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## **Problematizing the Role of Personal and Professional Relationships in Early Career Teacher Resilience**

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*Abstract: Formal processes such as ongoing induction, mentoring and professional development are commonly recorded as factors that can enhance early career teacher resilience. Yet, informal processes, including the support provided by personal and professional networks are not often acknowledged nor made explicit. Drawing on two qualitative studies, we examine teachers' informal significant relationships as these appeared to play a particularly key role for their resilience. We argue that it is problematic to represent early career teachers' support providers in two distinct categories – personal and professional, as has often been perpetuated in the literature. The article explores the various types of support provided to groups of early career teachers and concludes with implications for further research and for schools and teacher education programs.*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a surge of research examining how teachers maintain resilience despite facing challenges in the workplace (e.g. Day & Gu, 2009; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2012). Much of this research has focused on exploring the links between worker resilience, the successful navigation of workplace challenges and workers remaining in the profession. Formal organisational processes such as ongoing induction, mentoring and professional development are commonly recorded as resilience enhancing (Crosswell & Beutel, 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Yet, informal processes, including the support provided by personal and professional networks are not often made explicit.

This paper focuses on examining different forms of informal support afforded to teachers by their 'personal' and 'professional' relationships. It is common for research (e.g. Day, 2008, Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006) to refer to personal relationships as those that are situated within the personal lives of teachers (i.e. partners or family members). It is even more widespread (e.g. Day & Gu, 2007; McCormack, et al., 2006; Sumsion, 2004) that professional support is attributed to colleagues within the school context (e.g. school leaders and teaching staff). However, we argue that these personal and professional support providers should not be confined to these two contexts. Our studies have shown that the new teachers were afforded a variety of types of support from all of their significant relationships, whether they were in school (i.e. professional) or outside of school (i.e. personal).

This article draws on social support literature to focus on the various elements that constitute informal social support (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). When examining the various types of social support provided to teachers, we employ the categories 'professional' and 'personal'. We do this only to highlight that both types of support providers afford the

various elements of social support. We want to acknowledge from the outset however that we find the personal and professional categories problematic as they perpetuate a false division between support providers. This article highlights this issue using data from two qualitative studies investigating resilience in early career teachers. The article concludes with a consideration of the key implications for further research and for school leaders and teacher educators. We argue that for beginning teachers, there needs to be an emphasis on the benefits of receiving informal support from a wide range of networks, whether they be in school, outside of school, or online.

## **Early Career Teacher Resilience**

Resilience is the process through which an individual maintains adaptive functioning after experiencing risk or adversity. A most commonly used definition describes resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426). In recent years, there has been a surge of research examining how teachers maintain resilience despite facing challenges in the workplace (e.g. Day & Gu, 2009; Gu & Day, 2007; Johnson et al., 2012). As a result of this research there have been new definitions of teacher resilience provided in the literature. Day & Gu (2013) for example define teacher resilience as, “the capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching” (p.39). From this work, a range of formal and informal support processes that can enhance resilience have been identified

### **Formal Processes**

The formal processes that have been identified in the literature that have been found to enhance teacher resilience, or reinforce their decision to remain in the profession are most notably, induction related activities and mentoring. The most common support processes for new teachers include school orientations (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wayne, Youngs, & Fleischman, 2005), professional development workshops, quality mentoring by more experienced teachers (Richter et al. 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), additional release time, a reduction of work load, the opportunity to observe other teachers (Howe, 2006; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), dedicated planning time with staff (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wiebke & Bardin, 2009), and ongoing professional development (Crosswell & Beutel, 2013).

A key element in quality induction programs is mentoring, although, in some cases, the terms induction and mentoring have been employed interchangeably (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Nevertheless, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) state: “Mentoring is the personal guidance provided, usually by seasoned veterans, to beginning teachers in schools” (p. 683). In a similar manner, Fulton, Yoon and Lee (2005) defined mentoring as “a process by which a more experienced or knowledgeable individual offers assistance to a less expert individual” (p. 4). Mentoring, like induction, involves a variety of support processes. For example, mentors can provide general advice, inform the mentee of school policies and procedures, and support in enculturating the mentee, by helping them to adapt to the culture of the school and learn common behaviours and ideas (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Additionally, mentors can support the mentee with curriculum, planning, implementation and evaluation of student learning experiences (Lazovsky & Reichenberg, 2006), facilitate discussion and reflection on practice, and provide opportunities to broaden the teachers’ teaching and learning experiences (Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010).

The integration and implementation of the induction activities summarised above constitute what researchers describe as quality induction. However, according to Algozzine,

Gretes, Queen, and Cowan-Hathcock (2007) and McCormack and Thomas (2005), only a minority of beginning teachers experience a high quality induction program. This is also the case in regard to professional development opportunities (Bezzina, 2006; Ewing & Smith, 2003). Research also documents how teachers may be dissatisfied after being assigned ineffective mentors (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). Furthermore, Ewing and Smith (2003) reported that among the beginning teachers in their study, 73% were sent to schools which did not provide them with a mentor.

Although many studies indicate that induction is effective and beneficial, other research challenges these conclusions by questioning the *value added* through these programs. A number of studies (e.g. Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997) have found that a consideration of broader organisational structures within the contexts of the beginning teachers, particularly, social interactions with staff and power relationships within were lacking. In other words, cumulative factors, not usually considered to impact on induction, can either enhance or reduce the effectiveness of such programs. These factors relate to the informal processes operating within schools.

### **Informal Processes**

Findings from studies on teacher resilience have also established the significance of informal processes of support. For example, Ewing and Smith (2003) reported, “The first and most striking [observation] is that it was the informal support that was the most important form of induction for a large majority of the respondents” (p. 25). McCormack et al. (2006) similarly concluded:

Learning support in the traditional form of formal induction programs and mentoring were recognized as useful; however, collaborative informal, unplanned learning from colleagues and former peers was also reported as a most significant and valuable source of support (p. 95).

It is widely acknowledged that teachers are able to cope with workplace challenges if they experience a positive school culture that is collaborative and where teachers support each other, display trust and openness, and routine help is available (Aelterman et al., 2007; Flores & Day, 2006; Gu & Day, 2013; Hargreaves, 1992).

A range of factors contribute to the development of a positive school culture that can foster teacher resilience. These factors include school leader support (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Peters & Pearce, 2011), staff collegiality, good relationships with colleagues (Bath, 2006), having colleagues who specifically support teachers’ professional work (Day, 2008; Day & Gu, 2007), working collaboratively with others, (Demetriou, Wilson, & Winterbottom, 2009; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009), having supportive administrative staff (Swars, Meyers, Mays, L, & Lack, 2009), access to adequate teaching resources (Brunetti, 2006; Swars et al., 2009), having the opportunity for promotion (Bobek, 2002; Day & Gu, 2007), and feeling safe at school (Swars et al., 2009).

Support from family and friends has also shown to be resilience enhancing for beginning teachers (Day, 2008; Le Cornu, 2013; McCormack, et al., 2006). Howard and Johnson (2004) for example reported that all the teachers in their study had “diverse, caring networks of family and friends” (p. 412) which assisted teachers to cope with workplace challenges. Day and Gu (2007) also found that having a supportive family and a supportive spouse can increase teacher commitment as well as enhance teachers’ capacity to cope with workplace challenges. They noted that notions of support can include partners not displaying frustration if their teacher spouse works at home (Day, 2008), or having a partner who insists that their teacher spouse adopts a work-life balance, ensuring weekends are spent interacting with family (Gu & Day, 2007).

A limitation of the current work on informal processes of support is that researchers of resilience who have identified informal support outside of school rarely examine the type of support provided by these individuals, except beyond stating that a lack of support can increase isolation, while supportive structures can foster resilience. This results in an unsophisticated account of the role that social contacts play in influencing resilience. This article attempts to address this situation by focusing on the nature of informal support provided to the early career teachers – both within and outside of school.

The focus of this paper is solely on informal support, because, whilst our studies on which this paper is based, confirm the finding from the literature that early career teacher resilience is enhanced as a result of both formal and informal processes of support, it was the informal support that appeared to play a particularly key role for our teachers' resilience.

## Context and Background

We draw on two qualitative studies, a large scale study of 60 early career teachers in South Australia and Western Australia and an intensive study of 17 South Australian early career teachers (Table 1).

Demographic	Category	% Large Scale Study		% In-depth Study
		WA (n=28)	SA (n=32)	(n=17)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	14	16	6
	Female	86	84	94
<b>Age</b>	20-24 years	32	56	47
	25-29 years	18	28	29
	30-35 years	14	7	0
	35+ years	36	9	24
<b>Level of schooling</b>	Primary	77	72	76
	Secondary	23	28	24
<b>Location of school</b>	Metropolitan	50	56	71
	Rural	46	38	29
	Remote	4	6	0
<b>Employment status</b>	Permanent	18	15	30
	Contract	78	81	41
	Relief teaching	4	4	29

**Table 1: Demography of studies**

The first study was a collaborative qualitative research project funded by the Australian Research Council (this research was supported under Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (LP0883672). The research team also includes Professor Bruce Johnson, Professor Barry Down, Dr Anna Sullivan, Dr Judith Peters and Ms Janet Hunter) 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 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 organised using NVivo 8 software. Five main 'Conditions for Resilience' emerged from the analysis: relationships; school culture; teacher identity; teachers' work; and policies and practices (Johnson et al, 2012).

The second study was an in-depth qualitative study that employed a resilience lens through which to explore the complex interactions between factors that either support early career teachers, or put them at risk of leaving the profession. In addition, this study explored whether social networking sites influenced the resilience of early career teachers. The data were collected in four stages over the course of a year with 17 early career teachers. The four stages of data collection included an online survey, two rounds of open-ended interviews and the development of a social networking site to gather teachers' reflections on their everyday experiences. Each of these methods was underpinned by a conceptual model of resilience that incorporated ecological theory, providing data which could be analysed using thematic analysis. Data were organised using NVivo 9 to identify the constraining and enabling factors operating in the various social contexts in which the early career teachers participated (see Papatraianou, 2012).

## **Findings and Discussion**

The support that was provided to the early career teachers by informal networks emerged as a central finding in both studies. The informal support was provided by a range of significant relationships, including those with colleagues, leaders, support staff, students, parents of students and family and friends (Johnson et al, 2010; Papatraianou, 2012; Le Cornu, 2013). In order to elucidate the nature of the support we draw on social support literature, particularly the work of Rosenfeld and Richman (1997) who proposed three elements which constitute social support: (1) tangible, (2) informational, and (3) emotional. These three elements can be broken down into seven facets of social support, which are:

1. Listening support;
2. Emotional support;
3. Tangible assistance;
4. Task appreciation;
5. Reality confirmation;
6. Emotional challenge; and
7. Task challenge (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997).

Each of these is discussed next in relation to the early career teachers' professional and personal relationships. By professional relationships, we adopt the widely accepted view of those associated with the teachers' school (including department or advisory personnel) and by personal relationships we mean family and friends.

### **Listening and Emotional Support**

Listening and emotional support was readily available to the early career teachers from all of their support providers, in particular, their teaching colleagues, school support staff and their family and friends. Listening support signifies "the perception that an other is listening without giving advice or being judgemental", whereas emotional support refers to

“the perception that an other is providing comfort and caring and indicating that he or she is on the support recipient’s side” (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997, p. 135).

### Professional

This study has shown that listening and emotional support provided by teaching colleagues and school support officers was crucial to improving the early career teachers’ capacity to cope with workplace challenges. These colleagues provided teachers with a space to talk about their day as can be seen in the following; “*A lot of the time, at the end of my day, I usually dismiss the kids, tidy up my desk and the first place I go is to the teacher next door, and debrief with her*”. This type of informal support often occurred in the staffroom, or between staff whose classrooms were in close proximity, and was most obvious in the encouragement and affirmation afforded to the teachers. As one teacher said in relation to the school support officers; “*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.*” The positive nature of the teachers’ interactions with staff appeared to increase the teachers’ sense of collegiality, cohesiveness and caring within the school, which facilitated access to listening and emotional support. This finding is consistent with studies that have identified the importance of a positive and collaborative school culture and was confirmed most recently by Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson and Burke (2013) who wrote; “a school conducive to newcomers is characterised by high levels of support and collegiality” (p. 123).

For these teachers, listening and emotional support were intricately linked, confirming the work of Jarzabkowski (2002) who asserts that in schools, access to listening and emotional assistance is an integrated process. However, when the teachers interacted with their school leaders, these two elements were not always integrated in the same way. Certainly where leaders took the time to develop relationships based on respect, trust, care and integrity, the early career teachers appeared to flourish (Johnson et al, 2012; Le Cornu, 2013). Recognition of the need for emotional support can be seen in the following quote from a leader; “*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*”. However, there was an added dimension to the support offered by school leaders which meant that it was often problematic for leaders to offer this type of support in the same way as other members of the school community. A small number of the teachers from the in-depth study for example emphasised the hierarchical segregation between themselves and leaders. These teachers reported that they did not pursue listening support because they believed it would reveal their inadequacies, and possibly impede career progression or reduce the likelihood of securing ongoing employment. It may be that the primarily casual status of these teachers meant that they were “politically savvy” and wanted to “appear in control both informationally and emotionally” (Ray & Miller, 1991, p. 508). It may also be linked to other research that highlights that many new teachers find it difficult to ask for help (Jenkins, Smith, & Maxwell, 2009; Mansfield, Beltman, Price & Beltman, 2012; McCormack & Thomas, 2005; Castro et al., 2010; ), particularly in the growing climate of casualisation.

### Personal

A key theme to emerge from the findings is the listening and emotional support that all the teachers received from family and friends. They showed that they cared, were sympathetic and provided the space for teachers to debrief and discuss work-related challenges. These comments are indicative of many in the two studies; “*My mum...just listens and reminds me that I can do this*”, and “*I make sure I have time for my friends because they*

*just listen and encourage me, and some are not teachers but still they listen.*” The relational connectedness that resulted from sustained contact with friends and family appeared to enhance the teachers’ general wellbeing. The importance of maintaining such social connections is consistent with research which discusses the significance of social relationships in enhancing overall resilience (Day, 2008; Howard & Johnson, 2004; McCormack, et al., 2006).

Many of the early career teachers also appeared to place emphasis on maintaining social connections via online social networking sites. The use of such online sites was a time efficient mode of communication to maintain face-to-face relationships. This mode of communication proved particularly important during times of high stress and high workload. It was also a convenient way for teachers in rural locations to maintain contact with loved ones. They were able to debrief about work via online social networking sites, where it was common for online contacts to take an interest in the teachers’ struggles by giving various forms of encouragement. The effect of this is illustrated in the following; *“I use FaceBook™ to keep in touch with friends as well. You don’t always get to catch up physically, so just to see what they are doing. It makes me happy”*. This finding confirms the work of Baym (2010), who suggests that social networking sites, such as FaceBook™, are primarily a means for “relationship maintenance” (p. 134).

In the in-depth study, the online social networking site that was created to collect data also proved beneficial for casual teachers as it provided a safe space for the teachers to acknowledge their thoughts, feelings and experiences and receive emotional and listening support from other teachers who could sympathise with their struggles; *“It was one way of analysing what was going on in my own head. Putting all those thoughts together on a page always helps, and to have someone reading it and analysing it as well somehow makes it more valuable”*.

### **Tangible Assistance**

Tangible assistance was readily available to early career teachers through both their personal and professional relationships. This type of assistance is characterised by support providers rendering “physical assistance or aid in the form of advice or knowledge needed to complete a task” (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994, p. 158). In most cases, it is intertwined with listening and emotional support (Jarzabkowski, 2002).



### Professional

Tangible assistance was mostly provided by teaching colleagues and support staff. Teaching colleagues provided tangible assistance by imparting teaching ideas, sharing resources and providing advice about teaching practices. As one teacher explained; *"I can say [to the reception teacher] 'They are driving me insane! What do I do?' and she said to me 'Just an idea, this is how I do it, maybe you could try that?'"* For some of the teachers, the tangible support from school support officers provided crucial contextual information about school procedures, students and classroom processes. This assistance from support officers was particularly important for casual teachers.

The early career teachers appreciated the guidance and feedback provided by their colleagues, which then enhanced their confidence and self-belief in their professional practice. It appeared that the teachers to some extent evaluated the risk of seeking 'tangible assistance' as evidenced by their reluctance to debrief with school leaders, yet seek assistance from support officers. From a social support perspective, Adelman (1988) states;

Knowing who is an appropriate provider and recognizing possible "costs" for receiving support (e.g. loss of self-esteem, negative consequence for the relationship, incurring possible obligations) suggests some of the relational uncertainty that can accompany help-seeking (p. 186).

It seems that the teachers in this study sought out individuals they considered to be "low risk informants" (Adelman, 1988, p. 186), such as teaching colleagues, student support officers and non-teachers, inside and outside of school.

### Personal

The teachers' family and friends, both within and outside of the profession, provided tangible assistance by sharing resources, providing advice on particular students, planning collaboratively to reduce workloads, or providing general practical advice. Interestingly, teachers' personal contacts that had no occupational connection to the teaching profession were also able to provide this assistance. This was evident, for example, when one teacher's partner, a labourer, questioned the selection of free choice reading books in the classroom, and suggested that the teacher offer a wider array of texts for student reading. The teachers' family and friends also provided various practical types of support. Many spoke of this type of support they received, in particular from their parents or partners, ranging from help in painting the classroom and furniture, to providing meals at the end of the day, as can be seen in the following; *"My family and partner came in and helped paint my classroom which was so helpful"* and *"Mum often cooks me dinner so I have time to rest at night."* The value of this type of support cannot be overstated and is becoming increasingly recognised in the literature (Day, 2008; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Providing emotional and practical support to enable the early career teachers to do their job had a positive effect on their self-confidence, their sense of personal agency and their resilience (Le Cornu, 2013).

It was also apparent from our studies that the teachers exchanged tangible assistance via online social networking sites. The convenience to organise relief work, share resources or teaching ideas, and exchange professional advice online was seen as an efficient and beneficial method of sharing this type of support. Teachers also used the internet to search for subject specific information, lesson ideas, and various teaching aids. It is particularly interesting that those who reported the greatest time searching for resources online were casual teachers. This suggests that the internet provided access to support and resources for casual teachers, which was a little different from the teachers with more consistent employment. This latter group appeared to exchange support and resources via face-to-face interactions with colleagues with whom they had developed a working relationship. It also

may be that seeking assistance on the internet was seen as an extremely low-risk process for the casual teachers.

### **Task Appreciation Professional**

Task appreciation support is “the perception that an other is acknowledging the support recipient’s efforts and is expressing appreciation for the work she or he does” (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997, p. 136). Once again, the early career teachers’ teaching colleagues and school support staff provided some of this type of support on an ongoing basis. This was highlighted particularly for those teachers who worked in teaching teams or very closely with school support officers in their classrooms. However it was the school leaders who appeared to be the central figures in providing this type of support. Their informal feedback appeared to matter greatly to the teachers in our study. This is exemplified in the following; “*After we completed our parent-teacher interviews, we got a little note just saying ‘Well done! You were really well organised and all things went well It’s good to be acknowledged.’*” For another teacher, the relatively small token gesture shown by her school leader, who left a chocolate bar in her pigeonhole, resulted in her feeling appreciated. This supports and confirms findings of other studies which show that beginning teachers place strong significance on feedback from school leaders. For example, the beginning teachers in Brock and Grady’s (1998) study valued their school leaders’ “high visibility” (p. 180) in the school yard because it resulted in informal opportunities for feedback and affirmation. In our studies, it was casual visits to classrooms which seemed to provide these opportunities, as can be seen in the following; “*The principal makes his presence known, regularly visiting all departments, the all-important communication thing that I believe enables a workplace to function to high standards.*” The teachers also valued having access to leaders in times of need. Peters & Pearce (2012) noted that given the current managerial climate, it is often the case that school leaders have “only fleeting contact with teachers” (p. 11), and that such limited contact may not be sufficient to provide new teachers with the support that they need. Despite this, the ‘fleeting contact’ with school leaders in our studies appeared to contribute to the beginning teachers’ feelings of confidence and self-belief.

Two other support providers who provided task appreciation support, which could be classified as ‘professional’, as they are associated with the teachers’ schools, were the students themselves and their parents/carers. The early career 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. Many of the teachers expressed the enjoyment they gained from developing interpersonal connections, and ensuring that students felt safe and welcome in their classroom. This appeared to enhance their resilience. This finding is consistent with studies that suggest teachers derive significant satisfaction as a result of building relationships with students (Castro et al., 2010; Hirschhorn, 2009), and in turn this can increase their motivation and commitment towards their work (Day & Gu, 2007; Kitching, Morgan, & O’Leary, 2009). The teachers in our studies expressed a sense of accomplishment and pride when their students, particularly those who struggled academically, showed notable improvements in their learning. Student successes were by far the most influential form of encouragement that seemed to facilitate the resilience of the beginning teachers. This supports similar findings from other studies that have found that student engagement, achievement and success can enhance teacher resilience (Kitching et al., 2009; Swars et al. 2009).

The teachers also felt affirmed and/or appreciated when the parents of their students gave them positive feedback about their teaching or the impact they were having on their child. This comment is illustrative of many as one teacher said; *“My families have been really supportive, and they’ve been accommodating and positive which has made me feel like I’m doing my job.”*

### **Personal**

Once again, there was evidence in our studies of the teachers’ family and friends providing ‘task appreciation’ support. They acknowledged the teachers’ effort that they were putting into their teaching and this was highly valued by the teachers. It helped them to appreciate what was going well rather than focusing on what was not, as can be seen in the following; *“My friends remind me of all the positives, it’s so easy to be hard on yourself”* and *“One of my best friends is a teacher at a different school so we talk about school. It’s easier when someone’s a teacher because they get it and can support my work.”* It was clear from these sorts of comments, of which there were many, that the early career teachers’ close relationships played a considerable role in affirming them and boosting their self-confidence and self-understanding. Self-insight or self-understanding (Beardslee, 1989) is crucial in assisting teachers to understand and cope with difficult experiences. Sumsion (2004) explained that developing self-insight by engaging in self-reflexivity and being able to identify the intrinsic rewards experienced by working in the profession helps teachers put struggles into perspective and to develop a positive outlook.

### **Reality Confirmation**

Reality confirmation was afforded to the early career teachers by contacts who appeared to understand and confirm the realities and struggles traditionally known to challenge new teachers. By definition, reality confirmation is “the perception that an other, who is similar to and who see things the same way the support recipient does, is helping to confirm the support recipient’s perspective of the world” (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997, p. 136).

### **Professional**

The reality confirmation was provided by the early career teachers’ teaching colleagues. This type of support appeared to primarily emerge from colleagues who were also early career teachers. 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.”* The teachers provided each other with a reality check in that they were able to confirm many of the same feelings and similar experiences. The non-judgmental support they exchanged appeared to consolidate their sense of belonging and social connectedness to the teaching profession. In confirming the role of peer support in early career teacher resilience, Le Cornu (2013) made the point that “... early career teachers have a unique role that they can play for one another given their equal power base” (p. 13). Hagger, Mutton and Burn (2011) in their study of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in the United Kingdom, also found that NQTs were an important source of support for each other as they “provided the solidarity of people going through the same experience” (p. 400).

## Personal

For many of the teachers their personal networks also provided reality confirmation. Personal contacts offered the confirmation early career teachers needed in the initial stages of entering the profession, when relationships in schools had not yet developed. This confirmation was provided by personal contacts outside of the school and included, teachers, school support officers and other professionals (e.g. social workers). Understanding the trials and tribulations of teaching was an essential criterion for the teachers in deciding with whom to discuss their work. In contrast, there appeared to be no such criterion when teachers posted comments about their daily struggles on online social networking sites. For example, “*Just to know other people out there are feeling the same thing and that other people have problems too, and it’s not just a big world of teachers*” and “*You don’t have to be teaching to have a really crap day, so that’s comforting!*” The variety of contacts, ranging from those connected to the profession, to those who had no affiliation to teaching, provided some comfort by indicating that they either understood the teachers’ struggles, or were able to sympathise because of their own daily or work-place problems.

For a small number of our participants, some personal contacts with whom they had strong interpersonal relationships, for example their husbands or partners, were not perceived to be supportive because they did not confirm the realities of the early career teachers.

## Emotional Challenge and Task Challenge

### Professional

School leaders and teaching colleagues, together with students and their parents/carers, were the main professional contacts who provided emotional or task challenge. Emotional challenge is defined as, “the perception that another is challenging the support recipient to evaluate his or her attitudes, values, and feelings”. In a similar way, task challenge is characterised by “the perception that an other is challenging the support recipient’s way of thinking about a task or an activity in order to stretch, motivate, and lead the support recipient to greater creativity, excitement and involvement” (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997, p. 136).

As noted earlier, teaching colleagues provided high degrees of listening and emotional support to the early career teachers. In their conversations with the early career teachers on work issues and curriculum implementation, some teachers would also provide emotional and task challenge. They did this by encouraging the new teachers to reflect on and critique their practices and to take risks. This occurred most effectively in those schools which embraced a learning culture for teachers where all teachers were positioned as learners and were encouraged to share and critique ideas and strategies. This is where school leaders played a part in providing ‘emotional and task challenge’ support. Rather than providing it directly, they *enabled* the support to be provided, as a result of the culture they had established in the school. This confirms the key role that leaders play in establishing collaborative learning cultures (Peters & Pearce, 2012; Wood, 2005).

Our studies have highlighted the point that early career teachers need emotional challenge and task challenge in addition to listening and emotional support. This is best illustrated by an early career teacher who received the latter but not the former. As she said; “*There’s a lot of relationship support but not necessarily the professional discussions.*”

Two other support providers who provided emotional and task challenge support were the students themselves and their parents/carers. When the teachers’ students did not engage with a lesson as well as they would have liked or when a parent gave some critical feedback

on a practice they had implemented, the early career teachers were forced to re-evaluate their practices and/or attitudes. This is shown clearly in the following; *“I had to change my whole seating arrangement because of some comments from a couple of the girls. They thought I was favouring certain students. It really made me stop and question what I was doing”*.

### **Personal**

Once again, the teachers' family and friends provided support in these areas. They played a role in challenging the teachers' attitudes towards teaching and life in general as well as their thinking about particular activities or tasks they might have planned for their students. One of the most significant areas in which the teachers' families challenged them was in regard to looking after themselves and having a work-life balance. As one teacher commented; *“My partner says that I can't keep pushing my family and friends aside because I'm always have marking and the preparing to do”*. This type of support/challenge was particularly relevant given that the teachers reported being tired all or most of the time. As one said; *“I've never been in such an emotionally and physically challenging job.”*

A number of the teachers spoke of their parents urging them to look after themselves and not to work so hard. A number quoted their partners as insisting on them having some time free of work on the weekend. Gu and Day (2007) also found that partners insisted on their teacher spouse adopting a work-life balance, ensuring weekends were spent interacting with family and this helped the teachers to be more resilient.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

As has been shown, different types of support were valued by the early career teachers in our studies and appeared to influence their resilience. These included being listened to and emotionally supported, being offered advice and professional knowledge, being acknowledged and appreciated, having the realities of teaching confirmed and being professionally challenged. All of these forms of support appeared to be crucial to facilitating the early career teachers' resilience. By receiving these types of support they reported feeling more confident and competent in their teaching role. As a result they were able to successfully assume a positive teacher identity. Teacher identity refers to the development of one's awareness and understanding of self as a teacher (Johnson et al, 2012). We know that identity development is a challenging process for new teachers (Akerman & Meijer, 2011; Johnson et al, 2012; Morrison, 2013; Pearce & Morrison, 2011). Our findings from the studies support the assertion made by Day & Gu (2007) that successfully negotiating a teacher identity is pivotal to becoming a resilient teacher.

The key finding that we wish to highlight is that in every category of support, there was evidence of both personal and professional relationships. That is, each of the early career teachers' personal and professional relationships afforded the teachers the various types of social support resources. This supports our argument that it is problematic to represent early career teachers' support providers in two distinct categories – personal and professional, as has been perpetuated in the literature. Such a personal/professional dichotomy is unhelpful as it suggests that the role of support providers is to provide *either* personal *or* professional support. Our studies have highlighted that the early career teachers' personal and professional relationships played multiple roles. They did this by providing different types of support at various times. Hence our findings confirm that whilst early career teachers' informal relationships play an influential role in their resilience, it is problematic to discuss these only in terms of providing personal or professional support. Their roles are much more complex than that.

To add to this complexity is the fact that personal and professional roles are played out across multiple contexts. Hence we cannot support the traditional view that professional support implies support from within the school or the profession, and personal support relates to support in the home context of a teacher. The early career teachers in our studies were afforded support, in the forms of emotional and listening, tangible assistance, task appreciation, reality confirmation and emotional and task challenge, by all of their significant relationships, whether they be in the school (i.e. professional), or outside of the school (i.e. personal). The traditional home and work contexts are further expanded if we take into account the support spaces provided by the use of the internet. Our findings have highlighted the role that online social networking plays in the support process and the permeable nature of technology as it invades and strengthens the links between the home and school contexts.

The final point in relation to the problematic and complex nature of personal/professional relationships is that not all support providers have traditionally been recognised. For example, one of the insights afforded by our studies was the role of students and students' parents in providing some of the types of support to the early career teachers. These groups have not hitherto been identified in the literature as support providers to new teachers. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore this in any depth and will be further developed in a future article. It is only very recently, for example, that the reciprocal influence of students on teachers has been recognised – that is, that positive teacher-student relationships are not only important for students' development, but they are also important for early career teachers' development (Le Cornu, 2013; McNally & Blake, 2009; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011).

In conclusion, we believe that it is not helpful to confine our thinking to personal and professional support providers, as though they can be *either* personal *or* professional. We also deem it unhelpful that supportive relationships are often bound by a certain context (i.e. professional support relates to school-based support, and personal support relates to support provided outside of school). As has been shown, all of the significant relationships in which the early career teachers engaged provided a variety of support, the nature of which crossed traditional boundaries of the personal and professional; school and home, and; face-to-face and online.

There are a number of implications from the findings of our studies. Firstly there is a need for research to address the role that different types of support can play which can enhance teacher resilience. This means that there needs to be a focus on the type of information or support, rather than the individual or the context from which the support is sought. Also, future research could explore gender differences given the majority of our participants were female. Secondly, other implications relate to schools and systems. As well as any formal induction and mentoring arrangements for early career teachers, schools need to promote informal staff interaction. This allows new teachers to develop relationships with colleagues to promote the exchange of various social supports. Further, systems need to acknowledge and invest in the provision of informal support and learning opportunities for early career teachers. Finally, teacher education programs need to explicitly address the ways in which beginning teachers can develop strong supportive networks (Baker-Doyle, 2011), and identify particular individuals or social networks, inside of school, outside of school, or online, which will be most beneficial in enabling teachers to overcome workplace challenges.

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