Building Early Career Teacher Resilience: The Role of Relationships

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Abstract: There are serious concerns around the sustainability of teaching given the attrition rate of early career teachers. In Western countries we know that between 25% and 40% of beginning teachers are likely to leave the teaching profession in the first 5 years (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Day & Gu, 2010). Clearly, there is a need to better understand the experiences of early career teachers and to investigate, in new ways, how the problem of teacher attrition can be addressed. This paper is based on a collaborative qualitative research project funded by the Australian Research Council that aimed to investigate the dynamic and complex interplay among individual, relational and contextual conditions that operate over time to promote early career teacher resilience.

The methodology for the study was a critical enquiry. The data for the study came from interviews with 60 beginning teachers and their principals. Five main 'Conditions for Resilience' emerged from the analysis: relationships; school culture; teacher identity; teachers' work; and policies and practices (Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce & Hunter, 2010). This article focuses on the first theme – relationships. It illuminates the role that sustainable and mutually sustaining relationships play in the development of early career teachers. Jordan's (2006) model of relational resilience – with its characteristics of mutuality, empowerment and the development of courage - is used as a conceptual framework for discussing the insights from the study.

Introduction

Research on early career teacher resilience is particularly significant at this time given the current economic, social and political context which surrounds the teaching profession. Teachers' work today is arguably more complex, challenging and difficult than at any other time (Johnson et al, 2012). This is in part due to what Clandinin (2009) has described as the 'shifting social landscape' and notes the influences of globalization, refugee populations, immigration, demographics, economic disparities and environmental changes on teachers and teachers' work. She, together with other writers currently (eg Reid, 2005; Bloomfield, 2009; Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010) has also highlighted the impact of government policy decisions and directives, in particular those related to an increased focus on standardized accountability and performance management on teachers' wellbeing and competence. For these and other reasons, many Western nations are experiencing difficulties attracting new teachers and retaining them once they are in the profession (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Moon, 2007; Gu & Day, 2010).

We know that the first years of teaching are particularly challenging for teachers. Considerable research has investigated the problems teachers encounter early in their careers and a variety of reasons have been provided including; a mismatch between early career

teachers' 'idealistic motivations' and the daily realities of classroom teaching (Abbott-Chapman 2005; Day & Gu, 2010), a lack of quality induction programs (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007), a range of personal and contextual issues (Peters & Le Cornu, 2007) and debilitating school structures and cultural practices (Mc Cormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006; Kanpol, 2007). The research on which this article is based was designed to extend the extant research on early career teachers. The research team wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the interplay of personal and contextual factors around early career teachers' experiences. It adopted a *resilience* lens to do this. Masten, Best and Garmezy (1990) define resilience as 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (p. 425). Whilst this definition was adopted early in the research, the research team quickly adopted a socially critical orientation to resilience which not only acknowledged the psychological dimensions of resilience that help to explain some differences in human agency, but also the broader social, economic and political forces on human experience (see Johnson & Down, 2009).

The research team consisted of seven chief investigators from three Australian universities and eight industry partners. The methodology for the study was a critical enquiry drawing on the traditions of narrative enquiry and critical ethnography. The data were collected over the course of a year through two semi-structured interviews with 60 early career teachers, one early in the year and another towards the end. An interview was also conducted with a member of the leadership team in each school towards the end of the year. The focus of the study was on how early career teachers interpreted their lived experiences and constructed meaning of their experiences within the contexts in which they worked. The research team also wanted to get leaders' perspectives on what supported or hindered early career teachers' transition to teaching. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to produce over 1800 pages of interview data. A preliminary thematic analysis was conducted at two workshops held over five days and more fine grained coding categories were then created using NVivo8 software. Five main 'Conditions for Resilience' emerged from the analysis: relationships; school culture; teacher identity; teachers' work; and policies and practices (see Johnson et al, 2012). This article focuses on the first theme – relationships.

A key insight from the study was that in order for the 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. At one level this finding is unsurprising. We know that good quality relationships are important in maintaining our wellbeing and effectiveness in our daily work and lives (Goleman, 2007; Day & Gu, 2010). As Goleman (2007) writes; "...resonant relationships are like emotional vitamins, sustaining us through tough times and nourishing us daily" (p. 4). However the study has provided some insights about the nature of these relationships and the role they play in building early career teachers' resilience. It is not the intent of this paper to discuss the nuances of these relationships and the perceived challenges and tensions that arose for the teachers in negotiating these relationships. That is for another time. Rather the aim is to identify the relationships which impacted on the early career teachers' resilience and to provide some understanding as to how they did this. Jordan's (2006) model of relational resilience will be used as the conceptual framework to assist our understanding of the significance of these relationships.
The paper begins with a summary of Jordan's model of relational resilience. The findings of the study are then presented followed by a discussion centered on the notions of teacher self-esteem and teacher identity. It will be argued that the early career teachers developed resilience through their experience of 'growth-enhancing relationships' (Jordan, 2006).

Relational Resilience

Jordan's (2006) model of relational resilience has its theoretical underpinnings in relational-cultural theory which has as its core the belief that all psychological growth occurs in relationships. Relational-cultural theory suggests that resilience resides not in the individual but in the capacity for connection. Jordan criticises developmental models of resilience which she argues have been biased in the direction of over-emphasising separateness, particularly the separate self. She also criticises previous models for not taking into account the effects of gender or context and claims that issues of power and control are decontextualised. She argues that traditional models see an 'internal locus of control' as an individual characteristic which has often been associated with resilience whereas a contextual approach she says "might reconsider the concept of internal sense of control, examining a person's engagement in mutually empathic and responsive relationships as the more likely source of resilience" (Jordan, 2006, p. 80).

Jordan maintains that growth fostering connections are characterised by *mutuality*, *empowerment* and the *development of courage*. These three concepts provide the framework for illuminating some of the emerging insights about relationships and early career teacher resilience.

Mutuality

Jordan argues that at the core of relational resilience is the movement towards mutuality. She writes; "The importance of these relationships is not just that they offer support, but that they also provide an opportunity to participate in a relationship that is growth-fostering for the other person as well as themselves" (p. 88). The characteristic of mutuality resonates with the notion of *reciprocity* which our study found underpinned many of the effective professional relationships in which the early teachers engaged (Johnson et al, 2012). By reciprocity we mean a two-way direction or influence in the relationships. This reciprocity was evidenced strongly in two particular sets of relationships: with students and with colleagues. These two sets of relationships were regarded by all of the early career teachers to be particularly significant to them and their resilience. This finding is consistent with that of McNally and Blake (2009) who also argued that relationships with students and fellow teachers were most important for early career teachers. Each of these relationships will be considered next.

Relationships with Students

Arguably the most significant professional relationships in which the early career teachers engaged was with their students. This is not altogether unexpected given that 'working with children' is one of the key reasons given by individuals entering the teaching profession (Sinclair, 2008). At the heart of the teachers' stories is the centrality of the relationships that they developed with their students. The stories are full of the enthusiasm the early career teachers had for working with students and developing and experiencing positive relationships with them. These relationships were perceived by the early career teachers to provide enthusiasm and fuel their passion for the job. The following comments were common; *"I can't wait to get back to school on Mondays because of the kids"* and *"I just love being in the classroom with the kids."* The teachers were affirmed by the ways in which

their students engaged with them, their lessons and the feedback they received from their students about their teaching. This contributed to their feelings of self-worth as a teacher. However the opposite also occurred. The stories also reflect the times that the early career teachers struggled to build an effective relationship with a child or felt their relationships were threatened or that the children were not engaged in successful learning and the negative effects this had on how they felt. This is depicted in the following, *"I had two kids who just screamed at me across the room...nothing worked...no matter how hard I tried...I hit rock bottom."* And there were times when the anxiety was triggered by interactions between students in which the early career teacher needed to intervene and negotiate a satisfactory outcome.

Teacher-student and student-student relationships appeared to have a significant impact on how the teachers felt on a daily basis. This finding is consistent with that reported in the literature that teachers' relationships with their students have a significant impact on their affect, that is, whether they 'feel good or bad' (Hargreaves, 1998; Kitching, Morgan & O'Leary, 2009). The teachers in our study were both sustained by and drained by the relationships they developed with their students. There is no doubt however that the teachers in the study spent much time and effort getting to know their students and establishing democratic relationships with them and that this relational work resulted in them deriving much pleasure and satisfaction from their teaching.

Relationships with Teaching Colleagues/Fellow Teachers

Another set of significant relationships for all of the early career teachers in regard to building their resilience, was their teaching colleagues. This group includes other teachers in their school and also their peers in other schools. This section focuses on the former group as *peers* are discussed in the next section.

It was very apparent from the data that positive relationships with other teaching staff were vital in the early career teachers' lives. For some it fostered a sense of belonging and social connectedness. For others it provided emotional and professional support. They reported coping better and feeling more confident when they experienced support from other teachers in the school including being frequently asked about their welfare and being offered help. This is illustrated in the following; *"I wouldn't be able to operate as confidently and at ease in the classroom if I didn't have people around me that I thought I could rely on or just to talk to each day, and have a laugh with in the staffroom"*.

The reciprocal dimension of these relationships was highlighted in our study. It is captured in the following quote from one of the school leaders; *"The young teachers have been able to inspire some of my older teachers and because they see some of those teachers picking up on some of their ideas they are even more inspired to pick up on some of the older teachers' ideas"*. When the early career teachers saw their ideas being adopted by colleagues who had been teaching a lot longer than them, they felt that they were making contributions to their colleagues and that it was not just a one way relationship. This then enabled them to engage more fully in the relationship, which in the case above, was evident in the reciprocation of ideas. The early career teachers were thus affirmed by the feedback they received from colleagues and this feedback affirmed their own assessment of their capacities as teachers.

These relationships were further growth-fostering when colleagues were happy to meet with the early career teachers and include them in a support network. Such networks enabled the early career teachers to engage in a mutual sharing of ideas which had a positive effect on them. For example, *"I was put with...the other year 4 teacher to create a unit and*

we worked hours and hours on it and it felt really good." Again a reciprocal exchange is evident in the following situation where an early career teacher was part of a Year 7 learning team; *"The support I get from both Year 7 teachers is great and we actually support each other".*

Empowerment

Jordan cites empowerment as one of the building blocks of "growth-fostering connections" (p. 82). She maintains that such connections enable participants to experience energy, creativity and flexibility and compares this to the situation in isolation, where "we repeat old patterns, are caught in repetitive cognitions and often are disempowered" (2006, p. 85). It is clear from the data that where the early career teachers were able to establish trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationships, they perceived themselves as more confident and competent, which enabled them to feel more empowered. Hence, as well as the two sets of relationships in the preceding section, there were three more sets of relationships which were found to be particularly significant to all of the early career teachers. These were the early career teachers' relationships with leaders, their peers and with themselves. How much these relationships impacted on each individual teacher depended on the context.

Relationships with Leaders

The role of school leaders has emerged as a significant one - for two reasons. Firstly, in the relationships they established with their early career teachers to encourage and support them directly, and secondly, in regard to the culture established in the school.
Where leaders took the time to develop relationships based on respect, trust, care and integrity, the early career teachers appeared to flourish. This involved the leader having a role in providing emotional support and professional support by supporting the early career teachers' socialisation into the profession. Recognition of the need for emotional support can be seen in the following; *"You provide a bit more care for the graduates and look after them and make sure they're coming in bouncing and energetic rather than down and in disarray".*
In developing positive relationships in schools there was also a need to focus on the early career teachers' professional growth. It was not sufficient to build positive relationships per se. As one early career teacher noted in the absence of the former; *"There's a lot of relationship support but not necessarily the professional discussions.'* This is to be compared to the situation where the principal acknowledged; *"They need to be absorbed in a high learning collaborative connected culture."* Such a culture encouraged reflection and professional dialogue amongst all members of the school community and both formal and informal opportunities for engagement were provided. For example, formal relationships were established between some early career teachers and mentor teachers, often more experienced teaching colleagues. For others, conversations occurred more informally in the staffroom or with staff whose classrooms were in close proximity. The benefit of these informal interactions can be seen in the following; *"Chatting with people who have been teaching for awhile gives you really good insight."* The data illustrated the importance of a culture that promoted a sense of belonging and social connectedness and where there was collective responsibility taken for teacher wellbeing and learning. This is captured in the following comment from one of the participants at the end of her first year of teaching; *"The big thing is relationships. If you don't have support in your school then you've got nothing really".* This had a positive effect, not only on the early career teachers' confidence but on

their willingness to take risks. As one commented; *"The school is really supportive, so you're not afraid to make a mistake, you don't feel uncomfortable to try out new things..."*
Where the early career teachers had access to ongoing professional learning opportunities and were supported in the development of their pedagogical beliefs, values and practices, their confidence in their capabilities as a teacher was enhanced. In this way, they were empowered to not only to develop their classroom teaching skills, but to participate actively and confidently in the wider school and community.

Relationships with Peers

Both the reciprocal and empowering dimensions were very evident in the relationships the early career teachers developed with their peers. They played a key role in *"keeping each other going"* through the highs and lows of their teaching experiences by providing each other with much needed professional and personal support. Our study has highlighted the many emotions that the early career teachers encountered during their first years of teaching and in particular the high degree of self-doubt, confusion and uncertainty they experienced. Their peers provided much needed emotional support as can be seen in the following; *"They helped when I was feeling low and talking improved my mood."* They also helped each other with reflecting, problem solving and sharing resources. As one participant said; *"It's good to feel listened to and to share strategies and resources."* They felt encouraged by knowing that others felt the same way they did. They valued the time together to explore solutions to problems. They developed their ability to talk about teaching and interact in a professional way. The value of receiving support from others who were going through a similar experience is illustrated in the following; *"It was good going out to dinner with other grads …we were all sharing the same doubts and issues...It was nice to be able to talk and think well I'm not different, I'm not not doing a good job."* This affirmation and non-judgemental support encouraged personal and professional agency.

The majority of early career teachers in our study actively sought out their peers, unless they were in a school which had employed a number of early career teachers. Whilst this latter situation was the case for a minority, where it did occur, it was very beneficial, as can be seen in the following; *"The three of us (ECTs) have sort of joined forces and really supported each other"*. For many of the early career teachers, they actively maintained contact with their friends from University and many made use of electronic communication to do this such as Facebook and email. Many also attended Beginning Teacher Conferences where they were able to establish new relationships with other early career teachers The importance of a supportive peer network can be seen in the following; *"I think the biggest thing is to set up a network of support, even if it's over the phone or internet, even if it's still your mates that you made in uni"*.

Relationships with Themselves

The relationship that each early career teacher had with themselves, that is, how comfortable they felt as a person and in their role as teacher, has emerged as a component of how well they were able to sustain themselves – and contribute to sustaining others. In our study, where the early career teachers demonstrated a high level of personal awareness, viewed themselves as learners and were reflexive, their resilience appeared to be enhanced. This had a positive effect on their self confidence and their sense of personal agency. This in turn meant that they could play a role in sustaining themselves, as seen in the following quote from a

participant towards the end of her first year of teaching; *"I'm learning...as I'm more confident I'm not second guessing myself so much in the classroom."* The ability to reflect and re-frame is apparent in the following; *"There have been lots of things I've taken personally and I've been able to reflect on those and change them".* It also meant that they were more willing to ask for advice and/or seek support. For some of the participants this took some time, they did not willingly ask for help initially as they believed that they needed to convey the impression that they knew things and they did not want to look less than competent to others because they were new. As one participant said; *"Being a beginning teacher and on contract, you want to feel like you know what you're doing or appear like that to others."*

What has also emerged from the study is that the early career teachers who felt empowered were very conscious of the importance of looking after their own wellbeing. As one said; *"If you're not healthy and motivated your kids won't be either".* They did this by maintaining a sense of hope and optimism, employing proactive coping strategies and were working towards the establishment of a work-life balance. For example; *"I've really made an effort to ensure that I do keep a balance between the things that happen in my life... because when I first came in term one the gym got forgotten about and I started feeling very drained and very unhealthy and that sort of caught up with me after a little while..."*

Courage

Another feature of 'growth fostering connections' is, according to Jordan, the development of courage, which she defines as the capacity to move into situations when we feel fear or hesitation. She notes that as human beings, we are constantly in interactions that are either encouraging or discouraging. This was certainly the case for the participants in our study as they adjusted to the complex, intense and unpredictable nature of teachers' work. The following quote is representative of many of the early career teachers' experiences of teaching; *"I've never been in such an emotionally and physically challenging job."* Our study has highlighted the crucial role played by the early career teachers' personal relationships. It was often the teachers' friends and family members who encouraged them and reaffirmed for them that they were capable and up to the challenge. School leaders, mentors and support staff such as education officers and advisory staff were also instrumental here, as were the parents of the early career teachers' students. Once again, whilst the impact of each of these relationships depended on each individual teacher's context, they were all nonetheless significant for all of the early career teachers.

Relationships with Families and Friends

Family and friends' support were crucial for the early career teachers in providing both personal and emotional support. The significance of both is captured in the following; *"I am a resilient person but I don't know what I would have done if it hadn't been for my fellow graduates and family".* Both of sets of relationships had the effect of encouraging the participants in their role as a new teacher. Many spoke of the personal practical support they received from their parents or partners, ranging from help in painting the classroom and furniture to providing meals at the end of the day. For example, *"My mum tells me to take a chill pill when I'm cranky... She also cooks nutritious meals for me."*

Many also spoke of the emotional support they received as a result of having them to talk to: *"My mum...just listens and reminds me that I can do this."* and *"My friends remind me of all the positives, it's so easy to be hard on yourself."* It was very clear from these sorts

of comments that the early career teachers' personal relationships appeared to play a considerable role in affirming them and boosting their self-confidence. Where friends and/or family members were also teachers, the boundaries became blurred around the nature of the support that was offered; both personal and professional support were sought and given. This can be seen in the following quote; *"My mum's a teacher and she's pretty good to talk to about the problems I'm having ... she's very supportive"*.

The importance of these relationships was further revealed in the study when the early career teachers experienced difficulties in their personal relationships. For some these difficulties were caused by their tiredness and lack of energy. For example, *"It's so tiring, I just don't want to speak to anyone"*. For others, workload was an issue and they felt that they were often too busy to spend time with their friends or family which often caused some discouragement; *"I don't really see anyone. All I do is teach, come home, crash and then on weekends I just do housework and plan for the next week"*.   Others experienced difficulties due to lack of perceived support from their partners or family. For example, *"Teaching takes a lot away from your personal life...they don't understand that"*. While for others, the challenges were due to a lack of proximity. In country or remote schools for example, some participants missed having their parents/siblings/partner close enough to provide face to face and personal support.

The early career teachers, to varying degrees, found ways to combat their difficulties. Many, over the time of the study, learnt the importance of making time for their family and friends and having time out from their job. As one stressed; *"My friends keep me sane. I now set aside Friday nights and Saturdays – it's my time."* Others maintained connections through social networking and phone calls. While some others deliberately extended their social circles as can be seen in the quote from a participant in the country; *"There's a lot of social activities down here, there's a young professionals network I go to and I've made new friends...it's good having to mix with people other than teachers."*

Relationships with 'Other Professional Staff'

'Other professional staff' include a variety of people both within and beyond the immediate school context, such as education support staff (non teachers), administrative staff, counsellors and advisors, specialist support staff and teachers in other schools. They all played a role in providing encouragement for the early career teachers and had an impact on how the early career teachers felt about their competency in the classroom.

Non-teaching staff such as education support staff and administrative staff played a unique role for many early career teachers in providing encouragement. Where they related positively to them and talked to them about the school and community and gave them positive feedback, the early career teachers valued this. As one said, *"The secretary has been fantastic...so much support"* and another; *"They (education support staff) talk to you in the staffroom so that you don't feel left out"*. For some of the early career teachers they were a source of unsolicited feedback as can be seen in the following; *"They make comments, when they've been in my room, about the way I'm teaching and how I've developed...it made me feel good."* Often these support staff would provide words of encouragement if they saw the early career teachers looking a bit tired or despondent. These timely words played a part in sustaining the early career teachers. They also provided a listening ear if the early career teachers wanted to debrief and encouraged them to ask questions and advised them who to go to if they needed some help. Such support appeared to contribute to building the early career teachers' resilience. What was particularly important here was the authenticity of the

encounters - there was mutual respect for their respective roles and the support staff did not treat the early career teachers as though they did not know anything.

Other professional staff, outside of the school, also played a part in encouraging the early career teachers. These included advisory staff and teachers from other schools. As one participant said; *"I felt like I was getting a lot of mixed messages about what I should be doing...the district disabilities advisor helped me sort through it."* The following comment highlights the value of an 'outsider perspective'; *"I can ring her up and she has no idea who the kids are and she'll say 'what if you do it this way?'*

Relationships with Parents of their Students

Another relationship which appeared to affect the early career teachers' resilience was that which occurred between them and the parents of their students. As with the relationships with students, where the relationships developed were positive, this seemed to have an affirming impact on how they interpreted their competence. When they were not positive, this seemed to have a detrimental or discouraging effect. The positive effect can be seen in the following; *"My families have been really supportive, I've been able to have quite open conversations with them...and they've been accommodating and positive which has made me feel like I'm doing my job."* Many early career teachers reported feeling encouraged by the parents of their students. However many also reported times when they felt discouraged. For one participant, this occurred as a result of her taking over from a very popular teacher. As she said; *"Some of them liked the other teacher who was here before me and they made that very clear to me. That was hard"*. For others it was a result of the pressure they experienced due to reporting and conducting interviews or having to formally introduce themselves to parents. As one explained; *"It was quite stressful in the second week, I had to do a presentation to all the parents on one night"*.

Other challenges included getting to know the parents and families of students, keeping in contact with them, responding to parental expectations, learning to relate to parents with different views, negotiating different family structures, and dealing with behaviour and custody issues. Again, where these went well the early career teachers' self-efficacy seemed to be enhanced, where they did not, the early career teachers questioned their competency. For those participants in country placements, they had an additional challenge as they developed close relationships through outside school social interaction such as sporting teams and invitations to dinner. As one said; *"You have to make sure you behave like a professional in the community... and be careful you don't go beyond the boundaries."*

Discussion

Our findings confirm Jordan's belief that a person's engagement in mutually empathic and responsive relationships develops their resilience. The relationships that the early career teachers developed with their students, teaching colleagues, leaders, peers, family and friends, other professional staff, parents of students and themselves, all appeared to work together to promote their resilience. These relationships meant that the early career teachers were able to maintain positive feelings such as interest, enthusiasm, confidence and trust even in the face of ongoing challenges which resulted from the demanding contexts of schools and being newcomers to these contexts. Such positive feelings have been linked to the powerful emotion of *hope*, which many would argue underpins resilience (Goleman, 1995; Fullan, 1997). As Fullan (1997)

explains; "Hope is not a naive, sunny view of life. It is the capacity not to panic in tight situations, to find ways and resources to address difficult problems (p. 221).

The significant personal and professional relationships promoted the early career teachers' resilience by building their self-esteem and a positive teacher identity. Self-esteem refers to the set of perceptions that a person makes about the extent to which they regard themselves favourably (Gibbs, 2006). And teacher identity refers to the development of one's awareness and understanding of self as a teacher (Johnson et al, 2012). Both self-esteem and identity are complicated constructs. They are socially rather than individually constructed - they are produced in contexts and developed through interactions. As Jordan (2006) writes; "Feeling good about oneself depends a lot on how one is treated by others and whether one can be authentic and seen and heard in relationships with important others" (p. 81). Similarly, feeling good about oneself as a teacher comes when one feels accepted by students, teachers and parents into the school community. Our study has demonstrated that the joy of authentic connections and authentic learning relationships were responsible for building the early career teachers' self-esteem and teacher identity which impacted positively on their resilience.

Another aspect of self-esteem and identity development that is relevant to this discussion is that in competitive cultures comparisons with others are often at the core. As Harter (1993) notes, 'how one measures up to one's peers, to societal standards, becomes the filter through which judgements about the self pass' (Harter, 1993 cited in Jordan, 2006). There was evidence of this occurring in our study as the early career teachers often assessed themselves against their colleagues and peers. This aspect has also been highlighted in the literature on early career resilience (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006; Morrison, 2012). Identity formation is an ongoing process involving comparisons with significant others. For the early career teachers in our study their identity as a teacher became the lens through which they interpreted and re-interpreted their experiences.

Our findings from the study support the assertion made by Day & Gu (2007) that successfully negotiating a teacher identity is pivotal to becoming a resilient teacher. The study has provided some insights about the key role that relationships played in the process of early career teachers successfully negotiating a teacher identity.

Firstly, our study has confirmed that positive teacher-student relationships are not only important for students' development, but they are also important for early career teachers' development. This reciprocal dimension of the teacher-student relationship is being increasingly recognised in the literature. Spilt, Koomen & Thijs (2011) for example, postulate that teachers have a basic need for relatedness with the students in their class and hence suggest that individual teacher-student relationships may affect the professional and personal self-esteem of teachers. McNally & Blake (2009) take a stronger stance when they assert that, "new teachers are dependent on their pupils for a sense of professional purpose, for their very acceptance as a teacher" (p. 75).

Our study has shown that teacher-student relationships have a significant impact on early career teachers' sense of efficacy and their developing teacher identity. Not only were the positive learning relationships they developed with their students growth fostering for the students they were growth fostering for the early career teachers as they came to appreciate themselves and their capabilities as a teacher. For the early career teachers it was important for them to feel like they were making a difference to the children in their class and they relished feedback from others that affirmed that they were doing this. They felt empowered when they felt like 'real' teachers. This was evidenced in the positive learning relationships they developed with their students, their students' engagement in learning, in the adaptation of their planning, assessing and pedagogies to meet their students' needs and in the successful

learning outcomes they facilitated. Our study supports the assertion that "feeling effective as a teacher is at the heart of resilience" (Tait, 2005, p. 13).

It has long been acknowledged in the literature that self-efficacy has an important role to play in teachers' motivation, commitment and achievement (Bandura, 1997). What is becoming clearer more recently is the role that students play in this. The findings of our study confirm those of Kitching et al (2009) who found that student engagement and student achievement were major factors in incidents triggering regular positive feelings amongst early career teachers. They concluded that early career teachers "can to certain extents live with self-doubt, failure and even hostility provided they have a mix of positive outcomes like a breakthrough with new subject matter, signs of engagement with new activities or evidence of students' motivation' (p. 54).

A **second** insight is the importance of early career teachers feeling connected to their school community. We have described this as a 'sense of belonging' (Johnson et al, 2012). Other researchers have described this as 'forging connections and finding a place' (Ewing & Manuel, 2005) and 'the emotional need to fit in' (Rippon & Martin, 2006). Pearce & Morrison (2011) suggest that the shaping of a professional identity takes places during teachers' social exchanges and as a result of interactions with other members of the school community such as students and parents. They explain that a plethora of social exchanges shape professional identity including "the conversations teachers have about teaching, the emails they send to friends where they reconstitute events of the day, the seeking of support from critical friends about their practice and the myriad of other interchanges between teachers..." (p. 56). There is no doubt that the opportunities for support and collaboration between the early career teachers and their colleagues in our study helped them to see themselves as 'real teachers' (Rippon & Martin, 2006) and provided sources of encouragement that enabled them to stay hopeful.

The importance of supportive collaborative cultures in sustaining early career teachers' commitment and energy is well documented (Day & Gu, 2007; Flores & Day, 2006; Kardos & Moore Johnson, 2007; Peters & Pearce, 2012). Feiman-Nemser (2003), for example, emphasises the importance of supporting and surrounding early career teachers with a professional culture that focuses on constructive learning rather than just a period of coping, survival and adjustment. Schools that operate as professional learning cultures focus on continuous improvement through the learning of both students and teachers. Teacher learning is seen as important for all teachers and results in 'teachers continuously sharing and seeking learning (Harris & Jones, 2010, p. 174). Such learning cultures support the acquisition of a positive teacher identity for early career teachers through a process of 'mutual identification.' 'Mutual identification' is when early career teachers identify with their colleagues and their colleagues identify with them as 'members of the profession' (Morrison, 2012). This process provides the impetus for future development, confidence and success. As illustrated in our study, it also enabled the early career teachers to cope successfully when things did not go as well as they might have liked. They were able to bounce back due to feeling like they were a member of a supportive teaching profession - they identified as a teacher - and were identified by their peers and colleagues as a teacher.

Thirdly, our study has provided insights about the *nature* of the professional support that best assists early career teachers. Our early career teachers flourished when they were able to participate in relationships which recognised them as new professionals who had something to offer the teaching profession. They were viewed as active participants in their own learning as well as being able to make a contribution to others' learning. Hence it was not just about providing support *to* the early career teachers. It was also about recognising the contribution the early career teachers had to make to the teaching profession and school community and inviting them to participate in reciprocal learning relationships. This is a key

insight. Traditionally beginning teachers have frequently been seen as passive recipients and so the support that was provided to them was often one way, from the more experienced to the least experienced. There was no consideration given to the notion that they had anything to give back or indeed that this was important for the early career teachers' self- esteem. The beginning teacher was positioned as the novice with nothing to give and everything to learn from the experts. Cherubini (2009) noted the potential for this to occur when he wrote; "New teachers are situated as passively active subjects of a much more aggressively conceptual force that drives their enculturation to the profession" (p. 93).

Such positioning reinforces traditional relationships and ways of relating and perpetuates 'the complex struggles for power that take place in working relationships' (Cardini, 2006, p. 410). Being positioned as a *contributor* rather than a receiver, means that opportunities are created for people to relate differently. Different kinds of relationships can evolve that are not so heavily concentrated on a hierarchy of power. This is in keeping with recent calls in the literature for what have been described as 'de-institutionalised relationships' (Smyth et al, 2008) or environments that are "less alienating, less bureaucratically managerial..." (Day & Gu, 2010)

The **fourth** insight is that whilst the early career teachers were sustained by relationships, *they also needed to be able to sustain them.* If engagement in two-way relationships was important, as has been argued, then the early career teachers needed to have the energy, skills and abilities to be active participants in these relationships. This was a particular challenge to many of our early career teachers given the physical and emotional exhaustion they faced on an ongoing basis. An increasing number of writers are recognising the profoundly emotional experience of early career teaching (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Intrator, 2006; McNally & Blake, 2009; Aitken & Harford, 2011) and appreciating that which Intrator (2006) acknowledged; "The inner journey novice teachers experience is especially intense, conflicting, dynamic and fragile" (p. 234). It is precisely because of this that the early career teachers' relationships with their family and friends played such a significant role.

The value of strong personal support cannot be overstated and is becoming increasingly recognised in the literature (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Day, 2008). By providing emotional and practical support to enable the early career teachers to do their job, this had a positive effect on their self confidence and their sense of personal agency and their resilience. To understand the latter is to understand the interconnected nature of personal and professional identities and also to acknowledge that emotions are integral to identity development (Kelchtermans, 1993; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Our study found that resilience was enhanced when the early career teachers were able to retain a strong sense of their personal selves while at the same time working through the uncertainties of their new teaching roles. By providing support that boosted the early career teachers' confidence and self-esteem, families and friends, as well as other significant others, were inadvertently contributing to the early career teachers' developing teacher identity. As the early career teachers' beliefs in themselves grew, they became increasingly aware of the importance of engaging in secure and caring relationships, at both the personal and professional levels. They also came to appreciate that they had an active role to play in sustaining them. This level of self-awareness is critical, for as Gibbs (2006) wrote; "Teachers who have deep knowing about themselves as people and as teachers, show a sense of security in their personal and professional identities" (p. 77).

The **fifth** insight is that peer support has emerged as being central to the development of early career teachers' resilience. Peers appeared in all three of Jordan's building blocks, namely mutuality, empowerment and the development of courage. The non-judgemental support they gave each other consolidated their sense of belonging and social connectedness

to the teaching profession. They empowered each other to manage personal and professional challenges and conflicts and encouraged each other at both a personal and professional level. They also provided each other with a reality check in that they were able to confirm many of the same feelings and similar experiences. It would appear that early career teachers have a unique role that they can play for one another given their equal power base. For, as Jordan (2006) has acknowledged, "in order to enjoy full authentic and growth-fostering interaction one cannot be in a position of subordination" (p. 82). Many writers have stressed the importance of early career teachers creating their own support networks and have identified the value of peer support (Wookfolk, Hoy & Burke Spero, 2005; Gu & Day, 2007; Fenwick, 2011; Papatraianou, 2012). Papatraianou (2012) for example, highlighted the importance of early career teachers' social networks in developing their capacity to cope with challenges. There are many implications from the findings of this study. It is not possible within the confines of this article for a discussion of these but suffice to say that there are implications for the early career teachers themselves, school leaders, other teachers, school support staff and systems people including Departments of Education and Universities in regard to initial teacher education. The reader is referred to the book, *Early Career Teachers: Stories of Resilience* (Johnson et al, 2012) for a full discussion of these implications.

Conclusion

To conclude then our study has highlighted the crucial role of relationships in building early career teachers' resilience. It was through developing and nurturing relationships that were mutual, empowering and encouraging, and by being the recipient of relationships that had these attributes, that the early career teachers' resilience appeared to be enhanced. The significant personal and professional relationships that the early career teachers developed with their students, teaching colleagues, leaders, peers, family and friends, other professional staff, parents of students and themselves, all worked together to build their self-esteem and a positive teacher identity. This study has affirmed Jordan's model of relational resilience which emphasises strengthening relationships rather than increasing an individual's strength.

The critical message from this study is that everyone surrounding early career teachers, and the early career teachers themselves, has an active role to play in building their resilience. That is, it is a collective undertaking. Lieberman (in Day & Gu, 2010, p. xiv) acknowledged this shared responsibility when she wrote; "Teachers need their professional lives to be individually motivated, relationally connected and organisationally supported".

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