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Slipping Through the Cracks: One Early Career Teacher's Experiences of Rural Teaching and the Subsequent Impact on her Personal and Professional Identities

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Abstract: This paper presents experiences and responses of a first-year teacher, Emily, who participated in research exploring the identity work of early career teachers. This research explored the experiences and responses of her and thirteen other teachers working in disadvantaged schools across South Australia. The participants were drawn from a diverse range of schools and worked in a broad range of teaching roles. Emily was one of four participants working in a rural school in her first year of teaching. What emerged from her experiences and responses were issues of acute personal and professional isolation, absence of professional and personal dialogue and support, and a seeming lack of acknowledgement of the implications of deteriorating personal and professional wellbeing. In the midst of this disparaging context, and in the face of inevitable personal and professional distress, focus shifts to where responsibility lies for recruiting an early career teacher into an unfamiliar social and professional context without adequate relational supports. This raises questions about how understandings of these challenges can be translated from research into practice in rural schools with high staff turnover and limited resources. These questions are particularly pertinent, given the available literature on the early career stage as a critical time of professional survival, exploration and traction. These questions are especially pertinent to Emily and those like her, who attempt to author an identity for themselves, as individuals and teachers, in rural schools that regularly employ first year teachers.

Introduction

Early career teaching has long been recognised as a particularly challenging phase to navigate (Hannam, Stephenson, & Smyth, 1976; Lortie, 1975). The transition between pre-service and early career teaching for Australian teachers is often precarious and experiences vary greatly (Crosswell & Beutel, 2013). These early career experiences are often heightened by the contextual factors of teaching within rural and remote schools (White, Kline, Hastings, & Lock, 2011). This complexity is exacerbated by factors including educational disadvantage and disadvantage within rural communities more broadly. Furthermore, personal isolation and limited personal and situational resources result in particularly challenging forays into teaching where expectations are high (S. M. Johnson & Kardos, 2008).

Many of the challenges of early career teaching are experienced simultaneously, as newcomers attempt to construct an understanding of themselves as teachers. The process of constructing a professional identity as a teacher is a process of making sense of oneself in relation to new professional and personal roles and spaces. This paper illustrates how the interpersonal relationships between early career teachers and their colleagues within such challenging contexts and experiences influence and shape this formative identity work. This is conveyed through one early career teacher's responses to a confronting lack of connection between her and her professional network, including teaching colleagues and members of school leadership. Emily's responses to this professional isolation, in conjunction with the personal isolation that followed her relocation to a rural school, demonstrates her continued attempts to persist in the face of great adversity. Her experiences also highlight the lost potential of such early career teachers when more experienced teaching colleagues and school leadership overlook the capacity of personal and professional relationships during this transitional phase of teaching.

Emily's experiences and responses of such hardship were captured within a larger study of fourteen early career teachers. Data that were reflective of the range of experiences and responses of the entire cohort have been presented previously (Morrison, 2013) and there are important understandings to be drawn from these other teachers' perspectives. However, the purpose of this paper is to illuminate Emily's personal and professional identity work in response to her lived experience in a way that recognises those elements that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Early Career Teaching and Attrition

The early career phase of teaching is recognised as an immensely challenging time for early career teachers (Ewing & Smith, 2003; B Johnson et al., 2010). This phase of teachers' professional lives is characterised by a time of excessive workload, unfamiliar challenges and vulnerability. This phase is often explained and described as one of survival (Huberman, 1989) and contributes to many early career teachers feeling a sense of reality shock as their perceptions are jolted by the harsh realities of teaching (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002). As a result, many early career teachers leave the profession prematurely, despite their pre-existing and long-held beliefs about their suitability for teaching (Abbott-Chapman, 2005).

In Australia, the attrition rate of early career teachers is regularly reported to be as high as 25-40% in the first 3 years (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002; Ewing & Smith, 2003; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). High attrition of early career teachers is also reported in other parts of the world with similar frequency (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). A body of literature has identified common contributing factors that underpin attrition across geographic boundaries and there are indications that the rate of separation from the profession is growing (Smethem, 2007; Watlington et al., 2004). Australian and international research also indicates that this figure may be as high as 50% within specific areas of the profession by the end of the first five years of teaching (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Macdonald, Hutchins, & Madden, 1994; Owen, Kos, & McKenzie, 2008). This high attrition impacts on the capacity of teaching workforces and results in significant costs to communities more generally, as well as having significant personal costs to the teachers themselves (McKenzie, Kos, Walker, & Hong, 2008; Owen, et al., 2008; Preston, 1997; Smethem, 2007).

The gulf that exists between pre-service teachers' perceptions and early career teachers' experienced realities is considerable and well-documented (Day & Gu, 2010; Department of Education Science and Training, 2002). The seminal work of Lortie (1975) identified the pitfalls of basing assumptions about teaching on the perspectives formed while being a student. This understanding has been furthered by others who have explored the identity work of pre-service teachers with a view to exploring how they conceptualise themselves and their teaching and how they progress their thinking towards more realistic concepts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Chong & Low, 2009; Raffo & Hall, 2006; Sugrue, 1997). One area that continues to challenge early career teachers, due to the separation between perceptions and reality, is that of teaching within rural and remote schools (White, et al., 2011).

Rural and Remote Education and Teaching

There is a significant body of research literature that explores early career teachers' struggles to gain footholds in the profession and what individual attributes or systemic structures enable or inhibit them to do so (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009; B. Johnson, et al., 2010; B. Johnson et al., 2013 - forthcoming; Manuel, 2003). Teaching in rural and remote schools is one such factor that presents early career teachers with a raft of challenges that are unique to those contexts (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Willis, Beutel, Welch, & Willis, 2012). Issues of educational disadvantage and socio-economic disadvantage more broadly mean that students within these schools have a range of educational and social needs that stretch limited school resources and staff, including new appointees (Malloy & Allen, 2007). These additional pressures are recognised as being part of the brief of rural and remote schools to perform a more intricate and diverse role in their communities than their metropolitan counterparts (Anderson & White, 2011). These schools subsequently experience pressures of struggling to recruit sufficient, high-quality staff and to retain them (Anderson & White, 2011; Ramsey, 2000). This is compounded by other inhibitors including schools' varying capacity to offer suitable employment (Pietsch & Williamson, 2010; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). These pressures are reflected in such data as teachers in remote schools having an average of 5-6 years less experience than city or provincially-based teachers (McKenzie, et al., 2008).

These issues of isolation, limited social and professional resources and significant need within their school communities press down upon early career teachers (Sharplin, 2002; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). These newcomers often possess limited skills, knowledge and experiences in relation to teaching and so the additional pressures of teaching in complex contexts are heightened. In addition to the personal and professional isolation that comes from leaving family and friends, early career teachers grapple with learning unfamiliar and broad curricula knowledge, developing pedagogical knowledge and skill and expertise in learning to manage students and classrooms (Jones, 2006). Each of these areas for development present challenges in their own right but combined they produce noteworthy challenges (B. Johnson, et al., 2013 - forthcoming). A common response to this experience is to leave the profession early or to transfer to schools with less concentrations of need (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

How early career teachers respond to the challenges of their early teaching experiences within rural and remote schools, the meaning that they make of this process and the stories they narrate of themselves along the way all provide important insights into what it means to teach in

these settings (Morrison, 2013). Equally, understandings of how the profession may mitigate some of these challenges on their behalf remain a priority (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996).

Teacher Professional Identity and Early Career Teachers

The work of constructing a teacher identity exists within the complexity of contextual, professional and personal challenges of early career teaching. As such, the formation of a teaching self has received intensive research attention for the past several decades for its capacity to positively contribute to this process (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Alsup, 2006; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Britzman, 1986, 1991, 2007; Flores & Day, 2006; Gee, 2000; Sachs, 2001; Zembylas, 2003). This concept has been difficult to adequately define and conceptualise across and within disciplines, with a variety of definitions and perspectives contributing to the discourse (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, et al., 2004). This concept has sometimes been seen as ‘a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself [which] provides a shared set of attributes, values and so on that enable the differentiation of one group from another.’ (Sachs, 2001, p. 153). Watson (2006, p. 510) connects teacher identity to teachers’ actions, behaviours and practice, stating that at the heart of the concept is an assumption that ‘...who we think we are influences what we do...in a sense, professional action is doing professional identity.’ Maclean and White (2007) connect this individual action to the professional contexts in which it occurs, framing teacher professional identity as;

people’s legitimate participation in a profession; their occupation of a professional ‘role’ and ability to control the practices, language, tools and resources associated with that role; the ideals, values and beliefs that lead them to commit to a profession; the unique way in which they personify their professional role as a result of the experiences that have influenced them through their career; and the representation of themselves as a professional that they project both to themselves and to others.’ (2007, pp. 47-48)

Sfard and Prusak (2005, p. 16) further highlight the complexity of adequately capturing this process through such a concept as identity, stating that ‘Metaphorically speaking, identifying is an attempt to overcome the fluidity of change by collapsing a video clip into a snapshot.’ This framing of teacher identity recognises the challenges of adequately defining and operationalizing the concept and the contentions that exist (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, et al., 2004). Within the fields of anthropology, sociology and education, identity has been re-conceptualised time and again but has slowly gained acceptance and coherence (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). This has subsequently produced a common set of understandings from which to view it.

These attempts to articulate this concept illustrate the complexity of what it attempts to explain. As Akkerman and Meijer (2011) explain, teacher identity is dynamic, continuous and discontinuous. It reflects individual teachers’ attempts to incorporate new and diverse understandings of professional lives alongside understandings of themselves as people. The changing, multifarious and responsive nature of teacher identity therefore reflects attempts to align and position oneself to make sense of one’s history while also working towards a preferred future by capitalising on current events (Morrison, 2012).

Teachers often enter the profession with limited knowledge and understanding of the contexts of their first appointments (Abbott-Chapman, 2005). Many also experience inadequate

preparation throughout their initial teacher education programs in crucial areas like classroom and student behaviour management (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011). They come with a range of understandings of teaching and many of these need modifying, extending or abandoning in light of their professional engagement (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Lortie, 1975; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Raffo & Hall, 2006). As a result, early career teachers face specific challenges to constructing a teacher identity that positions them as an emergent professional (Morrison, 2013).

Teacher professional identity offers a way to explore how these teachers experience, respond to and mediate the challenges of their working lives. The subjective responses and the narration of stories to explain this growth provides first-hand accounts of what it is like to live and breathe those formative days. Understanding how these responses and narrative scripts position the newcomers for an emergent trajectory of success, one of distress, or a tenuous space in between (Morrison, 2012) therefore offers others understandings of how to contribute to this process to make it more productive.

Professional Relationships and Their Implications

The importance of relationships between early career teachers and their colleagues has been illustrated as pivotal in their success in navigating this phase (Morrison, 2012, 2013; Peters & Le Cornu, 2007). Recent research into the resilience of early career teachers working in complex contexts, including rural and remote schools, found that for ‘...new teachers to feel confident and competent they needed to be sustained by – and be able to sustain – relationships based on mutual trust, respect, care and integrity.’ (Le Cornu, 2013, p. 2). Consequently, in circumstances where teachers experience the complexities of rural and remote teaching, educational disadvantage and the pressure of the early career phase, interpersonal professional relationships and networks have been associated with resilience and professional traction (B. Johnson, et al., 2013 - forthcoming; Peters & Pearce, 2012) and contribute significantly to their developing teacher identities.

Relationships with principals and school leaders emerge as particularly important to the experiences and responses of early career teachers. By drawing on the work of Wenger (1998), Day and Gu (2010, p. 26) highlight that interconnected and interdependent professional learning supports the needs of teachers, builds conducive learning spaces and strengthens capacity. Consequently, in circumstances where school leaders and principals assume a level of responsibility and care for early career teachers, which incorporates a professional alongside a personal level of care, early career teachers convey a sense of capacity, self-belief and resilience (B. Johnson, et al., 2013 - forthcoming; Le Cornu, 2013; Morrison, 2012; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Peters & Pearce, 2012).

Gu and Day (2007, p. 1304) state that ‘...positive emotions fuel psychological resilience’ and draw on the work of Fredrickson (2004) in order to explain the contributions that positive emotions make to teacher development. Fredrickson (2004, p. 1367) argues that positive emotions not only signify optimal functioning but also produce it. Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions draws attention to the enhanced outcomes in individual’s beliefs, behaviours, choices and responses when they are able to experience these positive emotions. The connection between fulfilling professional relationships and enhanced capacity and wellbeing is one made by Le Cornu (2013, p. 5). In particular, where relationships with school leaders were characterised by ‘...respect, trust, care and integrity...early career teachers

appeared to flourish.’ Conversely, in circumstances where relationships between early career teachers and their school leaders, principals and colleagues are limited or inhibited, a great deal of emotional labour is devoted to navigating this phase.

Emotional labour is a term coined by Hochschild (1979) to describe the emotional experiences that are generated through individual’s working lives. In fulfilling professional roles, individuals are required to perform in particular ways, which includes demonstrating an appropriate range of emotions. Teaching is one such profession where there are high expectations to perform the role in particular ways; however, Zembylas (2003) highlights that teaching is often unpredictable and likens it to an emotional roller-coaster. Regulating emotional displays and responses is therefore a considerable task and the implications of this for the individual can be significant (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) highlight that emotional labour can produce negative outcomes for teachers in the ways that they suppress and dismiss challenging experiences and emotions but it can also produce positive outcomes in the ways that teachers’ emotional labour enhances their self-beliefs and experiences of teaching. The difference between the two often lies in the contexts of this teaching and the expectations held within them (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

These concepts of early career teaching, rural and remote teaching, professional relationships and teacher identity therefore overlap in important ways. Just as each of these concepts are shaped by a multitude of elements, these factors combine to produce particular experiences for early career teachers. They also contribute to a range of responses from them in terms of resilience, wellbeing and identity formation. The following experiences and responses of rural early career teaching illustrate the response to challenges faced on a number of fronts.

Methodology

Due to the nature of the data sought throughout this project, human research ethics approval remained an important component of research design, implementation and dissemination. Complex processes have been employed to de-identify participating schools and teachers. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, as were any colleagues, students or other people named within the research data in order to maintain strict confidentiality for all participants. Data was filed electronically by the pseudonyms only and any personal information about the participants was stored securely and separately from the research data.

In keeping with the socially constructed and relational nature of the concepts discussed above, this research drew on the qualitative traditions of phenomenology, critical ethnography and narrative inquiry. Attention therefore focused on explorations of what was revealed, uncovered and understood through explorations of everyday human experience (Moustakas, 1994) ‘...as it is lived and described by specific individuals in specific circumstances’ (Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997, p.28), cited in Barnacle, 2001, p. vi). While Van Manen (1990) describes this as the *theory of the unique*, Moustakas (1994) highlights that it is exploration of the wholeness of experience and a search for individual’s explanations that provide the rich and stimulating data. This exploration of early career teacher identity was therefore undertaken as a longitudinal qualitative project to capture evolving understandings of teaching and of the teaching self around the central research question of ‘*What are the perceptions and subjective responses of South Australian early career teachers which lead to the construction of professional identities that facilitate early career traction or early exit?*’ Fourteen early career

teachers were recruited from South Australian schools to provide perspectives on this question and these participants remained in the project for the duration of one full school year.

Participating schools were characterised as disadvantaged due to the level of socio-economic disadvantage and high level of need present within their school communities. These schools ranged from inner-metropolitan to isolated rural schools and catered for students across the compulsory years of schooling, from pre-school to senior secondary levels.

Participants drawn from these schools were interviewed up to four times throughout the year of data collection, using semi-structured interview schedules. Initial interviews were conducted on school grounds and were undertaken using a common interview schedule generated prior to data collection. For the second and subsequent interviews a core set of questions was delivered to each participant alongside specific questions for each individual participant, generated from previous interviews. These interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and later transcribed. Some of these later interviews were conducted away from school sites, at the request of the participants. Non-participatory observations were conducted in conjunction with each interview where possible (Patton, 2002). The purpose of these observations of teaching practice was to strengthen understanding of the participants and the ways that their teaching practice reflected their beliefs, perspectives, understandings and responses conveyed through interview data. A research field diary was also kept to make notes and to reflect on the interviews and observations in a timely manner. Research sites were spread across a wide geographic area and so there was a need to record initial responses to the data collected prior to the hours spent travelling home. These notes were used to identify themes present across the interview and observation data and within the coding and analysis processes.

Transcribed interview data and observation notes were analytically coded, whereby the data were systematically examined and interrogated for meaning (Richards, 2009). This occurred between each of the four rounds of data so entries from the field diary provided important ways of clarifying interpretations and meanings assigned to observable events and responses. This then informed the generation of subsequent interview schedules and focus of exploration. QSR Nvivo9 qualitative software was used to analyse the qualitative data for the project. Nodes were generated throughout the data collection phase and were refined through the on-going interaction with the research participants.

Emily was one of four participants who were teaching in a rural school for their first year of teaching. Purposive recruitment of participants took place and Emily was recruited to the project through hearing of the project through a colleague. She was recruited in the first quarter of the school year and the first interview took place within a few weeks of our first correspondence via email.

Findings

The findings of this research highlight the significant influence of relationships on the developing professional identities of early career teachers. The relationships that existed (or did not exist) within this early career phase conveyed deep meaning to the early career teachers about their place within the school and the profession more generally. This was regularly conveyed by the participants through how they saw themselves being perceived by others. Relationships were these early career teachers' measure of whether they were seen as competent. Relationships with school leaders therefore held particular importance because they represented

a judgement from an experienced, knowledgeable and senior colleague. The feelings of care, familiarity, trust and confidence that were expressed through these relationships therefore provided assurances to the newcomers that they were in the right profession and they were capable of fulfilling expectations.

The positive experiences and positive emotions attached to these developing professional and essentially interpersonal relationships therefore provided the circumstances and capacity for optimal performance (Fredrickson, 2004). Where the participants felt aligned to their school leaders they expressed enjoyment in their teaching, reflected on experiences where they had demonstrated confidence to take risks and to push their own professional boundaries through their teaching. They also talked regularly about feeling attached to the broader school community through a sense of belonging. As a result, these relationships and outcomes had positive implications beyond the classroom. Despite career entry being characterised by immense pressure, they conveyed a sense of enjoyment, purpose and agency within their roles accompanied by a sense of positive wellbeing in their personal lives (see Morrison (2013) for a detailed discussion focused on the positive outcomes of these relationships).

In stark comparison to these benefits, where mutual relationships of care, trust, respect and integrity with school leaders were not perceived by Emily, positive emotions and the belief in herself as a competent teacher soon deteriorated. For Emily, a significant amount of time and emotional labour was devoted to questions of why these relationships had not prospered. Early interactions with colleagues, and the deputy principal in particular, were constructive and gave her the initial impression that she might expect a level of care and support from colleagues. As time went on, Emily's experiences of early career challenges and a subsequent depletion of personal resources highlighted to her that these relationships of care and support were non-existent. Emily's confidence to seek support and guidance from these leaders was rare. She sought to minimise risk-taking and concealed anything that she thought conveyed a sense of her being less than competent. This had implications for how she responded to and reflected on classroom experiences and served to heighten her sense of isolation and ultimately distress. The following excerpts convey Emily's response to such experiences and demonstrate her feelings of distress, which permeated her professional and personal lives by the end of her first year of teaching.

Emily: Distressed Teacher Identity

Emily entered teaching with long-held beliefs about herself as a teacher. Despite initially using her very high Tertiary Entrance Ranking for university to study 1st year Journalism, her desire to be a teacher dominated her thoughts and pulled her back to Education. These beliefs about herself as a teacher were established throughout childhood and were structured around the qualities and attributes that she associated with observed teachers. These beliefs included teachers being caring and nurturing people who possess the capacity to build strong relationships with their students. Some of these attributes were what first attracted Emily to teaching and became the signifiers to her that she was suitable for teaching;

I had some really good teachers when I was in primary school, [who] kind of inspired me [to believe that] maybe I do have the qualities of a teacher. (Emily, 17 May)

Emily started off the year positively, with lots of energy and enthusiasm for her new role. She saw herself as fitting the mould of a teacher. There were initial feelings of alignment with and support from members of the school leadership team and from teaching colleagues. These supports combined to make Emily feel very positive about her early experiences within the school;

Very supportive, my deputy principal is just fantastic even though she is really busy. She is always very approachable. I don't feel there is anything I couldn't ask her and then the other teachers like...I just feel really well supported.
(Emily, 17 May)

In the initial stages of the year the unstructured and informal nature of support and professional dialogue was sufficient for Emily to continue to feel supported and capable of fulfilling her teaching role. The contributions of teaching colleagues and her deputy principal initially met Emily's professional needs as she encountered the initial challenges of teaching. Behaviour management ideas, organisational tips and identifying learning resources within the school were all common offerings that fulfilled her immediate needs. As evident in the following excerpt, Emily sought assistance if and when she required it;

I always go to the deputy principal if I need any support or anything to do with the kids and how they're doing. She is really approachable and really helpful. She has lots of different strategies that you can try. She is good in that she will give you ideas. (Emily, 17 May)

By Term 2 the ad-hoc support from colleagues and school leadership were starting to fall short of Emily's professional needs however. This occurred as she encountered more of the complexities of teaching. This was also compounded by Emily's professional context, where she was teaching and living in a country setting away from her family and within a stand-alone classroom in an isolated corner of the school grounds. In the absence of any formalised support, induction program or collegial mentoring, Emily was beginning to show signs of struggling to cope with what she saw as an overwhelming workload. Her response was to take a lot of work home and work late into each night and regularly work right through the weekends. This was an unanticipated feature of her new role and was an early revelation of the gap that existed between what she anticipated teaching to be like and how she experienced it;

I don't think anything can fully prepare you for what it's going to be like [...] Just balancing everything, just even school and home and everything you have to do outside of school; that is challenging. (Emily, 17 May)

These experiences resulted in an increased inability to manage the pressures that Emily was under. As she reflected on how she interpreted these pressures Emily conveyed that she did not often know where to direct her attention first. Emily's approach was to therefore devote more time and energy to her teaching outside of school in the hope that this would ease the pressure. This had a negative and cumulative effect however, of making it harder for her to function within school and also how she functioned outside of it, as she lamented:

I find it hard some days to really switch off from it. It is just always there [...] some days I will just go home and things will be just going through my head, like what you can I do better and just ideas that I have. They just don't go away [...] Sometimes I am at home and I think 'Oh, I could go and do this' and because I live close to the school I tend to come over here but after I just get really tired and I can't switch off. (Emily, 17 May)

Emily was aware of how her responses to these experiences were starting to affect her personally as well. Her inability to switch off from the pressures of teaching was draining and isolating. For example, Emily identified a deteriorating sleep routine, excessive time spent on

teaching tasks away from school and her inability to meet the challenges of her day as indicators of how she was inadequately responding to her work. She was also starting to recognise changes in her moods and how she coped and responded to life experiences more generally. As can be seen below, her strategy for managing some of this stress was to run it out at the gym;

I try...I started going to the gym and that helps me [...] that's probably the thing that helps me the most [...] just helps me to switch off otherwise I will go home and I will be like 'Oh, what can I do, I can do this, that and the other' and you can't do that because you just wear yourself out... (Emily, 17 May)

Alongside strategies for managing her own stress, Emily also sought opportunities to share in the experiences of others and compare them to her own. Within her professional context this rarely happened, so the following reflection about when it did occur conveyed its inherent value to Emily;

I don't know why, talking to other teachers just makes you feel a bit better and I guess then you feel like you're not the only one. Like, even if I just listen to Danielle about what her troubles are you can relate a little bit [...] and you think 'Oh yeah, I don't feel so bad.' I think it's important [...] feeling part of the team and being supported. (Emily, 17 May)

This opportunity to reflect on other teachers' experiences occurred during an afternoon where Emily reconnected with university friends that had entered teaching at the same time as her. The opportunity to debrief with other teachers was the result of Emily arranging a social gathering with her university peers on a weekend when she would be back at her parents' house. The effort and organisation required to debrief with other teachers highlighted her need for it, captured in her realisation that she was 'not the only one' to have these challenging experiences. It was also a glimpse into the extent of the professional isolation that she was experiencing within her school.

at uni that's one thing we did well was we did learning circles and things where you just have a debrief... it is good just to talk to someone just to get it off your chest (Emily, 17 May)

A lack of engagement with colleagues and school leaders in particular was apparent in Emily's reflections on the feedback that she had received at this early stage of her teaching. Emily taught in an isolated transportable classroom at the rear of the school grounds. This physical isolation reflected the professional isolation she felt. Initially, Emily reported being in contact with other colleagues but this changed dramatically throughout the year. Irregular opportunities to reflect on her experiences with others and an absence of feedback in relation to her experiences stood out to her as confronting. This was unsettling for Emily, as she craved authentic feedback on how she was progressing, as she pointed out;

People come in and out but they are not really in here for long enough to really comment. [My deputy principal] just gave me all positive stuff but she hasn't really focused on my teaching [...] I suppose she hasn't seen a lot. (Emily, 17 May)

The impact of this professional isolation and an absence of meaningful input from others was captured by the emotive responses in a follow-up interview, were Emily stated;

I'm just trying to find ways to cope myself I guess because that's all you can do, like when you're in a school like this where there's not...they can't offer you anything so you just have to cope as best you can. (Emily, 27 October)

When Emily was asked about how she was coping with this situation, she responded by saying 'Leaving...like whenever I feel a little bit down, I just think it won't be long now and I

can leave!’ (Emily, 27 October). Consequently, the impact on Emily was cumulative, as she pointed out;

I suppose I’m probably not ok. I’m ok but I don’t feel like...it’s hard to talk about. I feel like I’m just scraping through. It does take quite a toll on you I think. (Emily, 27 October)

Throughout the year a sense of isolation grew to dominate Emily’s reflections about her experiences. The abovementioned absence of input and guidance from others compounded her sense of isolation and further separated her from them, where she stated

Like no one really checks up on you in a professional kind of way...I can’t say that I have really built professional relationships...everyone is kind of out for themselves in a way. (Emily, 8 December)

As a result, Emily was left feeling like she was struggling to gain a foothold in the school and the profession. Consequently, as she struggled on alone, her experiences de-stabilised and challenged her sense of herself as a teacher. This also contributed to Emily being less inclined to seek support from her principal or colleagues.

As indicated by Emily’s earlier comments about ‘probably not [being] okay’ and ‘just scraping through’, by mid-way through her first year of teaching Emily felt exhausted and disillusioned. She was driving home to spend each weekend with her parents and so each working week became harder and harder to face. The support of and interaction with her parents provided great comfort, but also stood in stark contrast to the lack of support she felt existed within her school. This therefore came to a head when she reached breaking point and could not bring herself to return to work after a weekend at home, as she recalled:

I was supposed to go back to school the next day and I was just at Mum and Dad’s and I don’t know...I just couldn’t stop crying, I just snapped. I just didn’t want to come back. Sometimes when you go away, you just don’t want to come back because you feel like when you’re away, it’s an escape and you don’t have to think about it and you think ‘I have to come back to reality, how am I going to do it?’ [...] Mum was really worried because I just couldn’t stop crying. (Emily, 27 October)

Following this experience, Emily returned to school the very next day. Despite obvious and articulated signs that she was at crisis point and struggling to cope in her role, little help was offered or provided. In response to the crisis the deputy principal commented to Emily that “You always seem to be doing fine!” and suggested that she try sleeping tablets to help her sleep. Emily saw this response as inadequate but reflective of a bigger issue of a lack of support available, as she commented;

I’m not going to go around whinging and looking unhappy. That’s just how I cope. So [the deputy] is well aware but I still feel like she just doesn’t have the time, like she’s so stretched. Unless I look like I’m not coping she won’t [offer support]. (Emily, 27 October)

In response, Emily requested that she make use of additional non-instruction time that she was entitled to as an early career teacher. She saw this as a way of easing some of the pressure on her and as a way of accessing some collegial support during school time. Despondently, Emily recalled her conversation with the deputy principal;

She listened and she was really good to talk to but I knew they just don’t have the funding. They just don’t have the money. Well, that’s what they say anyway. [...] I’ve asked for...I guess I don’t even know what I want. I’ve asked for the extra non-contact time but they just don’t have the money for it. (Emily, 27 October)

A constricting school budget meant that Emily could not be provided with additional supports that she was entitled to as an early career teacher (including a provision for half a day of additional non-instruction time per fortnight for teachers in their first year of full-time employment). Emily also shared that no other supports were offered and that she simply went back into the classroom as though the situation had not occurred. This meant that the circumstances that brought Emily to this breaking point remained. Emily also conveyed that her colleagues and school leadership made no concerted effort to support her in responding to it. This experience further heightened her distress and led to her concealing her struggles and further withdrawing from colleagues and the school.

At this point Emily articulated that instead of being isolated and cut off she needed opportunities to be around other teachers. She saw a need to be influenced by others, to be contributing to the profession in collaboration with others, and, for her to belong to the teaching community more broadly. What she expressed was a desire to identify with her profession and for the profession to be identifying with her. Emily perceived this lack of relationships with colleagues negatively and this then contributed to a questioning her place within the profession. Consequently, her unfulfilled need to connect with others through her work began to emerge. There were evident signs of distress in her personal life and within her sense of who she was as a teacher;

I want the support, but I also want people I can work alongside who I can feel inspired by, get ideas from, who I can give ideas to. I'm keen to do that, but there's no one here because I am here on my own. I feel like in a different school things could be quite different. So I feel like I could try that, I feel like I will try that, but maybe not immediately. (Emily, 27 October)

Here Emily points out that she would not be teaching at the start of the following year. She had decided that teaching could be different at a different school but she was not able to commit to another year of teaching at this stage. As a result of her experiences and her responses to them, a shift occurred in how Emily saw herself and her role. Her enthusiasm for teaching and the profession was sharply deteriorating and it was being replaced by a concentration on survival. Statements like "What's the point in the end? You're not going to be doing anyone any good." (27 October) became more common. From this point on Emily struggled to find the strength to face each day and her beliefs about herself as a teacher had been irrevocably altered. Emily explained:

I find it hard to get excited about coming to school or to 'just feel' genuinely. I feel like it's an act a lot of the time. Sometimes you have moments...but a lot of the time I think it's an act and you really have to psych yourself up. (Emily, 27 October)

The resultant outcome in terms of Emily's teacher identity was one of distress. A disconnection from colleagues and a lack of identification with them meant that Emily felt further and further isolated to the point where she no longer saw herself as a part of the broader teaching community within her school. Equally, she struggled to see herself within another school any time soon. Her distressed sense of teacher identity was being compounded by her continuing experiences of struggle and she was counting the days until the end of her contract. A sense of resignation characterised the following response;

It's hard to feel inspired by other people because I'm not really working with anyone else, so you think 'Why am I doing all this if no one's even noticing and no one really cares what I do anyway?' (Emily, 27 October)

Instead of pursuing her dream of being a teacher, her priority had become fulfilling the obligations of her contract until the end of the school year and then returning to her family as

soon as possible. Emily had therefore undergone a transformation in relation to how she saw herself as a teacher. Her plans to pursue a continuing teaching career were now in tatters and she had refused employment offers to teach in her current school for the following year. This transformation came as a result of significant struggle and was not a preferred outcome. Consequently, Emily made many references to her previously held beliefs about herself as a teacher and the ways that her conceptions about teaching and herself had changed. Her teacher identity was now distressed, which she conveyed by saying;

when I started here I thought this is just the start of my teaching and I will just continue to do that and now I think probably not. I just couldn't keep doing that for the next 20-30 years. I would definitely consider different pathways whereas I never really thought that. I just thought that once I get my degree, that's what I'll do.

(Emily, 8 December)

Unsurprisingly, by the end of her first year of teaching Emily had radically shifted how she saw herself as a teacher. Through her experiences, most of her assumptions about teaching had been challenged and her teacher identity had been fractured. This was in stark contrast to her beliefs of only a few months earlier. At career entry Emily had viewed teaching as a life-long proposition, and this belief had been consolidated throughout the formative years of her development.

The magnitude of this swing was captured in the following statement where Emily said that she was ready to throw teaching away;

I don't identify myself as a teacher. That's not part of my identity yet. I think that takes a while because I think you get to a point where it is part of your identity and you couldn't do anything else but for me I could easily throw it away... like it's just something that I can put on and throw away at the moment so I kind of haven't reached that point and I don't know when you do. I could either take it or leave it.

(Emily, 8 December)

Linked to this radical shift in beliefs about herself as a teacher was the unsurprising feeling that her life was 'completely out of balance.' (8 December). Her long-held beliefs about herself as a teacher had been eroded by a year of challenging experiences. Also, her commitment to qualifying to teach meant that an investment of four years of study now seemed misdirected. Equally, her experiences of teaching had had a detrimental effect to how she was coping with life in general, as she noted:

For me the lows outweigh the highs. Even though there are highs, for some reasons I think I have been affected quite severely because when things happen that should be a high I just don't feel very happy about it. Like when a parent comes to you and is just praising me it just doesn't seem to affect me the way that it should. (Emily, 8 December)

Discussion

Emily demonstrated unpreparedness for the contextual challenges that she faced in her first year of teaching. In this way, Emily was similar to the other thirteen participants in this study as they each grappled with the combined complexities of early career teaching and teaching in educationally disadvantaged schools. Consequently, Emily and the rest of the cohort resembled most other early career teachers too, as the gulf between perception and reality has long been understood as sizeable (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002; Lortie, 1975).

The widely accepted and established recognition of early career teaching being a time of significant challenge (Abbott-Chapman, 2005; Ewing & Smith, 2003; B. Johnson, et al., 2013 - forthcoming; Le Cornu, 2013; Peters & Le Cornu, 2007), and that rural teaching adds significant complexity to career entry (Lock et al., 2009; Sharplin, 2002; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999), both compound readings of Emily's experiences. For her, these unanticipated experiences of challenge and distress were life-changing. Yet for a profession that already holds comprehensive understandings of the challenges that await newcomers, a perplexing set of questions is raised about why more is not done to mediate them.

Recent policy developments in South Australia include the provision of additional non-instruction time for teachers in their first year of full-time employment across public and independent systems (Catholic Education South Australia, 2011; Department of Education and Children's Services, 2011; Department of Education and Children's Services, 2010). This additional allocation of time recognises the need for additional collaboration and interaction between school leaders, teaching colleagues and career entrants. In circumstances where teachers like Emily are recruited to schools with significant added complexity, the provision of such supports is vital if we are to move towards sustainable and productive recruitment and retention of quality teachers in rural areas (Lock, et al., 2009). The limited resources that rural and remote schools have at their disposal, witnessed in Emily's accounts of being told that her school could not afford her release time, is therefore a significant factor affecting the progress and success of not only early career teachers but their students as well.

Emily's response to these challenges conveys a sense of her teacher identity being constructed dialectically and dialogically in a 'figured world' of teaching (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte Jr, & Cain, 1998) that had not eventuated. Her construction of a figured world of teaching, where colleagues and school leaders were closely connected within their professional/social environments, did not reflect her reality. Collaboration, relationships of care and support, guidance and mentorship were all largely non-existent and Emily was left to navigate her experiences in isolation.

The challenge of working within a school where it is difficult to break into confronts early career teachers' perceptions of teachers and teaching; and this is a factor that Emily faced. This reflects what Pearce and Morrison (2011) found, as teachers' sense of agency and identity is confronted by challenge. The most notable challenge facing Emily was the way that her professional identity was shaped by the lack of her interpersonal relationships with colleagues. Emily talked positively about herself as a teacher early in the year and was optimistic about where she was heading. She talked fondly about the initial interaction she had had with colleagues and school leadership and there was a clear sense of optimism and hope. As the year progressed, and as Emily struggled to establish the types of relationships and connections with colleagues and school leaders that she had hoped for, she questioned her place within the school. Over time, this self-doubt expanded to incorporate her evolving sense of self as a teacher - her teacher identity. Her capacity to respond to challenges, to overcome them and to see a realistic and positive way through these challenges was hamstrung by insecurities about whether she could in fact meet the challenges at all.

Part of this challenge reflects what has been known about career entry for a long time. Lortie (1975) identified the challenges stemming from observations of teaching being from the position of a student. Many of the assumptions that pre-service and early career teachers hold of teaching fail to appreciate what goes on within the lives of teachers out of sight of students.

Having an appreciation of needing to contribute to professional relationships and also having the capacity to find time to do this in addition to her other roles may have been a step too far for Emily.

At these important junctures, where Emily was responding to the experiences of her school, students and community as an early career teacher, Emily often focused on her isolation from others. At the beginning of the year the isolation was from family that she had left behind when relocating to her new school. Her initial optimism and energy carried her through these experiences as she looked to the prospect of colleagues becoming friends and to them being her new support network. As the year progressed, and as the support of others was left wanting, Emily sought the support of her family once again to help her through the hardships she encountered.

It is reasonable to anticipate that inexperienced teachers who relocate to rural and remote schools to begin their careers will need to establish relationships with colleagues and school leaders. In the absence of established support networks, and in the presence of considerable school-based pressures and challenges, such relationships are crucial to navigating these early challenges successfully, and in ways that moderate the emotional peaks and troughs that characterise teaching (Intrator, 2006).

Emily was able to articulate her need to connect to others and to build relationships. She was able to reflect on where this had and had not been possible and what the subsequent outcomes for her were. Through being able to follow Emily throughout her first year of teaching, alongside a cohort of thirteen others, it was clear that the absence of meaningful and productive relationships with others in her professional environment had significant and detrimental effects on her professional identity.

As the literature suggests (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011), Emily's professional identity was highly dynamic, responsive and reflective of her responses to experience. She explained her sense of isolation and abandonment as an indicator that she did not 'fit' within the school or community and perhaps even the profession. She questioned her long-held beliefs about herself as someone well-suited to teaching and was now looking to leave the profession.

How Emily made sense of her experiences reflects how Baumeister and Newman (1994) explains how individuals narrate their own experiences and weave them into a story of the self. The story that Emily narrated throughout her first year of teaching was of someone who sat outside of the group, a teacher on the fringe and one that others did not commit time or energy to connecting with or supporting. Left unmitigated, this story unsettled Emily and encouraged her to withdraw further. Her challenges of early career teaching became her challenges alone, and her ways of coping with them were individual ones, rather than collective solutions.

Conclusion

Recruiting early career teachers to rural and educationally complex contexts must be approached with an understanding of how complex this work is for those entering the profession. It must also be done with an appreciation that these experiences have profound implications for those that are recruited. The effects contribute significantly to the formation of teacher identity and to the individual's wellbeing generally. The motivations for entering teaching, including the desire to be a part of the teaching community through close interpersonal relationships, are an essential part of how these newcomers interpret their experiences. The need to relate, connect,

trust and rely on others influences why teachers teach and what they hope to gain in return. Consequently, interpersonal relationships enhance professional and personal capacity and provide enhanced opportunities for growth. It is therefore incumbent on those who recruit, support, mentor and teach alongside early career teachers to foster those opportunities.

Despite the multiplicity of teacher professional identity and the subjective nature of its construction, an aim of early career teaching should be the formation of a teacher identity that makes sense to the individual, supports the teacher to navigate early challenges with confidence and purpose and is connected to a continuing sense of oneself as a teacher. For those of us who prepare pre-service teachers, and those of us who employ early career teachers, our aim should be to prepare and support them in ways that make this transition possible and productive and to assume some collective responsibility for what happens at this crucial phase of work and life.

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