

New Teachers are Leaving the Profession: How can School Leadership Make a Difference?

Jiaqi Dai^{1,*}

¹ Institute of Education, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT

Abstract. The problem of loss of new qualified teachers has been a global issue which has a detrimental impact on the pool of future leadership positions and talented workforce in national labour markets. Despite the fact that a wide range of studies have investigated into the effects of mentoring and coaching on novice teacher retention, the leadership practices that highlight the development of teacher leadership capacities and resilience are currently insufficient. This article aims to examine the negative experiences of early career teachers (ECTs), who are in their first five years of teaching, and analyze how school leadership theories could support them by building positive working conditions. The development of ECTs' sense of agency and resilience is emphasized in this paper through the utilization of two leadership theories: distributed leadership and caring leadership. It also clarifies recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers to enhance the quality of pre-service teacher education and induction programmes with the central premise that teacher professional development should be a career-long continuum.

1 INTRODUCTION

The significance of training and keeping effective teachers has been increasingly highlighted throughout educational reforms over the past few decades since it is directly tied to student achievement and school performance [1]. However, the ageing of teaching force and high attrition of early career teachers (ECTs) nowadays have turned into an intractable issue in global educational systems [2][3]. According to the existing research, the ECTs who are in their first five years of teaching profession are the most vulnerable and roughly one-third of them decide to leave the profession during that time [3][4]. The shortage and poor retention of qualified new teachers is even more severe in schools with underprivileged conditions, contributing to a 'vicious cycle' that further undermines the educational equity [4][5]. Moreover, high levels of teacher attrition reflects an excessively inefficient use of resources that would impact on the future educated workforce and hinder the economic success of a nation [6]. As recognized by academics, in addition to individual traits, school characteristics—particularly a supportive leadership—are the primary aspect influencing the turnover intentions of ECTs [7][8]. Therefore, in order to address staffing problems, it is crucial for school leaders to comprehend the professional and emotional needs of ECTs and examine their own leadership styles and management skills.

In this article, we will begin by analyzing the causes underlying the high turnover rates through the lens of ECTs based on their negative experiences reported in

previous research. Then, we adopt a school-level perspective to discuss the role of school leadership in transforming the school culture to support novice teachers, with an emphasis on fostering their resilience and agency. Subsequently, recommendations are offered for school leadership strategies to lower turnover rates and develop ECTs as future experienced teachers and leaders.

2 THE EXPERIENCES OF NEW TEACHERS: WHY ARE THEY LEAVING?

2.1 Inadequate Pre-service Preparation and Induction

Evidence revealed that many beginning teachers experienced feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem because they lacked pre-service training to help them acclimatize to the change from being an undergraduate to entering the workforce [2][9]. Despite having completed rigorous teacher education preparation courses, the majority of them would still have pre-teaching anxieties and find it very challenging to bridge the knowledge practice gap [6][10]. This problem can be referred to as 'praxis shock' [9]. According to the past research findings, the school provision of effective mentoring and induction programmes is positively correlated with ECTs' motivation and retention [6]. Countries like England has recognized the importance of supporting ECTs and implemented the educational policies mandating the assignment of mentors to each ECT and a one-year compulsory induction [11]. The introduction programmes are designed to improve ECTs' class management abilities

*Corresponding author. Email: zctpjda@ucl.ac.uk

while also assisting them in becoming familiar with the school system and national teaching standards [12]. In reality, though, the induction programmes are commonly reported by ECTs and mentors to be time-inadequate and that their effectiveness is underestimated [13][14]. As suggested by scholars, the professional development for teachers to become experienced and qualified is not a 'quick fix', but rather a continuous accumulation and internalization of knowledge and practice [11][12]. Moreover, the existing research demonstrated that ECTs are disappointed with their induction experiences and feel that they are not respected as agentive professionals, which makes them more likely to leave the field [13][14].

2.2 Resilience and Sense of Agency

Although prior evidence indicates that many ECTs left the profession due to the demanding workload, the gap between ideal and reality, and the growing complexity of student behavioural and cultural problems [6][15], research in recent years has consistently highlighted that resilience is the key factor to comprehending the career decisions of novice teachers [16][17]. Resiliency is defined by Luthar et al. as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of considerable adversity" [4]. According to the research findings by Hong, self-efficacy, beliefs and values are the main psychological constructs to comprehend teacher resilience. When confronted with adverse circumstances in the classroom, the leavers typically displayed declining self-efficacy as they blamed their own personalities and abilities, which led to burnout and intentions to quit the profession [9][17]. Additionally, they thought that the unfavourable working conditions were permanent and uncontrollable, therefore they decided to approach their work with a negative attitude [17]. On the other hand, those who had higher levels of resiliency mainly attributed their failure to a lack of effort and knowledge, and they continued to modify their coping mechanisms in the objective of improving the challenging conditions [17].

As suggested by Day and Gu, teacher resilience is not simply related to the capacity to 'bounce back' after traumatic experiences but rather to the ability to sustain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the course of daily teaching [16]. The sense of agency refers to "an individual's capacity to 'make a difference' in an already-existing state of affairs or sequence of events" [18]. The formation of ECTs' professional identity and self-efficacy, which support strengthened resilience, are boosted when they successfully acquire a sense of professional agency that enables them to purposefully control their personal learning in order to enhance student achievement [10][19]. The results of previous research show that when ECTs first entered the field, they frequently stated that they desired to "make a difference" in student lifelong learning and school policies [6][16]. Nevertheless, recalling what we mentioned in 2.1, pre-service teacher education and school induction programmes both downplay the significance of fostering ECTs' leadership skills and treating them as agentive professionals [4][13][14]. In actuality, they lack teaching

autonomy and space, and their voices are unheard throughout school decision-making processes, which demotivates them at work and seriously undermines their resilience [3][20].

2.3 A Toxic Culture Without Supportive Leadership

A supportive school leadership plays a crucial role in establishing positive working conditions and transforming school culture so that ECTs feel empowered to develop resilience [5][16]. As claimed by scholars, individual school contexts and leadership styles could create heterogeneity that influences the quality of induction and professional development programmes both directly and indirectly [11][13]. Henry and Milstein ingeniously described school leaders as 'the weavers of the fabric of resiliency initiatives' [21]. Conversely, an unsupportive leadership in schools along with a toxic and hostile culture, as reported by ECTs, could become the primary factor driving their turnover intentions [8]. Due to the increased global accountability pressures in education, many schools adopt a results-driven strategy and establish a performativity culture, which ignores the teachers' development of agency in favour of just focusing on student scores [6]. In this case, teachers tend to become 'performative workers' rather than respected professionals, which leads teachers to feel deprofessionalized and demotivated [6][22].

Moreover, the hierarchical school structure that lacks quality distributed leadership is demonstrated to be detrimental to teachers' trust, collaboration and professional development aspirations, especially for beginning teachers [8]. ECTs are reported to be at a heightened risk of feeling isolation and being bullied by superior colleagues and students as they adapt to the micro-political systems in the new workplaces [12]. As their pre-service course in university often overlooks leadership knowledge and practices, they lack the assertiveness necessary to achieve system preparedness and understand the multi-layered relationships in schools [10]. Without the proper empowerment and support from school leaders, ECTs might fail to develop resilience, personal identity, and a sense of belonging during this process, ultimately becoming vulnerable [12][16]. Furthermore, in fact, school leaders are proved to hold more positive attitudes than other stakeholders and they often underestimate the developmental demands of ECTs in routine classroom practices [13]. Consequently, it is critical for school leaders to comprehend what sorts of leadership styles are effective to support ECTs in order to evolve a positive school culture and enhance staffing management.

3 EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TO SUPPORT NEW TEACHERS

After recognizing the barriers encountered by novice teachers, Wood summarizes and underlines five crucial roles that school leaders undertake in the retention and coaching of ECTs: 1. Culture developer, 2. Instructional

leader, 3. Mentor coordinator, 4. Staff recruiter and 5. Advocate for beginning teachers [20]. As further explained by educational academics, leadership is not limited to one top individual but is instead a ‘social process’ and ‘interactional activity’ that fosters culture, generates equilibrium, and motivates stakeholders with diverse values to work together to achieve shared goals [10][23]. The previous research findings reveal that the resilience of ECTs needed to sustain them is not a ‘innate capacity’, but rather could be developed through training and supportive leadership in daily practice [16][17]. It is evident that schools which function as learning communities that support teacher collaboration, ongoing professional development, and chances for teacher leadership consistently have higher levels of resiliency and retention of new qualified teachers [4][24]. In the following sections, we will highlight the effects of two leadership theories—distributed leadership and caring leadership—on addressing the complex emotional and developmental demands of ECTs.

3.1 Distributed Leadership and Teacher Leadership Development

Distributed school leadership is defined as “a collection of responsibilities shared among a much broader sector of the school community that involves teachers and other professionals as well as community members both internal and external to the school” [25]. As agreed by scholars, distributed leadership understands leadership practice as a co-production of knowledge through various interactions at the inter-organizational level which is influence-based rather than authority-based [26][27][28]. It is important for formal leaders in schools to serve as gatekeepers and ensure each member has leadership capability and the opportunities to lead and innovate at appropriate times [26][29]. A review of the literature indicates that the majority of studies concentrate on supporting experienced teachers strengthen their leadership skills [8], echoing the ECTs’ negative experiences and dissatisfaction introduced in the aforementioned sections. In actuality, ECTs’ ability to build a sense of agency, comprehend others’ leadership behaviours, and become system-ready is facilitated through leadership development [10]. Only with enough leadership preparedness and confidence, ECTs can build a professional identity and self-efficacy that will strengthen them resilience to sustain their profession [10][24].

Therefore, formal school leaders ought to provide in-depth leadership training in the induction programmes and professional development opportunities for all teachers [13][28]. For ECTs, it was proposed that ‘leading by learning’ and ‘learning by leading’ are both effective in-school professional learning activities to build their leadership skills as they model their expertise on their mentors and lead their peers [10]. Meanwhile, quality distributed leadership would guarantee that every teacher have the chances to put their leadership knowledge to practice regardless of their prior teaching experiences while giving them freedom to initiate decisions and

manage their own learning in the professional contexts [19][28]. Equally crucially, it is the responsibility of formal leaders to create a culture of trust and collaboration at schools where teachers will not be held accountable for their mistakes and diverse opinions are respected [30]. When ECTs work in this kind of positive school culture, as opposed to those that are ‘toxic’, they are more prone to build organizational commitment and leadership aspirations [8][16].

3.2 Caring Leadership for Emotional Support

After considering the impacts of distributed leadership and teacher leadership learning on ECTs’ retention, however, the professional development practices of ECTs in reality are more complicated in specific contexts [8]. Due to the accountability and increasing complexity of student issues, the pre-service teacher curricula and training for ECTs are already overloaded [10]. Additionally, under the present Covid-19 scenario, the long-term trends have been reinforced by additional health insecurity, increased job intensity, and other pressures associated with teaching [15]. As teaching is an emotionally-charged profession [9], it is essential for school leaders to pay attention to the psychological health of ECTs and provide them with emotional and spiritual resources that enable them to be resilient [16]. Scholars posit that a caring school leadership, which is defined as the capacity of leaders to foster caring communities in schools, is an efficient strategy to motivate and support school members through extraordinary circumstances [31][32]. As explained by Riley, caring leaders constantly establish clear standards and expectations, accept responsibility for their mistakes and show up physically and emotionally in their followers’ lives [32].

Along with promoting leadership training and teachers’ development in pedagogical skills, it is equally important for school leaders to give ECTs access to professional development activities on handling emotions and showing care towards others [17]. More specifically, leader caring can be a powerful source of modeling that promotes the development of followers’ caring capacity which enhancing social interactions and emotional learning within school contexts [31]. Recent research supplements the idea that strong caring leadership requires all necessary holistic, interpersonal, and societal efforts from school leaders [33]. Thus, in order to effectively enhance ECTs’ resilience, school leaders must also engage in continuous professional development to advance their own personal abilities to be ‘caring’ and ‘supportive’ [2][33].

4 CONCLUSIONS

Although ECTs are experiencing burnout as a result of the rapidly evolving world and educational reforms, the toxic school culture and poor resilience development are the main reasons for their high turnover rate. As generally speaking, ‘good schools’ produce ‘good teachers’, thus school leaders should actively build teacher learning communities and apply effective leadership strategies to

support the needs of all school members [11]. This paper demonstrates how distributed leadership and caring leadership behaviours are advantageous to enhancing teachers' sense of agency, resilience, and wellbeing, especially for ECTs who are deemed to be the most vulnerable. To conclude, educational leaders and policymakers at current stage should shift their mindset to perceive ECTs as future experts and leaders rather than 'rookies' [6], and construct a strong professional foundation during the most receptive learning periods across their career development continuum [11].

From the school aspect, it is advised that school administrators give new teachers the time and space they need to actively transform their theoretical knowledge into practices through adaptive reflection [19]. Also, the behaviors of experienced teachers in mentoring and feedback processes should be enhanced to increase the flexibility and relevance of induction programmes [9]. Regular professional meetings and professional development options from various professional agencies or universities might be beneficial in ensuring the quality and continuity of teachers' professional development [12]. Given the significance of a positive school culture in fostering teacher resilience, school leaders should promote intense trust and collaboration in teacher learning communities by, for example, enhancing their peer review skills and ensuring that everyone's voices are heard [11][19]. Moreover, evidence-based leadership programmes and personal leadership development are recommended for school leaders to assess school conditions and ensure the professional development programmes are cost-effective [5][11].

On a broader level, it is asserted that teacher pre-occupied beliefs and values are challenging to be altered [17]. For pre-service teachers to be adequately prepared before beginning their careers, it is crucial for educational policymakers and university faculty to redesign curricula and provide real-life practices [34]. It is important to recognize the harmony between the workload of the curriculum and the proper integration of leadership training [10]. The development of teacher agentive awareness and transformation of accountability metrics should be complements to the national policies relating to support for beginning teachers [5][12].

Finally, it worth noting that the effectiveness of leadership strategies and combinations of leadership styles should be context-specific and take socio-cultural variables into account [35]. Therefore, I would recommend future research to start with a system review of current pre-service teacher education and ECTs induction programmes, and then investigate how leadership practices can be effectively applied in practice to improve teacher retention within international contexts.

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