginning teachers' experiences and their satisfaction and development (Author, 2013a; 2013b; Kelchtermans, 2011; Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013). New teachers have to learn to be micropolitically literate as they negotiate their way through school organisation and staff room culture in the process of establishing their own identity, role and place in the school (Authors, 2016, in press). While micropolitics in schools and staffrooms are ubiquitous and occur in everyday contexts, Vanderlinde and Kelchtermans refer to certain critical incidents and persons that trigger the micropolitical learning process and subsequent reactions in ECTs and which function as turning points in teachers' professional development (2013, p. 35). Triggers include problematic situations or challenges during the first few months of teaching (Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013). Clandinin et al. (2012) reported that some ECTs saw their relationships with senior colleagues as fraught, and that mentoring and induction programs did not always provide a safe environment in which to air their concerns. Beginning teachers' stories in Christensen's (2013) study depict the highly contextualised and informal micropolitical learning that takes place in staffroom contexts, which shapes ECTs' professional identities, sometimes negatively. Teachers' learning, development and micropolitical skills are contextually bound by "unique situations, people, interactions, and relationships of the very particular micro-political staffroom context" (Christensen, 2013, p. 81). Potential discrepancies between the beliefs of ECTs and those of their senior colleagues, together with

formal structures of the institution, may compromise ECTs' professional learning. Christensen highlights the need for strategies that "contribute to the development of positive micropolitical identities for beginning teachers; micropolitical identities which will enable and empower them to participate in and move from context to context, with the confidence, belief and strategies to proactively, assertively and effectively engage in and influence their professional contexts" (2013, p.81). Without these strategies ECTs may feel disempowered, leaving them vulnerable to bullying by other staff and students (Lemaire, 2009).

ECTs' experiences

Previous studies have asserted that the teaching profession "eats its young" (Halford, 1998, p.33) or leaves new teachers to "sink or swim" (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p.28). Fantilli and McDougall (2009) suggested that little had changed for ECTs in the past forty years. However, as noted above, in recent years there have been significant policy changes for ECTs in NSW (Government Education, 2016) and elsewhere (e.g. Peters & Pearce, 2011), warranting new investigation. Nevertheless, we note the persistence of high attrition rates (Author, 2015).

The 2012 OECD report by Jensen et al. provides a comprehensive examination of new teachers' working lives using data from the 2008 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in which teachers from over 23 countries participated. Across most countries, new teachers reported similar levels of responsibility to those of experienced teachers, while still developing the classroom management skills necessary for effective teaching and learning. Jensen et al. also reported a need for professional learning to improve their classroom management skills and address poor disciplinary climate (p.10).

Other studies have reported excessive workload, classroom management difficulties and inadequate support from school leaders (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009;

Meister & Melnick, 2003; Veenman 1984, 1987). For instance, one of the major concerns emerging from Meister and Melnick's study relate to student behaviour, workload demands and working with parents (2003). McCormack et al. (2006) suggest that beginning teachers experience additional responsibilities, difficult classes and unrealistic expectations together with low status and professional feedback. Student behavioural issues remain an ongoing fundamental major challenge as is reported in several studies (Akdag & Haser, 2016; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez, & Cummings, 2016).

Other concerns raised included lack of respect for ECTs due to their youth, and being unprepared for staffroom politics and the school culture (Ewing & Smith, 2003). To overcome some of the challenges, Fantilli and McDougall recommend that beginning teachers be assigned ample time to increase their familiarity with the school settings and provided with expanded levels of support tailored to their needs (2009, p. 824).

Support systems for early career teachers have been found wanting, with ECTs relying on their everyday capacity for resilience when circumstances are adverse (Gu & Day, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014). Employing authorities have responded to the issues noted above with a series of policies and practices aiming to improve the transition of ECTs into the profession (NSW Government Education, 2016). Author (2015) found that reduced face-to-face teaching and the provision of mentors are productive and beneficial to ECTs. The role of mentors in facilitating novice teachers' development has been recognised by various stakeholders in the context of formal learning (McNally & Martin, 2006). Mentor teachers need to both support and challenge beginning teachers in their professional development. When mentoring meets ECTs' learning needs, they acknowledge their mentors as being one reason for remaining in teaching, and many ECTs attribute their wellbeing and successes to effective mentoring (Author, 2013a; McNally & Martin, 2006). However, the nature of the mentoring relationship is variable and may not help teachers cope with micropolitical challenges in schools. For

example, Clandinin et al. (2012) reported that some ECTs saw their relationships with senior colleagues as fraught, and that mentoring and induction programs did not always provide a safe environment in which to air concerns.

The aim of this research is to investigate ECTs' in-school experiences at a time when policy initiatives have been implemented to address the numerous recommendations arising from research, such as the availability of mentor teachers, reduced teaching for ECTs and provision of resources to support ECTs.

Methodology

Conceptual framework

The underpinning conceptual framework is socio-cultural theory as espoused by Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1985, 1991). This theory recognises that people's experiences are mediated by social interactions and practices, and in turn these interactions and practices are affected by people's experiences. In the case of schools, teachers are entering an existing and complex social system, which they need to negotiate. In particular, teachers' experiences are substantially mediated by the socio-cultural and micro-political relations that exist in schools as they attempt to negotiate, define and create a presence for themselves and shape the socio-cultural reality of the school in the process (Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013).

Consequently, this study foregrounds teachers' experiences of, and in, this complex socio-political environment.

Research design

The data used in this paper emerged from a survey of ECTs in New South Wales, Australia. The survey was built using an online survey system and a link was emailed to 2500 ECTs. The first section of the survey sought demographic information and the second section was

quantitative, gathering data on the most influential actions that might retain teachers. The final section informs this paper. It contained two open-ended response items, each generating rich qualitative data. The first item was “If you could make any comments about the things that make you stay in the teaching profession, please feel free to write about these here”. The second item was, “If you could make any comments about the challenges you face as a teacher, please feel free to write about these here”. The quantitative aspects of the survey have been reported elsewhere (Author, 2013; 2015).

The ECTs were in their first three years of teaching. These teachers were among the first for whom the employing authority had mandated both mentoring support and release time. The response rate of 13% comprised 336 complete responses. While this response rate is not high, extensive qualitative data were obtained: 70% of respondents responded to the open-ended items and 90% of these furnished responses of 15 or more words. Table 1 details these data. The first open-ended item was intended to elicit views about what kept teachers in the profession, so unsurprisingly it elicited mainly positive responses; however more than a quarter of the respondents to this item (27%) chose to respond negatively by describing the challenges they faced. The second open-ended item provided the opportunity to describe in detail the various types of challenges ECTs faced. A limitation of this study may be that those ECTs who held concerns about their teaching situation may have been more likely to respond to the survey, in particular the open-ended comments, potentially skewing the results. A second limitation is that the survey was sent to ECTs only, and therefore is silent on the perceptions of experienced colleagues, mentors and school leaders.

<Insert Table 1 here>

ECTs responding to this survey were predominantly female (77%), a figure broadly consistent with the high proportion of females currently teaching in Australia. 68% of

Australian teachers are female (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) representing a 10% increase in female teachers since 1986). Ninety-four percent were full-time, four percent part-time, and two percent were no longer teachers. Forty per cent were teaching in primary schools, 50% in secondary schools, and 5% were at schools with both primary and secondary students. Most teachers (82%) were based in large city schools. The majority of respondents were under 30 (64%), approximately 20% were in their 30s and the remainder were 40 or older. Highest qualifications varied: they comprised Bachelor's degrees (68%), graduate diplomas (18%), and Master's degrees or PhDs (11%). Those responding to the two items (70.5%) were not significantly different from those who did not provide any response to either item (29.5%).

Given the open-ended nature of the questions, a qualitative approach was used for analysis. An interpretive methodological approach (Opie, 2004) was used to ascertain participants' perceptions of their experiences. The study drew on grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that participants were asked two broad questions and their responses were analysed to generate categories without reliance on a predetermined set of criteria. The aim was to provide rich and thick data to generate insights that would illuminate the topic under discussion by providing a voice to the participant group under study. The study examined policy initiatives experienced by ECTs, rather than as conceptualised by policymakers and school leaders responsible for their implementation.

Responses for each item were analysed, following a process of data organisation and reduction, coding and categorising (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Themes were identified through line-by-line analysis and grouping of similar phrases and meanings to establish categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These coding categories were initially developed by the research team and a research assistant. The research assistant then re-coded all data to develop the

final themes. Similar categories were combined into single themes. A constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyse the data.

Four themes are discussed below in the Findings section. These themes either related to the newly mandated initiatives of mentoring and workload reduction, or are discussed because they appeared frequently in the responses to the open-ended questions. The four themes are: mentoring; executive support; collegial support and workload. The complex realities of micro-political contexts are understood and framed from ECTs' relationships with students, colleagues and the school executive (Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013).

Findings

Mentors

The provision of mentors was a key policy initiative in NSW (see Government Education, 2016). Yet when asked what factors kept respondents in the profession, only 20 mentioned mentoring at all, and of those, 14 either did not have a mentor (n=7) or they made a negative comment about the support offered by the mentor (n=7). The remaining six respondents noted that mentor advice, lesson feedback and support broadly were important. Collaboration on daily work, cooperative planning and mutual decision-making was seen as particularly helpful.

These respondents' comments include:

The support of my mentor and supervisor are a big factor in contributing to the successful completion of my first year. (Respondent 1370)

I was lucky enough to have a Head Teacher Mentor who supported us for accreditation and observed several lessons a week and provided feedback. (1845)

Provision of a supportive mentor confirmed existing literature. However, policy initiatives formulated at a system level concerning mentoring do not always work well at the school level, highlighting the complexity of the challenges facing ECTs. The response below depicts a problematic situation and critical incident faced by an ECT.

If [beginning teachers] are placed in a school that does not have supportive staff (my experience) who will not share resources, and they do not meet the criteria of a "buddy" then chances are they are bullied by staff, parents and students and their legal rights are diminished because they are too weak or scared to act so it's easier to leave. My mentor was best buddies with my supervisor so the two of them decided they were going to put unreasonable demands on me and because my supervisor was hired by the principal, the principal would back up their demands (80 hr weeks, daily lesson plans, daybooks, and weekly overviews, 8 meetings a week, class with huge behaviour problems etc...) the cycle goes on.

(40)

The above quotation illustrates that having a mentor as mandated by a system policy, in a social system that is in other ways flawed, can actually compound the problems experienced by the ECT.

School executive and leadership

About 10% of responding ECTs noted that the collaborative, supportive professionalism of the school staff stemmed from the leadership of school executive and principal. Comments included:

The executive lead by example and our school is on the cutting edge of developing high standards of education through being part of a collegial group of schools working together as a community. (1358)

Good leadership in a school (that is, Head Teachers, Deputy Principals and Principals) are important in creating and maintaining a positive learning environment. It also helps when there are teachers who are enthusiastic and are willing to share and try new ideas. Support from the school executive is also important. (1845)

Around 15% of ECTs mentioned a lack of support from senior executive and school management. These ECTs noted that they did not feel they could turn to school senior staff when faced with challenges. ECTs also commented on dealing with unacceptable student behaviours and managing students' learning. Almost 30% of respondents referred to classroom management issues as one of the major challenges they faced as a new teacher. Out of these, nearly half indicated inadequate support mechanisms for managing these behaviours and a "lack of support from executive for behavioural problems in students" (1161). Another recounted,

At least once every day you will have to deal with students upset about family breakups, abuse, pregnancy issues, drug issues etc. - the advice from my supervisor when I asked how to deal with this was, 'don't be so approachable'. (1352)

Other comments referred to 'behaviour issues in and outside of the classroom and feeling unsupported by the behaviour policy' (1155), 'lack of coherent behaviour management policies' (1118) and 'no back up from executive' (1448).

The ECTs also reported a lack of executive advice and support in helping them manage relationships with parents, and insufficient commitment from the executive to assisting them in learning how to deal with such matters.

Collegial support

ECTs with welcoming colleagues and/or supportive school executive are likely to develop confidence, which empowers them to engage with, and to influence, their professional contexts. Approximately 18% of our participants indicated that staff collegial support can ease their transition into the profession. They valued friendly welcoming environments and networks of staff ready to assist and advise. Related comments included:

Excellent support from colleagues - both classroom teachers and head teachers.

(1772)

Staff are fantastic, so much support. (1089)

The friendly staff and school environment are a real bonus. (1839)

The people I work with at my school are highly supportive and helpful. When I ask for help there is a large support network to help me. (1531)

The type of encouragement and assistance on offer was often nebulous, but providing time to talk, to share ideas and resources, as well as acknowledgment of ECTs' achievements and the encouragement to experiment with their teaching, were all identified as important. For example,

Working with an understanding and supportive network of people. It makes it easier when your work colleagues recognise and appreciate the hard work and extra hours that you put in. (1360)

Working as part of a mutually respectful team was identified as worthwhile by these ECTs. An important element of such teamwork, as reported by ECTs, was that all members of the team were being supported by each other rather than the ECT simply being identified as the only team member in need of support. For example,

I work with a team that are truly collaborative, so their support and openness to my ideas have made my first years of teaching manageable. (1155)

Cooperative and collaborative teaching staff is important in helping each other in the teaching process and supporting each other. Without supportive staff, the stresses of day to day teaching would be more difficult to cope with. (1854)

These experiences match findings from the literature indicating the importance of informal and unplanned collegial support and encouragement (McCormack et al., 2006). By contrast, others (around 11% of respondents) in this study reported less supportive environments, noting an absence of support, sharing, encouragement, and acknowledgement from more experienced teachers. Notably, these respondents tended to write more extensively than those reporting supportive experiences. For some, isolation was normal and the lack of collegiality was noted and missed (For example, "... and a classroom away from other rooms ... it makes you isolated and dependent on yourself").

I had the understanding that teaching was a collaborative profession. I find that it is anything but. (1907)

More specifically, these ECTs were sometimes faced with road blocks such as a lack of resource sharing or isolation in lesson development, which created feelings of disempowerment, disengagement and isolation. For example, comments indicated that teachers were, in the words of one respondent,

..working in silos with no genuine planning or collaboration; teachers in a faculty not planning and sharing resources as a team. (1164)

One ECT reported experiencing a school culture that was far removed from the professional community described in their teacher education programs and which they therefore had anticipated.

Each classroom is (almost) an island and the idea of education as a continuum and a community as taught at university is an ideal - not a reality. (1569)

These ECTs' school experiences contrasted sharply to literature recommendations for informal collaborative learning with colleagues, indicating 'little collaborative planning and discussion of teaching practices between colleagues' – 1161. Another ECT observed that 'teachers criticise too much' (1423).

The clear message from ECTs (in the face of the diverse challenges they face) is that supportive, collegial staff, including school executive, makes a significant difference. As one observed,

The support of the experienced teachers at my school has enabled me to continue learning and experimenting in the classroom. (1262)

Workload

ECTs' experiences appeared to echo those in the literature, despite initiatives that were introduced to reduce workload demands for ECTs and allow time for professional learning and preparation. Around 28% of ECTs reported workload and time management as a major challenge, although the employing authority of teachers in this study had mandated reduced face-to-face teaching for ECTs. One respondent summed up, 'Teaching is a wonderful

profession and I love what I do but it is very demanding both mentally and physically' (1151).

Workload issues were exacerbated for ECTs due to the mandatory fulfilment of accreditation requirements which consumed considerable time on top of the normal full teaching load. People commencing any new career are likely to experience high work demands. Nevertheless, some of these teachers reported working at levels that appear unreasonable, unhealthy and unsustainable. They spoke of 'being overwhelmed' and of 'relentless demands'. Comments included, 'I get home around 6pm ... then start preparing for the following day from about 8pm till 1am' (1088) and 'I wish there was a point I could be 'up to date'. I find it difficult that it is never 'complete'. I could work 24 hours a day and not get enough done for work' (1422).

In particular, responsibilities other than classroom teaching render the work challenging. Responses included:

Balancing planning, programming, parent expectations/problems/questions, student needs, resource requirements, assessment, behaviour management and accreditation on top of actually physically teaching in the classroom is quite challenging. (1183)

The workload is unbelievable, my principal is very demanding and has little sympathy for the plight of those who are struggling to cope. Despite being a new teacher I have been overloaded with extra responsibilities such as positions on several committees, appointment to school sports teams, running meetings etc. I feel it is due to my mature age that it is assumed I can just cope with anything. Age does not equal experience, however I feel that is what is being assumed of me. (1514)

Others spoke of ‘pure exhaustion’ (1772) from the multitude of tasks, including welfare, paperwork, and extracurricular activities. It may be that many of these responsibilities and tasks are particularly onerous when being undertaken for the first time. This being the case, ensuring time, resources and support for them is warranted and is consistent with initiatives that, at the time of this study, had been recently implemented.

The demands of the ECTs’ work made achieving work-life balance difficult for some ECTs. They recounted, ‘I NEVER work less than 10 hours a day’ (1230) and, ‘it’s a 24hr job’ (1516).

This underscores the value of allocating time for ECTs to prepare classes and to attend induction sessions; nevertheless, ECTs continue to feel overwhelmed.

ECTs emphasised, as noted above, that they valued acknowledgement and recognition of their ideas and capabilities. However, some reported perceptions that more experienced colleagues made judgments about their expertise and capacities based on their age and relative inexperience rather than on an assessment of their actual work, ideas or abilities.

Comments included:

My position as a young and less experienced teacher has caused me difficulty, as even when I take on responsible roles such as co-ordination of programs and committees, I feel as though my judgement and knowledge is continually called into question. It is very frustrating. (1133)

One of my Head Teachers refuses to recognise my expertise or intelligence and often suggests that younger people do not know how to teach or assess and this is very disheartening. (1280)

This can be particularly debilitating if there are no other beginning teachers at the ECT's school:

I am the only teacher under 40 at my school. I find it hard to put my hand up for support for fear of being seen as “that stupid young teacher. (1222)

The term bullying was specifically used by five ECTs to describe the behaviour of some senior staff. Comments included,

I have been bullied by a teacher who I am forced to work closely with due to the nature of my position. I have not received much support in dealing with this teacher's treatment of me. There needs to be a better way to deal with bullying as I am unable to get the support that I need and am unable to ask for it because I need to keep the executive onside to get any support from them both now and when I apply for a new position (1094);

My biggest challenge is dealing with politics and other staff. I have had some very negative experiences with bullying by other staff that have made me question my place in the school. The nature of teachers always finding fault with each other was quite a shock. (1280);

In my school there was a massive issue with bullying - that is the older staff bullying younger staff. There was lots of nastiness and professional jealousy. My supervisor informed me that I am on the bottom of the school hierarchy on my first day. My nickname from the first week was 'pond scum'. I love kids but didn't like the teachers. (1341)

Criticism and name-calling can be isolating, intimidating and demoralising for ECTs. Where this behaviour occurs; it is at odds with a productive work and learning environment for

ECTs. Instances of dismissive or contemptuous behaviour by colleagues of ECTs have been noted in the literature. Our data suggest that it persists in some school cultures.

The findings show that experiences of ECTS were generally positive when they: had a collegial and collaborative mentor able to provide daily support; were in schools with effective leadership from principals and the school executive; and found themselves among welcoming colleagues willing to provide advice and assistance when required. However, the data also provide evidence of negative experiences for ECTs. The reports of ECTs in this study indicate that the initiatives that had been mandated by the education system, such as mentoring and a reduced time allocation, had not been successfully implemented in all schools. Moreover, other data reveal persistent problems for some ECTs, which need to be addressed by education jurisdictions. These problems include the lack of collegiality experienced by some ECTs, high workloads and problems with student behaviour management.

Discussion

Curiously, despite decades of research and recommendations to support ECTs, early career teachers continue to face the same challenges as those identified in previous studies (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Meister & Melnick, 2003; Author, 2015). These challenges appear far from resolution, and our ECTs' comments are a timely reminder of the need to learn from sites where teachers report positive experiences, to inform strategies to support all ECTs.

Clearly, while many schools and experienced colleagues provide welcoming, supportive environments, there were sufficient negative experiences reported to raise concerns. It is noteworthy that the participating ECTs wrote more prolifically on negative elements of their experiences (when responding to question 2) and relatively briefly on examples of positive experiences when they responded to question 1. Indeed, even in Item 1, which encouraged

ECTs to report on reasons for staying, ostensibly an opportunity to report positively, 27% of the responses discussed negative experiences as mentioned earlier.

Schools that were deemed supportive featured environments that were collaborative, challenging yet helpful, open to divergence in views and practices, and empowering, which is consistent with other studies e.g. McNally & Martin (2006). In contrast, where these elements were lacking, ECTs reported negative experiences. Even though various supportive strategies have been proposed or implemented to support ECTs, a socio-political environment exists in some schools that positions ECTs as lesser colleagues than their more experienced counterparts. The evidence indicates an ongoing need for significant cultural shifts in some schools to ensure adequate ECT support.

The demands made on all teachers are extensive. Consequently, what ECTs perceive as uncaring behaviour may be symptomatic of overwhelming workloads, exhaustion, and the challenges and complexities of teaching. Nevertheless, some of the reported behaviours of experienced teachers and school leaders call into question these teachers' dispositions towards those entering the profession. Micro-political contexts in schools, as in any organisation, are complex and untidy. For every beginning teacher employee, negotiating these involves reading and understanding their environment and then going through a series of stages of acquiring and practising micro-political literacy skills. As incoming members of the school community, ECTs need to work through developing personal relationships with the "variety of actors in the school ... and learn the explicit and implicit rules about territory, hierarchy and do's and don'ts that are part of every school's organisation and culture" (Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013, p.33).

We accept Vanderlinde and Kelchtermans' (2013) call on ECTs to become micropolitically literate. As part of this 'learning contract', we also believe that established teachers can be

pivotal in creating optimal circumstances in which ECTs can be welcomed into the school and the profession. These experienced teachers may need support in this endeavour. Kelchtermans (2011) asserts that an understanding of the moral and political dimensions of the school-workplace is essential in addressing “teacher vulnerability” (p. 66) and the impediments for ECTs that arise from it. Both beginning and established teachers will benefit from informed responses to these vulnerabilities.

We also concur with Vanderlinde and Kelchtermans’ suggestion in broadening the scope of mentoring policy initiatives which will assist beginning teachers to practise and acquire their micro-political skills (2013, p. 37). As our findings show, improving ECTs’ experience is not just about providing more mentors or extending their scope of support to ECTs. Mentors need to play a supportive role and assist ECTs impartially in their settling process. ECTs should be comfortable approaching and seeking mentors’ assistance and help. Understanding and acquiring micro-political skills and managing relationships can be very challenging if the ECT is faced with a hostile mentor. Being placed in a new environment where they may be still be working out trust relationships, it is unlikely that ECTs would have anywhere to turn to without a supportive mentor.

The employing authority of ECTs in this study has invested in major initiatives, including reduced face-to-face teaching and provision of mentors to support ECTs in their first years. These initiatives are shown both in the literature and in the findings of this study to be productive. However, the claimed lack of support identified by some in this study raises questions as to how extensively and thoroughly these initiatives were implemented. While this paper focused on the micro-political environment of the school and its role in supporting ECTs, there also exists a tension between the system and the school. The system has prioritised the provision of support for ECTs but does not take carriage for its implementation within each school. The implementation occurs within schools, in a context of competing

local priorities. As a result, the intention of the system mandates may be diluted by the realities of individual school contexts and demands. This can create a disjunction between system-wide policy initiatives and actual school enactment.

We argue that many changes and initiatives should occur at the school level within the framework of government policy. Furthermore, this study indicates that support for ECTs needs not only to include these formal modes of support, but also to include a shift in some school cultures. These cultures need to establish and maintain encouraging and welcoming environments that enable positive interactions amongst ECTs, their colleagues and the school executive, and promote professional learning. A potential risk of a mandated policy is the removal of the personal and collective responsibility of all school staff to facilitate the transition into the profession of all ECTs. Therefore, while formal modes of support are critical, work needs to be done to ensure that teachers and executive staff share responsibility for creating a culture that nurtures new staff. Principals and school executive are pivotal in influencing the experiences of ECTs. They can smooth the transition into the profession by recognising the ‘new employee’ status of ECTs and assisting with the kinds of adjustments needed to become part of the organisation. As senior members, they are already familiar with the complex relations and interactions prevalent in the school culture and can ensure ECTs are given time and support to become micro-politically literate.

Conclusions

Our paper elaborates on the persistent challenges faced by ECTs, which do not seem to have dissipated with time or with new initiatives. This study shows that even where policy initiatives are implemented by an education system, much needs to be done in some schools to improve ECT experiences, with regard to the school context and school relations.

A growing body of research recommends approaches and strategies to support early career teachers. Many systems and schools have implemented programs for ECTs in response to these stated needs, including the system in which our participants were teaching. And yet, attrition in the early years of teaching remains “intractable”, according to Gallant and Riley (2014, p. 562). Our informants join the chorus of those early career teachers pointing out needs that should be addressed.

We suggest that rather than accepting the status quo which provides support for ECTs to navigate their way through rocky shoals, we consider ways of modifying their passage. This inevitably requires the socio-political climate to be different for those schools where the current culture is impacting negatively on the newcomers to field. The challenge is for school leaders and their staff to work together to build a different kind of social and political structure in their school, one that is welcoming and supportive of ECTs. There is both an immediate and potential benefit for the school in assisting ECTs to become confident and competent practitioners. Recognition of the value of their contributions might provide an incentive for schools with less welcoming environments to collaboratively change their cultures. At the system level, monitoring of mentoring systems, and increasing where necessary the support offered to mentors, may identify and help address problems at local level. Ensuring that mandated reductions in face-to-face time for beginning teachers are actually enacted in schools may also alleviate some of the teachers’ workload related challenges. Calls for high standards of collegial professional behaviour are appropriate in any workplace. Support and encouragement, we believe, should be instinctive in the teaching profession, whether for children or for new colleagues.

A notable difference between the ECTs who had positive experiences and those who had negative experiences is that for the former, colleagues and executive emphasised their abilities and provided informal and formal support. In contrast, for the latter, colleagues and

executive tended to emphasise ECTs' inabilities, neglected their support and in some instances, established demoralising environments. Even in accepting that the sample may represent the experiences of a minority, the reported experiences require attention. Change, at least by some, in the way that ECTs are treated, is critical if we are to move away from a profession which has been said to 'eat its young' (Halford, 1998, p. 33).

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Table 1: Qualitative items

	Stay (Item 1)	Challenges (Item 2)	Total
No of Respondents	204	214	237
% Survey Sample	60.7	63.5	70.5
Number of words used in response:			
Average	39.5	40.2	70.1
St dev	39.7	41.3	64.7
Min	2	2	2
Quartile 1	15	15	27
Median	27.5	28	52
Quartile 3	53	49	94
Max	309	289	437