Retaining quality early career teachers in the profession:

New teacher narratives

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Following strenuous efforts to raise teacher recruitment rates, enrolments in pre-service teacher education programs in universities across Australia are rising - as are the cut-off University Admissions Index (UAI) scores for acceptance into such programs. Alongside this success in attracting quality teacher education students, there has been a significant upward trend in early career teacher resignation rates in Australian states and territories (cf. Skilbeck and Connell, 2003; Ramsey, 2000). The Review of Teacher Education (Ramsey, 2000) and other recent studies suggest that this trend is representative of attrition in other parts of the world (cf. OECD, 2004, 2005; Smithers and Robinson, 2003; Hunt and Carroll, 2003). Early career teacher retention and attrition rates have specific implications for the future and quality not only of Australian schooling, but for international contexts of schooling as well. This paper brings together findings from a range of studies (Ewing & Smith, 2002 &2003; Manuel, 2003; Manuel & Brindley, 2002) with recent narratives, written by early career teachers, in order to explore more fully the forces that shape experiences in the first few years of teaching. It is clear that these may impact on issues of retention and attrition.

INTRODUCTION

Despite concerted efforts and increased resources to attract quality entrants into teacher education and growing support for induction and mentoring of early career teachers in Australia, it is well established that here, as in other countries in the Western world, up to one third of all newly-recruited teachers resign or ‘burn out’ in their first three to five years of teaching (cf. OECD, 2005 & 2004; Skilbeck and Connell, 2003; Smithers and Robinson, 2003; Hunt and Carroll, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ramsey, 2000; Australian
Senate, 1998). This issue of teacher attrition is even more apparent and critical in rural and disadvantaged areas.

In their recent *Background Report for the OECD*, Skilbeck and Connell (2003: 32-3) comment that:

Teaching is becoming to some extent a career of 'movement in and out' and the 'out' may be permanent. There is a need for further, more detailed study of the movement in and out of teaching, particularly by teachers in the younger age cohort.

This paper reports on several longitudinal studies (Ewing and Smith, 2003; Manuel and Brindley, 2002) that have as their fundamental, generative focus, the task of identifying the forces and conditions that lead to early teacher retention and attrition. It seeks to explore how the continuities and discontinuities in the journey from pre-service teacher into the teaching workforce influence the decision to stay or to leave the profession. It first briefly examines reasons why people choose to teach before drawing on excerpts from narratives written by early career teachers to examine their experiences after graduation. Narrative inquiry provides an important tool to 'unpack' early career teachers' experiences and can yield new insights into these experiences for the wider teaching profession. Stories, as process and as artefact, have been recognised as very powerful tools to develop understandings of teaching and teaching contexts (cf. Connelly & Clandinin, 1994; Barone, 2000), and are therefore central to the present research study.

THE DECISION TO TEACH

A number of research studies in Australia and internationally have sought to identify the motivations of new teachers entering the profession at a time when issues of salaries and working conditions, opportunities for professional development, the implications of an ageing workforce, and apparently inflexible career pathways have been at the forefront of many media reports on teaching and education. In the face of what appear to be strong disincentives for entering the teaching profession, there is no shortage of school-leavers and others seeking places in teacher education programs. On this point, Dinham (2004:2) notes that there has been a 'surge in the popularity of teaching' in recent years, and alongside this upward trend:

Entry scores for teacher pre-service training have been rising across Australia after a 1990s nadir....After a steady climb over the past three to four years, there has been a jump of ten points or more this year, with tertiary entrance scores over eighty for primary teaching at fourteen universities, with most others not far below.

Not only is there a strong demand for teacher education places that exceeds supply: the calibre of entrants is very high. More that 70% of all teacher education degree students enrolled in 2003 in the University of Sydney's Secondary Combined Degrees, for example, attained tertiary entrance scores of 90 or more (out of a possible 100).

The corpus of reasons *why* people choose to enter the teaching profession is largely positive. In a longitudinal study of 196 graduates from the University of Sydney (Ewing
and Smith, 2003) the reasons identified by participants for choosing to teach reflected the ideals we as teacher educators might hope for. The following results, for example, are combined totals of recorded rankings of 'Important'/Very Important'/Extremely Important' in response to a series of statements about teaching. The only statement identified by more than 50% of participants as 'Extremely Important' in their motivation to teach, and by a combined total of 97% of the participants was 'satisfying career'. To promote student learning was also recorded as a motivation to teach by 97% of the sample. Other motivations such as, for example, the desire to contribute to society (94%), the goal of helping others (93%); and working with young people (86%) ranked highly across the sample. These strong expressions of a commitment to focussing on assisting young people in learning were followed by less strong, but still important, levels of response to statements about teaching as a career such as, for example, the opportunity for professional growth (85%), sharing academic knowledge (78%) and working in a community (72%). Flexibility in personal lifestyle was a reason for choosing to teach that was identified by 65% of respondents. Similarly, in a survey of a cohort of beginning teachers of English in 2002, around 80% of participants identified 'working with young people to make a difference; personal fulfilment; and enjoyment of the subject' as the dominant reasons for choosing to be a teacher (Manuel and Brindley, 2002). These results are similar to those reported in a number of international studies (cf. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003; Kyriacou et al, 2002; Hammond, 2002; Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000; Reid and Caudwell, 1997).

Another approach to exploring the decision to teach is the expectancy value model advanced by Wigfield and Eccles (2000), and originally based on examining motivation and choice in relation to participating in school subjects. Applied to the decision to teach, the expectancy value framework links choice of career to expectancies of success, ability beliefs and the subjective value of the career as motivating forces in the decision to teach. Thinking you can teach, being told that you can teach and early positive experiences in teacher education and teaching are seen as powerful motivational forces in deciding to teach. Difficulties in induction and lack of support can challenge the positive expectancy that new teachers have used to decide on teaching as a career with consequent problems for retaining new teachers.

Attracting teachers to the profession and meeting the demand for recruitment, however, constitute only part of the equation for building a dynamic, resilient, and thriving teaching profession. We know from extensive research in the field that successful schools are largely created and sustained by effective teachers who can be powerful agents of reform. If good teachers make the difference in students' educational experience, then we need to understand more fully the reasons why good teachers stay, and the reasons why good teachers decide to leave.

At the core of the teacher quality debate are not merely the processes of the preparation and recruitment of high calibre candidates into teacher education programs. Increasingly urgent in educational systems throughout the Western world, is the need to keep these good teachers working with children well beyond one, two or three years of
service. Teacher retention is now regarded as a more serious issue than teacher recruitment (Kyriacou, 2003). This is particularly so given the ‘ageing’ profile of the teaching profession in many Western countries. In fact, Professor Barry McGaw, now OECD Director of Education, identified teacher supply and retention as one of a handful of major educational issues in all OECD countries, with the exception of Poland (European Educational Research Association Conference, Portugal, 2002). It is therefore imperative that research studies focus intensively on understanding the reasons for teacher attrition, particularly early career teacher attrition.

RETENTION ISSUES

Despite the increased levels of resourcing to attract quality graduates into teacher education and growing support for induction and mentoring of early career teachers, it is well established in countries in the Western world that between 25% and 40% of all newly-recruited teachers resign or burn out in their first three to five years of teaching (cf. Smithers and Robinson, 2003; Hunt and Carroll, 2003; Lee Dow, 2003, Skilbeck and Connell, 2003; Kyriacou et al, 2002; Ramsey, 2000; Wilhelm et al, 2000; Australian Senate, 1996; Gold, 1996). In No Dream Denied, the National Commission’s Report on Teaching and America’s Future, Hunt and Carroll (2003:6) state:

The real school staffing problem is teacher retention. Our inability to support high quality teaching in so many of our schools is driven not by too few teachers entering the profession, but by too many leaving it for other jobs.

Even given the difficulties of comparability of studies of teacher attrition (Macdonald, 1999), analysis of the most recent attrition rates in America demonstrate that a third of America’s early career teachers leave teaching during their first three years and almost half leave during the first five years. In addition, the attrition rate for teachers in disadvantaged schools is reported to be almost a third higher. While adequate data on attrition of early career teachers is not yet available for Australia (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002), the Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales highlighted the alarming upward trend in early career teacher resignation rates in NSW during the late 1990s (Ramsey, 2000: 197). In addition, Skilbeck and Connell (2003) reported that the average age of teachers leaving the profession prior to conventional retirement age is 29 years.

WHAT WE KNOW FROM INTERNATIONAL AND AUSTRALIAN STUDIES OF EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

Major research commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) in the United Kingdom, Factors Affecting Teachers’ Decisions to Leave the Profession, reports that a significant percentage of teachers leave the profession in the first three years (Smithers and Robinson, 2003). Five main factors affecting this decision were identified, including workload, the desire for a new challenge, the school situation, salary, and personal
circumstances. Workload was reported as 'by far the most important, and salary the least' significant reason for early resignation (Smithers and Robinson, 2003: iii).

A large study of 10,080 early career teachers in the United States (Boser, 2000) mapped the career patterns of individuals from 1992-1993 to 1997-1998. The study found that one fifth of all teachers who began teaching in public schools in 1993-94 had left by 1996-97. The researchers estimated that a further 3% would have left by 1997-98. This is a total attrition rate of around 22% (Boser, 2000: 1-3). On average, those teachers who decided to leave had higher graduate test scores. The researchers noted that these rates rose sharply in high poverty areas, with as many as 50% of all new teachers appointed to schools in high-poverty districts leaving within the first three to five years of service. Moreover, teachers who did not participate in formal induction programs were twice as likely to leave after the first three years. The study concluded that there are two major reasons why good teachers leave:

1. a lack of on-the-job support, and
2. workplace conditions (discipline problems, poor administrative support, poor overall school culture) (Boser, 2000: 3).

A study of early career attrition in the Netherlands (Stokking et al, 2003) likewise concluded that the role of internships and teacher mentors is critical in arresting the turnover rate in the early career phase.

The final question in a recent questionnaire involving graduates from the University of Sydney (Ewing & Smith, 2003) asked for an indication of how long each respondent expected to be a member of the teaching profession. In response to this, while 44% of 196 respondents stated they believed they would be teachers for more than 10 years, nearly the same number reported that they would leave teaching within ten years. A further 27% said they intended teaching for at least five years. This data reflects other Australian and international data (Macdonald, 1999) on the dropout rate of early career teachers. Such data raises important questions. If these indications are correct, does it mean that teaching may become a relatively short-term career for many young teachers who will seek to change careers after about ten years? If so, this has major implications for a continuing supply of teachers into the profession and for the professional 'capital' that is built up over time through experienced, expert teachers remaining in the profession well beyond a decade. Alternatively, are the main reasons for teacher dropout caused by lack of effective induction and support in the early years of teaching, and factors that may be attributed to school culture (Bullough, 1997)? Or, is there a combination of these factors at work?

We have no clear sets of statistics on teacher resignations that enable us to identify the numbers of early career resignations as distinct from those that occur during mid or later career phases, in either the public or private education systems. Until recently there were no exit surveys to provide us with insights into why teachers decide to leave the profession and what their future plans may be. While we have an evolving
understanding of the ebb and flow of early career teachers' day-to-day lives and of their aspirations on entering the profession, it is their stories that may provide further insights into the less well understood shifts in attitudes and aspirations over time.

**EARLY CAREER TEACHERS' STORIES**

The research that we have conducted over the past number of years with early career teachers has had, as one of its aims, a gathering of stories from the teachers themselves. Our research aims to map the territory from the pre-service phase of teacher development through the first years of employment. It has a strong qualitative, ethnographic foundation: we believe that it is through a deeper understanding of the forces which shape and influence early career teachers' working lives that we can more effectively address the issues of early career dissatisfaction and attrition. Principally, it is through the chronicling of teachers' experiences, collected in narratives, surveys, and interviews, that we can build a more substantial profile of why teachers stay and why teachers leave.

**FROM PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION TO THE END OF THE FIRST-YEAR-OUT: SHARING SOME OF THE KEY MOMENTS IN DEVELOPING TEACHERS' LIVES**

What follows is a series of excerpts from early career teachers' stories presented as a means of filling in the canvas: to illustrate the transitions, growth, impediments, hardships and joys of becoming a teacher.

**Early expectations and a sense of vocation**

Time and again, early career teachers frame their expectations and their vision of teaching in ways that are redolent of the archetypal journeys and odysseys of classical mythology. The following four excerpts from early career teacher narratives are characteristic of the tenor of many:

I saw education as a great liberator and equalizing tool and so, when I graduated, I asked the Department to send me somewhere where my services were needed ...I had hoped to go forth and teach in remote North-Western NSW. Such are the ambitions of youth. I was full of enthusiasm and felt somewhat like John Fahey after the Olympics bid “I will” (Early career teacher, rural NSW).

I will be working with young people in order to help them to understand who they are and what they want to do with their lives ... through educating them, opening up and expanding their view of the world and of life ...(Early career teacher, Sydney, NSW).

The journey of this course is literally a personal quest for me...I am more committed than ever to evolving into the type of teacher that makes a real contribution to children’s lives (Early career teacher, Sydney, NSW).

I was excited about being a teacher, it was something I had wanted for a long time. I believed strongly in public education, the right of the individual to a fair and equal
education. I was excited about being a learner too (Early career primary teacher, Sydney, NSW).

It is clear that these pre-service teachers have a genuine commitment to their chosen profession and initially held well-articulated beliefs about their vocation as educators. At the time of writing these narratives, these early career teachers were still in a university context that they perceived as collegial and supportive, and within which they participated in a shared or communal goal of preparing to teach.

The following section looks at critical phases as reported by early career teachers once they have graduated and taken up a position as a fully qualified teacher.

The Early Days of the First Teaching Appointment

It is commonly recognized that the initial days, weeks, and months of teaching are taxing physically, and often intellectually and psychologically, on the new teacher. A study of early career teachers conducted by Gold (1996:556) concluded that:

the greatest problems encountered by beginning teachers were overwhelming feelings of disillusionment and believing that they were unable to cope with the multitude of pressures encountered each day.

It is less well understood why and how some teachers who experience such stress move through the early months to consolidate a positive and more informed view of teaching, while others who experience similar stress describe a growing sense of anxiety and negativity about their future. It seems there is a ‘resilience factor’ at work here that is complex and difficult to identify, but nevertheless important to acknowledge in any account of teacher workload and career choice.

What we know is that the early idealism of the newly-appointed teacher can be buffeted and undermined by poor staff morale, deficit staff-room culture, and the growing realization that there may be endemic school-based and system-wide challenges. Typical of early career teachers’ experience during the early days of teaching is:

• Entry shock sometimes accompanied by self-doubt – “Can I really do this?”
• A need to prove oneself with colleagues and students – “I can do this.”
• A questioning of the adequacy of pre-service preparation – “I had no idea that some classes could be this bad.”
• A feeling of being overwhelmed by the workload and a sense of anxiety about professional competence and levels of efficiency.
• A need to comply with prevailing routines, rituals and sub-culture of staffroom. Rocking the boat in the early days is avoided.
• Some initial identification of potentially valuable relationships and possible ‘mentors’.
• Possible disillusionment and frustration triggered by deficit teacher-talk, particularly if it is about students.

• The maintenance of the initial determination to make a difference and to swim against the cultural tide, if that tide is negative.

The excerpts from early career teachers’ stories reproduced below provide evidence that beginning to teach is often made more difficult than it needs to be:

When I arrived at my first appointment the faculty had units they did and everyone followed the faculty units. I never felt comfortable doing that so I always changed things. It really is left up to chance if staff take you under their wing. Thankfully I have had some caring people who have done that in my first two schools. At my first appointment though, I walked into a staff room that was divided. It was very difficult maintaining friendship with both sides (Early career secondary teacher, NSW).

On my first day I entered the principal’s office and was given an incredibly long list of jobs that had to be completed. I was to be responsible for organizing the school tennis competition, preparing all sports awards, umpire Saturday sport and teach a full load. My head swam. Where was I to begin....No one offered me any support....I was isolated and alone. (Early career primary teacher, Sydney).

We can characterise this phase of teacher development as the early survival phase. During this time new teachers are intensely concerned to acquire the essential practical knowledge needed to function effectively in an unfamiliar environment. Those initial feelings are often of being overwhelmed by the need to navigate their way around the physical, administrative and infrastructural realities of the school. As one early career teacher remarked:

The resource issue was not a pleasant introduction to the school but certainly made me realise not to expect anything in the way of too much support.

Finding a place; the establishment phase

After a period of orientation to a new environment and new, sometimes conflicting sets of expectations, early career teachers identify a range of experiences including:

• A need to communicate, learn from, and debrief with a significant other or others.

• The use of journals as helpful in processing experiences.

• Equivocal attitudes to staff hierarchies and school decision-making processes.

• A limited but growing awareness of the socio-political dimensions of school life.

• A need to communicate effectively with a wide range of people, including parents.

• Anxiety about relationships with students that are not proceeding smoothly.
• Uncertainty about lines of authority for the new teacher for the discipline and management of disruptive and behaviour disordered students.

• Some sense of being “set adrift” – doing things (teaching, planning, assessing, reporting) “on your own.”

• A recognition of the ways in which contextual factors (physical setting, personalities, resources) are a significant mediating force in determining the quality of the professional experience within and beyond the classroom.

It is during this period that early career teachers recognise the importance of forging connections and finding a place. Socialisation of the early career teacher can take the form of enculturation into the dominant norms and mores of the staffroom or school community, and the early career teacher recognises the need to manage the political dimensions of teaching and collegial networks.

Managing conflict with other staff members (especially when they do the most ridiculous things in the state system like dividing a class between two teachers. When you have different ideas about marking and students’ needs it is very difficult to find common ground. (Early career teacher, Sydney, NSW).

I wasn’t prepared for how much of me, how much of myself would be embedded in these relationships and how difficult classroom and school cultures would be to negotiate. How do you work in a school that professes an ethos of care and attacks those who don’t fit their mould? (Early career secondary teacher, Sydney, NSW).

Consolidating pedagogical content knowledge

For the early career teacher, consolidating the ‘art and science’ of teacher knowledge means refining pedagogy and seeking effective strategies for classroom management. Typical of many early career teachers experience is:

• A preoccupation with discipline and behaviour management.

• An over-reliance on ‘products’ as a measure of professional competence and student learning.

• Anxiety over assessment and student results.

• A lack of confidence in monitoring and reporting on student progress.

• A tendency to over-plan.

• For some teachers, a dependence on textbooks, prepackaged resources, or other teachers’ materials.

• A growing awareness of the classroom as a complex social crucible.

• Difficulty with managing and effectively teaching a mixed ability class.
• Coping with the rigours of time constraints and deadlines.

• Genuine enjoyment of, and satisfaction derived from, the relationship with “good” classes.

• Confidence that is amplified by positive classroom experiences and strong teacher-student rapport.

Typical experiences are captured in narratives such as the following:

During term time, I rarely have weekends free and by Sunday afternoons I started to get a little bit stressed about the upcoming week. My preparation was ongoing and of course the marking could be quite crippling at times. I spent holidays programming all my classes for the term and so my term preparation was daily planning, knowing what my ultimate goals were. This meant that I feel like I have been constantly working...

Managing students – particularly low ability and special needs. My style of teaching had to change somewhat as a result of these two things. I also still have classroom discipline matters even though I shouldn’t if my teaching is exciting enough. There are some days when things fall flat or when students just want to misbehave.

I had a delightful Year 7 group and we regularly put out a newsletter that the students wrote and edited etc. They also performed and filmed themselves doing excerpts for television shows and then we had an awards ceremony afterwards... I had a top Year 9 class and they did some marvellous acting for The Merchant of Venice. We also did an Australian Literature Study looking at the literature from colonial times to present day. They were also exposed to ‘classic’ literature in the wide reading program. These have all been enjoyable experiences.(Early career teacher, Sydney, NSW).

It is important to consider that the positive experiences here are generated from the professional engagement with students and their learning, even though the challenge of classroom management and constant preparation is ever-present.

Building a professional identity and voice

Participation in committees, involvement in professional development activities and conferences, and roles beyond the classroom can be a source of empowerment and reward for the new teacher if she or he considers that their contributions have been recognized and valued. There are some common features of this phase of teacher development that include:

• The re-evaluation of one’s professional image through the prism of others’ responses, attitudes, and feedback, both explicit and covert.

• A strong desire to be accepted.

• A reluctance to ask for assistance since this may be interpreted as a reflection on professional competence.
• Participation in administrative and extra-curricular tasks to enhance the teacher’s presence in the school.

• The journey towards their own truths about the who, how, what and why of teaching.

• A desire to generate a positive profile within the school and community through personal and professional accomplishments.

On this theme, a newly-appointed teacher wrote:

I also enjoy researching for topics. I love to stay up to date where English is at. I read through *Metaphor* and peruse children’s literature often. I also am a sucker for books on teaching English and *Re-Viewing English* has become almost the bible of English teaching for me. I have used something in just about every in-service and conference I have attended…(Early career teacher, Sydney, NSW).

**INDUCTION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF EARLY CAREER TEACHING**

Recent changes to policy and practice in government schools in New South Wales have mandated induction programs for all newly-appointed teachers (NSWDET, 1999). Recent reports on teacher education (eg. Ramsey, 2000) have highlighted the importance, but often inadequate provision of, induction programs and structures in teaching compared to other professions. A further important factor, and arguably, perhaps the most important factor in retaining early career teachers is the quality of the induction experience teachers receive when they enter the profession (Boser, 2000; Hatton & Harman, 1997).

Recent survey data from graduates over four successive years from the University of Sydney (Ewing and Smith, 2003) suggest that informal support was the most important form of induction for the large majority of the respondents. On the one hand, this is not unexpected and the notion of colleagues helping each other in informal ways is a fundamental and cornerstone form of learning about teaching, as well as a critical form of ongoing professional development. On the other hand, informal support is often an act of serendipity. There is no guarantee that it will occur, or what the quality of such informal support will be. Early career teachers may feel isolated and unable to seek informal support for a range of reasons. Informal support, often in the contexts which most demand it, is not necessarily readily available (for example, in a difficult school where there are many young teachers trying to survive). Further, the induction of early career teachers is an important area of management and leadership and there are those in schools who are charged with such responsibilities. What is disturbing about the data collected is the very low level of reported involvement of the principal (42% reported very low/low involvement) and particularly the other members of the executive (65% very low/low/moderate involvement) in the induction of these early career teachers. Arguably, it is both of these groups which should have a major responsibility in the
induction of new staff. Certainly such data would make for interesting comparisons with similar situations in the corporate sector.

The formal provision of a mentor has been recognised clearly in the research literature as a central force in the effective induction of student teachers (cf. Feiman-Nemser, 2000, Weiss, 1999, Hatton & Harman, 1997). From 2005 all schools in NSW are expected to provide early career teachers with supervisors, although the role of supervisor and mentor should not be considered interchangeable or synonymous. Linking early career teachers with mentors is also strongly encouraged by the NSW Department of Education and Training. Of 98 respondents who replied to the Ewing and Smith survey question, more than 75% reported that no mentor was provided and of those teachers who did have a mentor, few had any role in choosing their mentor. What is even more disturbing is that half the respondents did not have a supervisor. Thus, for over half of the respondents, there was no teacher who was assigned to have a special responsibility for assisting the early career teacher. Again, Ramsey (2000) in his extensive review of teacher education in NSW, pointed to the serious weaknesses in the induction of early career teachers when compared to all other professions.

A similar picture of inadequate and unmanaged induction emerged from the data on the format and nature of induction sessions. Only 12% of the respondents reported systematic and regular sessions for the whole year. A further 13% reported regular sessions in the first two terms (i.e. half a year). No respondents reported any continuation of induction sessions beyond the first year of teaching; something that has been recognised as very important in not only the continuing professional development of young teachers but also in their retention (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In many cases the induction program was very brief, lasting only a day or a few sessions. This has serious implications if we consider that systematic, universal professional development and professional learning, are the basis of creating schools as professional learning communities (Ewing, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2000; Senge, 2000; Weiss, 1999). More than half of the respondents reported either single sessions (30%) or multiple irregular sessions.

One of the key factors in the retention of early career teachers is a supportive induction into their specific school context; its conditions, culture and ethos, as well as the teaching profession more broadly. Although state schools in NSW are expected to provide early career teachers with induction programs, the data reported above does not provide evidence of a consistent, universal and effective induction into teaching for the respondents. Ideally, an extension of the NSW Department of Education and Trainings' successful Teacher Mentor Program for all newly-appointed teachers may be one means of redressing this situation.

**TAKING STOCK**

It is often at the close of the first year that teachers take the time to reassess their initial career aspirations and reformulate goals. Even after a number of years in the profession,
early career teachers still feel they are re-visiting and re-viewing those initial visions of how and why they chose to teach:

When I first started teaching I wanted to be a teacher of excellence. Five years down the track I feel I am still a long way off because the more you learn the more you realise there is more to learn. I am also feeling somewhat worn out. This does a lot to my motivation levels. I'm not sure if I want to teach long term. I think I'm reasonably good at it but it takes a lot out of me so I don't always feel happy. I feel sometimes that I have lost my sense of self. This is a really tough job if you want to do it well. (Early career teacher, NSW).

There is a real poignancy in the reflections of this teacher with the serious implication that the desire to fulfil her own expectations of a professional role has required of her a degree of personal commitment and sacrifice that has taken its toll on her very sense of self and identify. The personal cost of remaining in the profession under such circumstances can be a determining factor in teacher attrition.

**EARLY CAREER TEACHERS’ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE**

Can we afford to continue to witness one quarter, or more, of our early career teachers leaving the profession for good?

If we consider the long-term profile of the teaching profession; the lives of the individuals who leave; the loss of intellectual and cultural capital never fully realised; the impact of high staff turnover upon the educational experiences of students; and the economic disadvantages of an upward trend-line of early teacher attrition, then the answer is clearly “no”. What, then, can we do to address this?

There are a number of initiatives already underway in New South Wales. These include:

- The NSW DET Teacher Mentor Program. This was a pilot program that commenced in 2003, whereby experienced teachers were appointed as dedicated full-time mentors in schools where there was a high proportion of early career teachers. The program has been maintained into 2005-2006.

- Large-scale qualitative research into the experiences of early career teachers to identify the reasons driving the quantitative data on attrition.

Importantly, we need to hear the voices of new teachers far more consistently than we presently do. This can be addressed through the infrastructures of individual schools and the actions of senior teachers within these schools. Providing meaningful contexts, on a regular basis, for early career teachers to connect with other staff, to express concerns, and to contribute ideas and perspectives would go some way towards offsetting the isolation and professional disconnectedness that can lead to attrition. Professional teaching associations are also critical in effective ‘induction’ of new teachers.
On this point, it is appropriate to conclude with the words of two early career teachers at the end of their first year of teaching. Implicitly, each has something worth considering about the reasons why good teachers stay, and the reasons why good teachers may come to the decide to leave:

I would like to see teachers being more active researchers. I had two staff members at my previous school that I could bounce ideas off and they would challenge me in my thinking. In the state school I taught at nobody attended conferences or had a lot of discussion about the teaching of (their subject) although to be fair I’m not sure I was up for that in my first year of teaching.

It’s difficult to know whether the system or the school frustrated me more in my first year of teaching. Mainly the school I think, but perhaps it was compromised by the system. I definitely know some of my contemporaries had a more supportive time, certainly more positive experiences than I did….I stayed because of the kids. They made my year worthwhile. So, I’m sticking with them! (Early career teacher, NSW)

NOTES

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