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Hyper-performativity and early career teachers: Interrogating teacher subjectivities in neoliberal educational assemblages

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This paper explores the hyper-performative expectations of early career teachers (ECTs) in the context of neoliberal education assemblages. The need to support and retain beginning teachers is a salient issue in the context of troubling rates of teacher attrition. The study explores how ECTs perceive teacher identities in response to national standards. Our research revealed that ECTs held concerning conceptions of 'quality teaching' that are largely constructed through discourses of competition and job insecurity. ECT subjectivities were heavily influenced excessive extra-curricular hours, high stress environments, and performative school cultures. This paper concludes that hyper-performative expectations of ECTs and insecure patterns of employment contribute to teacher attrition.

Keywords: neoliberalism; early career teachers; attrition; becoming; Braidotti; Butler; Deleuze and Guattari

Introduction

This paper analyses how early career teachers (ECTs) construct teacher subjectivities in an aggressive age of hyper-performativity (Macfarlane, 2019). Alarming rates of teacher attrition have plagued the profession in recent years (Hackman & Morath, 2018; Tickle, 2018), leading to a focus in research on teacher quality, readiness, resilience, induction, and school culture (Clandinin et al., 2015; Curran et al., 2109; Dupriez et al., 2016; Glazer, 2018; Trent, 2019; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Recently, the Australian Federal Education Minister, Alan Tudge, announced a review into initial teacher education in order to 'attract and select high-quality candidates into the teaching profession' in the face of 'declining numbers of top students choosing to study education' (Tudge, 2021, p. 1). This article seeks to add to the literature a consideration of how ECTs perceive teacher subjectivity in the context of neoliberal education assemblages. What normalised discourses and constructions of the good teacher do they see embodied in their colleagues when they begin teaching? How do their embodied experiences of teaching compare with their expectations? Could this enfleshed experience of teacher subjectivity be a contributing factor to ECT attrition?

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We utilised a critical neo-materialist understanding of subjectivity based on the work of Braidotti (2013), Butler (1990), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2012), to interpret our data, as together, these conceptual paradigms foreground interconnectivity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity.

Teaching was once considered a long-term secure career. However, in the past decade, up to 50% of ECTs in Australia leave the profession within the first five years (Stroud, 2018). These numbers are echoed across the western world (Hackman & Morath, 2018; Trent, 2019), resulting in teaching being labelled 'a temporary job' in the teacher education nomenclature (Glazer, 2018, p. 62). According to the most recent Commonwealth of Australia 'Staff in Australia's Schools' (SiAS) survey, a heavy workload and lack of support are the main reasons ECTs leave teaching (McKenzie et al., 2014, p. 9). This is exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of early career teachers are employed under insecure casual contracts (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Initial teacher education courses in Australia (undergraduate and postgraduate) have a completion rate of 65% (AITSL, 2019, p. 5). The four-year Bachelor of Education or two-year Master of Teaching degrees are comprised of education theory, specialist subject knowledge, and professional practice. Australian undergraduate teachers complete approximately seven months of professional practice in schools in that time. This 'internship' model gives undergraduates a solid foundation, analogous to other professions such as medicine and nursing. Yet nurse turnover rates in Australia are 15% (Roche et al., 2014) and only 9% of physicians departed from clinical practice, mainly due to burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (Jackson et al., 2018; Rittenhouse et al., 2004). This raises the question, why are teacher attrition rates so high in comparison to other demanding occupations? It is widely acknowledged that early career teachers enter the profession with enthusiastic outlooks and a desire to be outstanding teachers (Buchanan et al., 2013; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Trent, 2019; Watt, Richardson, & Wilkins, 2014). As the Australian Federal Minister for Education, Alan Tudge (2021), notes, 'the quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor influencing student achievement' (p. 1). Yet despite accumulating a debt of between AUD $114,000 and $240,500 (Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2020) many ECTs do not survive their first year of teaching, as one of our research participants highlights:

> The teacher before me just up and quit. It was her first year in the job and she decided after four weeks, 'I'm not doing this', and she left. (Annabelle, ECT)

Literature review

The research literature on teacher attrition in Australia reflects what is happening on the international stage. Factors such as insecure employment, lack of support, heavy workloads, and a dissatisfaction with professional relationships and career opportunities influence ECT attrition rates (Harfitt, 2015; Kelly et al., 2019; Trent, 2019). The 2014 Staff in Australian Schools (SiAS) report supported these findings, highlighting the two most salient factors: workload (58%) and insufficient recognition/reward (51%) (McKenzie et al., 2014). Salary levels and insecure employment are factors that exacerbate the aforementioned reasons for teacher attrition (AITSL, 2019; Kelly et al., 2019; Mason & Matas, 2015; Mayer et al., 2015; Plunket & Dyson, 2011). Furthermore, whilst there is a dearth of literature on Arts

teachers' attrition rates per se, these teachers are particularly susceptible to stress and burnout because of extra-curricular workloads and the devaluing of the Arts in neoliberal school assemblages (Lambert et al., 2017).

In recent years, research has directed the discourse of teacher attrition towards understanding the process of becoming a teacher through the shaping of identity (Kelly et al., 2019; Long et al., 2012). By foregrounding subjectivity (identity) and its interrelationship with school culture (belonging), we can explore many possibilities for supporting ECTs in their transition from students to teachers. Research highlights that individualistic school cultures become a barricade to belonging for ECTs (Mason & Matas, 2015). Furthermore, lack of access to formal support compounds ECTs' sense of isolation (Kelly et al., 2019). Normative discourses on good teachers and constructions of quality teaching based on standardised frameworks have been found to be problematic (Mason & Matos, 2015; Tuytens & Devos, 2014; Vagi et al., 2019). As Vagi et al. (2019) note, constructions of teacher quality and their relationship to ECT survival and retention are not as clear as once thought. Teacher attrition is a complex intersection of social, human, structural and positive psychological capital (Mason & Matos, 2015).

Data collection

It is at this juncture in the discussion that our study seeks to contribute to the discourse. We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 27 early career Arts teachers in Western Australia from a variety of independent and Catholic secondary schools in 2018. The schools range from low to high socio-economic backgrounds and are situated within the metropolitan area of Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. The participants represent a diverse range of ethnic identy, gender and sexual orientation. The average age of the participants was 23, and the majority were in their first two years of teaching. Participants were selected through a snowball sampling process (Browne, 2005), beginning with contacting a small number of graduates from the university where the authors currently teach in the School of Education. These subjects recruited further participants from among their acquittances and colleagues. Semi-structured interviews, ≥ one hour, were conducted with small groups. Pseudonyms were given to all participants and their places of work to protect their identity. The focus of our research into ECTs is becoming and belonging.

Theory

Theoretically, we utilised a neo-materialist, rhizomatic mapping of the embodied process of ECT teacher identity formation (becoming). Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2012) devised the concept of the rhizome – a subterranean plant stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes – as a lens through which research can be mapped. This pivotal concept in their work posits an 'acentered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2012, p. 23). Thus, rhizomatic thinking foregrounds connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Rhizomatics is an emerging philosophical approach to exploring the experiences of beginning teachers in contemporary educational research (Clarke & McPhie, 2016; Hordvik et al., 2019; Marble, 2012; Masny, 2013; Strom & Martin, 2017; Villas et al., 2019). This conceptual framework rejects linear conceptions of teacher development, and allows

for multiple entry and exit points in the interpretation and representation of data. Our research is rhizomatic because it foregrounds social complexity and multiplicity, rather than viewing teachers as autonomous agents.

By exploring discourses, teacher bodies and their connectivity to neoliberal assemblages, this approach maps the ebbs and flows of 'becoming teacher' in contemporary education. The concept of becoming is central to Deleuze's work and is the foundation of our understanding of teacher subjectivity. He states, 'There is no being beyond becoming, nothing beyond multiplicity … multiplicity is the affirmation of unity; becoming is the affirmation of being' (Deleuze, 1986, p. 22). We therefore describe the non-linear, ongoing, and fluid process of ECT identity formation as becoming teacher.

Critical posthumanist neo-materialism has been influenced by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1977), resulting in a focus on relational ontologies, heterogeneity and multiplicity (Barad, 2014; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2008). At the ontological level, Barad (2014) notes –

> Matter itself is diffracted, dispersed, threaded through with materializing and sedimented effects of iterative reconfigurings of spacetimemattering, traces of what might yet (have) happen(ed). Matter is a sedimented intra-acting, an open field. Sedimenting does not entail closure. (p. 168)

Likewise, Braidotti (2013) conceptualises subjectivity as –

> a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, to say, wilful choice and unconscious drives. (p. 18)

Utilising these posthumanist, neo-materialist conceptualisations of subjectivity to illuminate our data we explored the psychological, social, emotional and physical 'infoldings of the flesh' that normalising school apparatuses have on ECTs (Merleau-Ponty 1945, cited in Haraway, 2008, p. 249).

Utilising the concepts of the rhizome and becoming, our research interrogates what it is to be a becoming teacher connected to neoliberal assemblages in the current milieu. We pose two questions: how do ECTs experience 'teacher' subjectivity, and what impact does this have on their bodies? Thus, using the rhizomatic nodes of the existing body of knowledge, we construct a map of early teacher becomings. Our study's central node of one rhizome is becoming. From this node we examine the offshoots out of the many roots that a rhizome grows. Our first offshoot is the enfleshed working environments of ECTs and how insecure employment impacts their mental health. Secondly, we explore the offshoot of belonging and school culture through the lens of subjective materiality. Our third offshoot is how ECTs develop the identities in response to hyper-performative school assemblages and educational discourses. Our exploration of becoming teachers maps the embodiment of the teacher identity through the interconnection of these offshoots – these 'infolding of others on to one another … the knots we call beings' (Haraway, 2008, p. 249). This embedded and embodied approach to ECT identities/becomings knits discourse with the material world (Braidotti, 2013). As Haraway (2008) notes, 'embodiment is always a verb', an 'ongoing, dynamic, situated and historical' becoming (p. 249).

Findings

Offshoot one: enfleshed becomings and insecure employment

Currently in Australia, research shows that one quarter of ECTs will be engaged in insecure employment with an apparent lack of support (Kelly et al., 2018). All of the ECT participants in our study were on temporary, casual or short-term contracts in their first three years of teaching. Their insecure employment contracts meant they did not know if they had a position from one term to the next. This trend is consistent with national employment statistics, with less than half of Australians in full-time paid employment (Carney & Stanford, 2018). Fewer than 50% of all initial teacher education graduates in Australia find full-time work in schools, and those who find jobs are mostly employed on a fixed-term or casual basis (QILT, 2020). Furthermore, it is not clear how often temporary contracts actually lead to secure employment. The impacts of these insecure employment conditions are enfleshed, felt both without and within the body as affects – that increase or diminish the body's power. Insecure employment conditions fuelled competitive behaviours between ECTs. Teachers' identities reflected a state of anxiety about employment, as Ross and Bella's comments highlight:

> Ross: Because I'm on a contract, basically you're just doing things so that when it comes to applying for your job again you can say, 'I do this!' It's actually one of my biggest worries as a beginning teacher – staying employed.
>
> Bella: Yes, that whole 'every year not knowing if you had a job'. There'd be times where it'd be the last day of school and the last hour, they'd be telling me yes or no.

Max describes the process of becoming teacher in a competitive environment:

> Max: It comes from trying to suck up to the boss to get a job. There was so much backstabbing and dobbing and running to the boss to show what I did and, 'Look how good I am, my kids [students] achieved this.' I don't really like playing those games.
>
> Author: So, it's a competition then amongst the staff?
>
> Max: Big time, to win their contract. It's really nasty.

As Max, Ross and Bella highlight, rather than finding a sense of belonging within a school, beginning teachers begin to view other ECTs as their competition. This had a detrimental impact on their mental health.

> Max: Being on a contract is very stressful. And playing that game. That last year out in Lowlands High it was so stressful when you know your contract's coming up and you don't know what's happening … you need to be a bit careful and because I'm new, I don't want to say the wrong thing and jeopardise a permanent position.

Desperate to secure employment in teaching, some participants accepted part-time positions, but found themselves working full-time hours.

> Jacinta: I'm 0.6 but I'm there full-time. Even mornings that I'm supposed to be off, I come in and do prep. It's challenging and I try to have one day on the weekend to myself.
>
> Jude: They pay me a 0.6 load, but they get a full-time teacher out of me. When I first started at the school, I was told that there's a musical going on and that I have to direct it.

Many ECTs we interviewed, such as Jacinta and Jude, expressed a reluctance to confront management about their employment conditions for fear of jeopardising their jobs. They felt pressured into taking on extra-curricular activities despite not being financially remunerated. Unscrupulous employers may view this style of management as an exemplar of productivity, however, as Jude went on to explain, 'The person I replaced moved to a school nearby, and she has been really supportive of me more than any of my school staff'. Jude went on to explain, that because management had promised full-time work yet 'nothing has been put into writing' she felt she had reached 'the point [of realisation] that I'm just being used and exploited'. This dissatisfaction with professional relationships, lack of support and insecure employment is associated with an intention to leave the teaching profession (Kelly et al., 2018).

In addition to having insecure employment, working in the Arts is precarious at the best of times in neoliberal education assemblages. Recently, the former Australian Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, raised the student contribution fees for many university arts courses by 113% in order to 'incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices' (Tehan, 2020, p. 1). The impact of high stakes testing and the derision of the Arts in neoliberal discourses has led to a reduction in the uptake of arts subjects in schools because they are not perceived as being 'academic' (Lambert et al., 2017). Jude, who works part-time, notes how her workload is impacted by the pressure to build up the numbers in her arts subject.

> Jude: We're trying to build the numbers up in drama. Next term, we start the musical which is three after-school rehearsals a week. That will run for the rest of the year and the musical will take place this time next year. Past productions have been very elaborate, high-end and it's expected it will be the same quality. Besides that, I run an inter-house drama competition that ran in Term One. I've also coordinated the whole school inter-house drama competition.

The ECTs in our study were often the sole teacher of their subject (drama or dance) within an Arts department. Inexperience and insecure work conditions meant that ECTs were frequently taken advantage of by being asked to take on more students or combine year groups in their classes. Combining classes is frequently used as a tool by management to cut staffing costs.

> Jude: In our department, there is no sit-down meeting. I've not had a meeting with my Head of Department where he's asked where I'm at or how my classes are going. It's conversations on the hop, at the photocopier asking important questions. He asked about whether we might mix the Year 7s next year, but I don't want to short cut myself out of classes.
>
> Ross: I take the 11/12, General and ATAR [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank – university bound] courses. Because the General and ATAR are combined, I also have a whole range of middle school classes just to get me to be full time.
>
> Luna: I have ended up with the 11s and the 12s and I've got combined ATAR and General classes with 17 and 19 kids a piece. It's quite hectic.

The adverse effect on student achievement from combined, overloaded and 'hectic' classes did not appear to concern school management, perhaps because, like the former Australian Minister of Education, they did not view the Arts as 'job relevant' (Tehan, 2020). Performing Arts teachers repeatedly expressed their frustration that Arts subjects were not valued in their schools.

> Angela: It's very hard working in a school that doesn't really value drama education.

| Melinda: | Our Careers Advisor doesn't support drama either. When kids are going into upper school and are trying to decide what marks they need to get into university, the Career Advisor is telling them not to do drama. 'You won't have a career in it. Do science instead.' |
| Jaxon: | Dance is even worse. If drama is thought of like that then dance is the arse end. Culture change is needed. |

Even if ECTs are employed full-time, they feel pressure to work excessive extra-curricular hours to justify their existence. Angela explained that she frequently worked an extra 30 hours per week – unpaid – in addition her usual 40 hour working week. This resulted in her leaving the school at the end of the term.

| Angela: | In first term I was at a different school. We had a production on that term which was full-on. We were there afterschool and evenings on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and all day on Saturdays. We started week one and the production was week nine. It was very stressful. We were all there to 10 pm each night with rehearsals. |

Working a 70-hour week did not secure Angela a permanent position. For many ECTs, securing tenure can be a lengthy process that can take years.

| Ross: | One of my drama colleagues, who has been teaching for about 10 years and much of that time at this school, only recently got a permanent position. For the past eight years she has had to apply for her job every year. |

Offshoot two: belonging and school culture

The need to 'fit in' with the normalising cultural apparatus is a driving force for new teachers trying to secure ongoing employment. The culture of competitive performativity manifested in unsustainable working hours for the ECTs in our study. Teachers tried to impress management by conforming to the school culture through working excessive extra-curricular hours coordinating productions or preparing for class.

Maya:	I'm a temporary staff member, so my contract is yearly. So now I'm a maternity parental leave cover. I'm the coordinator for one of the extra-curricular events that we hold, so I have been given opportunities, but there's probably no future unless the person who I'm covering for doesn't come back to their job.
Jude:	Most nights I'll spend time prepping because I like to always know what I'm doing and where I'm going. I try to have one day off from work on the weekend but then I need the weekend to catch up and get organised for the week.
Bella:	I found the work/life balance very hard particularly with the rehearsal schedule. The extra-curricular was insane. I find with my prep that I try to get a lot done in the holidays so that I can cope with all the other stuff that pops up – admin, musical preparation and stuff like that. Term one was very, very hard. We were doing the production and on Saturdays I'd be chasing up props.

The taken-for-grantedness of these normalising constructions of the beginning teacher is alarming. The ECTs in our study appeared to accept the hyper-performative employment conditions as a given. Those who did not conform to this normalising apparatus were considered not suitable for teaching. Furthermore, if ECTs failed to embody this hyper-performative identity, they inevitably left the profession, as Ross' comments highlight:

Ross: Last year I took over for the drama teacher who left. So, there's always someone leaving. We had another teacher who was the senior school teacher, so there were four of us. All of us were part-time. And then the senior school teacher left. There was a graduate first year out teacher and she went. And when she was making plans to go, one of the things she said was just that she felt there wasn't enough gratitude. That there was not enough appreciation. While I think she was right, I do think that you don't become a teacher because you want to be told you're wonderful, because you won't get that. Spending all this time on a production and the Principal going, 'Yeah, it was alright'. Sometimes that's the best. More than other people get. How many math teachers get told that they're doing alright?

Working long hours with little appreciation is viewed by ECTs as a normalised embodiment of the teacher. According to a recent report, principals hired new graduate teachers because they were 'cheaper to employ' and 'more easily influenced' (Australian Research Council, 2015, p. 95). However, the report also found that ECTs felt 'expendable' (p. 170). This normative cultural apparatus could help to explain the high rates of teacher attrition.

The normative construction of quality teaching and the good teacher in education culture is multifaceted. Education discourse is enfolded in the language of quality, assessment and reform, with 'quality teacher assurance' linked to 'rigorous assessments of graduates' (AITSL, 2020). Neoliberal assemblages such as AITSL fetishize work and govern through data (Hardy, 2019). Due to the hegemony of the quality teaching discourse, the good teacher sign is a vehicle for the governance of teachers and their productive effort (Thompson & Cook, 2014; Zhu, 2020). When exploring ECTs' conceptions of what it means to be a teacher, the significance of signs cannot be underestimated. Our research explored the normative representations of quality teaching that real ECTs are measuring themselves against. These representations are not merely in national standards, but fluid, neoliberal constructs such as the teacher performance assessments, and embodied materialities enacted by colleagues. These constructions of the good teacher have come to precede the real teacher. They are covered-over discourses and expectations about teaching, constructed in performative neoliberal assemblages. These hyper-real representations do not merely conceal reality – they become reality (Baldwin, 2018).

Early career teacher identities are mediated within school assemblages that determine the unwritten codes and workload expectations of Arts teachers. The ECTs in our study felt the need to replicate the embodied teacher exemplars they saw around them, even when these were incompatible with mental health. This process of enculturation in competitive hyper-performative cultures was unconscious.

Jocelyn: We get sick, but we still have to go in because there's so much that needs doing. We just can't take that time off.
Angela: Sometimes it's Netflix or junk food to get me through the day. Whatever I can do to survive. I know in myself that things need to change, definitely, but I find myself not sleeping and I know that has a lot to do with not exercising and not eating right, not releasing stress.
Bella: My diet and exercise is horrendous. This term, the stress was full on and I broke out in a rash. I thought I had the chicken pox, but it turned out it was some bacterial infection. My immune system was so run down that it just spread all over my body. Diet and exercise were important to me when I was at uni but I just don't have the time now.

The subjective embodied experiences of our participants can be likened to walking a knife's edge between hyper-real performative teachers and physical exhaustion. Braidotti (2013) conceptualises subjectivity as 'a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, to say, wilful choice and unconscious drives' (p. 18). Utilising this conceptualisation of subjectivity to illuminate our data we explored the psychological, physical, emotional and social impacts that normalising school apparatuses have on ECTs. This constant unconscious drive to embody the hyper-real teacher subjectivity is exemplified in Mikaela's description of how teaching impacted her physically in the first year:

> Mikaela: I would make myself sick trying to do everything I had to do. You can't actually physically do everything you need to do and be an Arts teacher at the same time.

The impact of embodying Mikaela's hyper-performative teacher subjectivity is felt on her body. As Butler (1990) highlights, 'Power operates successfully by constituting an object domain, a field of intelligibility, as a taken-for-granted ontology, its material effects are taken as material data or primary givens' (p. 170). For our participants, being 'sick' became an ordinary component of becoming teacher. Braidotti (2013) and Butler's (1990) theorisation of power and subjectivity, highlight the usefulness of the neo-materialist paradigm for understanding ECTs experiences. 'Materiality' incorporates the concept of power in the field of intelligibility and its constitutive effects. Teacher subjectivity is a process of becoming, constantly in flux, and forever engaged in dynamic power flows. The ECTs we interviewed in this study embodied a taken-for-granted hyper-real teaching identity that includes 'extra-curricular stuff' and illness as primary givens of the role.

> Melinda: We also do productions and things like that. So, it's running all those things as part of your role – and extra-curricular stuff.
> Kelly: There's going to be a rehearsal and there's going be extra-curricular things that I have to be there for … We get sick, but we still have to go in because there's so much that needs doing. We just can't take that time off.

Kelly and Melinda assume that the physical manifestations of hyper-performative work such as a being sick, are a taken-for-granted aspect of the identity of the performing arts teacher – part of 'your role'. Understanding materiality, through exploring the embodied experiences of ECTs, is central to our conceptualisation of contemporary teacher subjectivity. As Butler (2004) highlights: 'Materiality appears only when its status as contingently constituted through discourse is erased, concealed, covered over. Materiality is the dissimulated effect of power' (p. 251). Thus, the expectations of the performing arts teacher are 'erased, concealed and covered over' as 'part of your role':

> Sophia: We had two Sunday rehearsals and then because I direct the show, I'm expected to be at the dance rehearsal for the show, the drama rehearsal, the vocal rehearsal, and I pop in on doing the costuming and other stuff. So, it's quite big, but I guess usually extracurricular involves the shows that we do.

Offshoot three: materiality and hyper-performative teacher subjectivities

Our conception of subjectivity encompasses the material body 'fully immersed in processes of becoming, in productive relations of power, knowledge and desire … an

affective, dynamic structure' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 17). Dominant constructions of teacher subjectivity normalise hyper-performative employment conditions such as 70+ hour working weeks. These hyper-performative teacher subjectivities become embedded in the culture of a school and enfleshed in the bodies of early career teachers. Melinda elaborates on the working conditions that have become her new teacher identity:

> Melinda: I find myself getting to school at like seven o'clock in the morning and then not leaving until the same time at night. So, it's like a massive 12-hour day every day just trying to make sure I'm on top of everything that's been missed.

Melinda's ECT subjectivity was sadly the norm among our research participants. Hyper-performative working conditions are normalised in the neoliberal discourse as 'stuff you've gotta do':

> Sophia: I get to work at seven most mornings. Some nights if I leave before seven, that's a bonus. Even after a show, we don't get home till 10:30, 11 o'clock at night. It's late … you do whatever adult stuff you've gotta do.

Subjectivity is a fluid process of becoming (Braidotti, 2013). The following discussion with Jaxom and Maya exemplifies the process of becoming teacher, the unwritten expectations about working hours and the deleterious impact this has on their mental health:

> Jaxom: I work long hours because I want to be good at my job. I could go home when the bell goes if I wanted to but then I'd fall behind and that's not my work ethic and that's not who I am. Teaching is a vocational degree. On weekdays I'm there till the cleaners kick me out, but on the weekends, I borrow someone else's code. We are there pretty much from about nine till five.
> Author: Is it unwritten or a written expectation?
> Maya: Unwritten. Yeah. I think it's a huge part of our college, the extra-curricular activities that we offer.
> Author: What do you do, if anything, to help you manage your physical and mental well-being?
> Jaxom: Swear? I don't think I do anything. I think having colleagues, not being the only drama teacher, really *really* helps because then you can talk to them about issues. So, we're quite isolated from the rest of the school – kind of 'us against everyone else'.
> Author: Yes. And Maya? How about yourself?
> Maya: So, for mental well-being … every now and again I have to see a psychiatrist.

As this conversation illustrates, the normalised hyper-real teacher subjectivity is viewed as just part of being a good teacher, something only other drama teachers can understand. Moreover, Maya has to see a psychiatrist 'every now and again' just to survive. These unwritten expectations of quality teaching are concerning, particularly if the covered over and concealed teacher subjectivities are incompatible with mental health. The participants' becoming-teacher identities lead to conflicts with personal relationships at home, as Sophia highlights:

> Sophia: My work/life balance is not great. My husband does get pissed off at me probably once a term and we have a bit of an explosion because I've not been home. Home suffers, because I put everything into work. We end up having an argument about it. He always says to me, 'You just put work before everything else'. But I think it's a very consuming job and it's really hard not to put it all first.

This representation of quality teacher subjectivity was echoed by other participants:

> Jaxom: Although teaching takes up a lot of my time, I think that's the kind of person that I am. I like to commit fully, 100%. Teaching is rewarding but it's knackering. I think that's something that's tied to the heart of a teacher because it's a lot of late nights. It's a lot of your free time unpaid, particularly for Arts teachers.

The dissimulated power of the quality hyper-performative teacher subjectivity is a construct that remains concealed and covered over from the participants themselves, who equate unpaid late nights and 100% commitment with 'the heart of a teacher'.

Discussion and conclusion

In recent years, alarming rates of teacher attrition have highlighted the need for qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of early career teachers. There is a pressing need to retain early career teachers, as is evidenced by recent research and the Australian Government's decision to review initial teacher education (Glazer, 2018; Jackson et al., 2018; Trent, 2019; Tudge, 2021; Vagi et al., 2019; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). This study sought to understand how ECTs perceived their burgeoning teacher identities, what enabled them to flourish, and what constrained them. We mapped their experiences of 'teacher' subjectivity and what impact this had their bodies, relationships and mental health. Through interweaving conceptual threads from Braidotti (2013), Butler (1990) and Deleuze (1987/2012), we have woven new maps of beginning teacher becomings. These neo-materialist theories of embodiment and the desire for belonging highlight the taken-for-granted power relations that exist within neoliberal school assemblages.

Specifically, we examined three interconnected offshoots of the becoming teacher rhizome that infold on to one another: the enfleshed working conditions of ECTs; belonging and school culture; and hyper-performative school assemblages. The discourses of quality teaching and the normalisation of hyper-performative workloads and insecure employment conditions have a significant impact on ECTs' becomings. These discourses and unwritten or concealed expectations become a system of governance whereby neoliberal education assemblages mould teacher subjectivities. Embedded in this aggressive performative environment the ECTs in our study normalised their experiences and sought solace in other arts teachers. The infolding of these assumptions and bodily experiences forms an ongoing, dynamic, situated becoming. Those who could not or would not embody this troubling manifestation of Arts teacher subjectivity simply left the profession.

Our study found that ECT becomings are mediated through implicit neoliberal discourses and conceptions of the hyper-performative teacher. Surviving in the quality teaching 'game' often requires 70 hours per-week unpaid extra-curricular work, deteriorating mental health, and an acceptance of teacher victimisation in order to become competitive in the teacher 'market'. Finding themselves under constant threat of unemployment, ECTs tolerate these conditions in order to secure their positions.

The normative construction of quality teaching and the good teacher in education culture fetishizes over-work. Due to the hegemony of the quality teaching discourse, the good teacher sign is a vehicle for the governance of teachers and their productive effort. These fluid, neoliberal constructs of the good teacher have come to precede the

real teacher. They are covered-over discourses and expectations about teaching, constructed in performative neoliberal assemblages. These hyper-real representations do not merely conceal reality – they have become reality for becoming early career teachers. ECTs are measuring themselves against these signs and embodying them as the 'heart of a teacher'. The fallout from this unsustainable material subjectivity is the increased probability of leaving the teaching profession.

Early career Arts teachers entered the profession with creativity and passion and have shown themselves to be dedicated and hard-working. As the Australian Federal Minister for Education recently stated,

> Australia's teachers are some of the most dedicated and hard-working in the world … and we want to provide them with the best platform to produce better student outcomes … we want the finest students choosing to be teachers. (Tudge, 2021)

However, it is not merely a matter of attracting 'top' students into the profession; once they enter the profession, it is imperative that we retain them. Sadly, this paper concludes that embodied teacher subjectivities experienced by ECTs are the antithesis of mental health and belonging. What is needed to support and retain these young teachers is a complete re-evaluation of what it means to be a quality teacher that places students and teachers centre stage, and not in the wings of neoliberal societies of control.

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