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Teacher Identity in the Early Career Phase: Trajectories that Explain and Influence Development

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Abstract: Early career teaching is a difficult phase to navigate with many newly qualified teachers choosing to leave the profession within the first few years. The professional identities of these and other teachers are shaped by challenging and unanticipated experiences. The schools where this teaching takes place also have profound influence on these teachers' individual responses to their new roles. This paper reports on how the contexts and professional environments of fourteen early career teachers contributed to the establishment of three distinct trajectories of teacher identity: the emergent, tenuous and distressed. An examination of their developing identities revealed the influential experiences and individual responses that were connected to how the novice teachers understood and explained themselves with and through influential others. These descriptions and representations of themselves shaped their future actions and evolving beliefs. These were then implicated in their identity trajectories, which in turn contributed to their professional traction or early exit from the profession.

Introduction

Becoming a teacher is a complex process and the early career phase is difficult to navigate. Descriptions of this phase usually incorporate the first several years of progress towards effective teaching practice (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Flores & Day, 2006; Hong, 2010) but are also characterised by a range of unfamiliar and diverse classroom experiences that challenge teachers on a number of fronts (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). This phase often reveals a gulf between pre-conceived understandings of teaching and the realities of lived experience. These experiences have contributed to descriptions of this phase as a time of survival (Day, 1999; Huberman, 1989a). The confronting nature of these experiences is often exacerbated by the contexts in which they occur. Moreover, the historical and social contexts of teaching influence how new teachers experience the profession (Day & Gu, 2010). In many ways, the professional networks, available resources and geographical location of schools contribute to newly qualified teachers' capacities to thrive or struggle (Johnson et al., 2010; Sharplin, 2002).

These contextual factors contribute to a tumultuous time of transition, where early career teachers also engage in the task of constructing a sense of teacher identity. This process is shaped by these contextual factors but it also reflects the complexities that arise when newcomers enter the profession and attempt to apply their existing perspectives, priorities and philosophies to this work (Pearce & Morrison, 2011).

The perceptions and understandings that newly qualified teachers carry into the profession are the product of a long history of observation. These observations are made from

the perspective of a student or someone other than a teacher (Lortie, 1975). Due to the perspectives from which these observations are made, developing understandings are limited by what they fail to incorporate about teaching. This means that early career teachers can lack insight into the multiplicity of the role and the diversity of challenges that they will face. Newly qualified teachers can therefore enter the profession oblivious to the complexity of their chosen field. Equally, initial teacher education programs can go only so far in preparing teachers for the diverse experiences and inevitable challenges that await them in the classroom (Abbott-Chapman, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Consequently, a great deal of important work happens within this early career phase, which Fantilli and McDougall (2009) describe as the most difficult and hectic period of teachers' lives.

Our long-held beliefs about who we are as individuals and why these make us suitable for teaching underpin our journey towards teaching (Abbott-Chapman, 2005; Day & Gu, 2010). What happens within this early career phase is therefore an important melding of personal histories and professional engagement, all with the view to establishing a sense of who we might be in the future (Day, 2012). Consequently, the early career phase is a time of constant self-assessment in relation to a new body of knowledge, new experiences, unfamiliar expectations and burgeoning responsibilities. Assessing one's own suitability and capacity for this role, and subsequently identifying as a teacher, therefore takes on new importance throughout this early career phase (Flores & Day, 2006).

This paper reports on the exploration of teacher identity formation within this phase. The process of developing a concept of oneself as a teacher is presented here as a complex, dynamic and multi-faceted process, just as others have found it to be (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Fourteen early career teachers shared their evolving beliefs, experiences and responses to teaching within a range of South Australian schools. The process of becoming, through moderating experiences, perceptions, interpretations and responses in relation to others, highlighted how identity was instrumental in shaping their beliefs about themselves and in guiding their aspirations beyond the early career phase. As a result, the process of identity formation is explained here as essential in understanding the products of identity formation. In the same way that Huberman (1989b, p. 32) describes career development as a process, the process of identity formation within the early career phase is equally understood to be 'descriptive rather than normative'. The year-long engagement with these participants revealed how these teachers understood and described their identities and how they made sense of their work and their lives.

Early Career Teacher Attrition

A significant body of research has established that the early career phase is particularly challenging, so much so that many 'new teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time and effort simply [keeping] their heads above water.' (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009, p. 814). In Australia, like other similarly placed Western nations including the US, Canada and the UK, this contributes to a high attrition rate within the profession. In Australia, this figure is estimated to be between 25-40% in the first three years (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002). This rate continues to climb, with studies showing that up to 50% of early career teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Joiner & Edwards, 2008).

The effectiveness of teachers is shown to spike once they have negotiated the early career phase, therefore a high attrition rate comes at a significant cost (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). According to Ewing and Smith (2003) the most capable early career teachers are likely to leave the profession first, which is of particular concern . Consequently, this erosion

of quality and quantity from the profession looms as an on-going threat to the strength, capacity and success of the teaching workforce (Ramsey, 2000). This also has particular negative consequences for those students who are more likely to be taught by a revolving workforce of early career teachers, namely students from hard-to-staff, disadvantaged, rural and remote schools (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009; Thomson & De Bortoli, 2009). As a result, teacher attrition within this paper refers to what Macdonald (1999) describes as 'wastage', meaning the premature exit of quality teachers rather than the movement of teachers from one teaching role to another.

There are many factors associated with decisions to leave the profession prematurely (Joiner & Edwards, 2008; Macdonald, 1999). Of those that leave, many cite the personal and emotional challenges encountered through their new roles as contributing factors (Jones, 2006; Kyriacou, 1989). The lack of preparedness for their roles (Jones, 2006) and the unanticipated nature of this work (Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Löfström, 2012) confront existing beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. Equally, classroom and student behaviour management have been identified as significant areas of challenge for early career teachers (Jones, 2006). Implicated in these managerial issues are teachers' needs to relate to their students and the desire to build relationships with them (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Teaching circumstances and professional responsibilities do not always allow for this level of relatedness however, and so the personal motivations to join teaching can become disconnected from or be at odds with the professional expectations or roles required within the classroom. Tensions between managing students' behaviour and connecting with them can confront early career teachers' sense of role and purpose (Anspal, et al., 2012). Equally, inadequate socialisation of new and high quality teachers through induction and mentoring programs remains a significant barrier to retaining these teachers in the workforce (Joiner & Edwards, 2008). Ingersoll and Strong (2011) cite a significant body of research literature which highlights the positive impact that induction and mentoring have on retention, and so a lack of access to such support has on-going implications. Furthermore, a lack of personal and professional connection to teaching colleagues and school leaders can contribute to feelings of isolation and dissonance (Pearce & Morrison, 2011). Moreover, this array of complexity sits within the broader social and historical contexts of teachers' lives, which in itself challenges teachers' commitment and capacity to teach (Day, 2012). In these ways and in these circumstances, the personal rewards of teaching can be outweighed and overshadowed by the costs.

The transition into teaching is therefore simultaneously a professional and personal endeavour where the stakes are high. This process is reliant upon the teacher being present in the process (Day & Gu, 2010) and reflects an important mix of emotional struggle alongside professional competence. Consequently, challenging experiences and insecurities are interpreted at an individual level where some of this is seen but much of this struggle is concealed (Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009). The contestation and grappling with expectations, responsibilities and responses contributes to how these teachers understand their progress and fit within the profession. As a result, this on-going process is strongly connected to the subsequent teacher identities that take shape. As Day (2012, p. 15) describes, the link between the personal and professional identities is clear;

> There is, then, an unavoidable interrelationship between the personal and the professional if only because the overwhelming evidence is that teaching demands significant personal investment. So when we think of the importance to good teaching of a positive, stable identity, it is necessary to construe such identity as being made up of these elements.

This process of becoming and of identity formation is therefore dialogic and complex, reflecting a multitude of factors that encourage and/or inhibit the professional identity trajectories of these teachers (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Teacher Identity Formation in the Early Career Phase

Teacher professional identity has gained significant research attention throughout the past several decades; however it has remained difficult to conceptualise (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). The lack of consistency across disciplines and research projects has made it difficult to agree upon a shared framework for researching and explaining it. Consequently, the process of identity formation has been difficult to articulate.

Erik Erikson contributed much to the modern construct of identity formation (Erikson, 1950, 1959, 1968). His theorising of identity crises and resolution throughout a life-long epigenetic process has provided a springboard for others to build on. The abovementioned crises of becoming a teacher demonstrate how Erickson's work has provided a language to describe and understand that work. Contemporary theorising of identity and professional identity also recognises identity development as on-going but rather than seeing this as the product of the response to a series of crises and resolutions as Erikson did, identity development is now being seen as a highly complex, discontinuous, multi-faceted and non-linear process of interaction between individuals and their various social and professional environments (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Common developmental patterns are evident within the professional stages of teachers (Day, 2012); however their identity formation is much less uniform. The central role of individual meaning-making, in response to social, professional and geographical contexts give rise to a wide range of expressions. These understandings have been generated across academic disciplines and are contributing to a more widely accepted framework for exploring the concept.

Akkerman and Meijer (2011) connect the dynamic and discontinuous nature of teacher identity to its multi-faceted characteristics. Early career teachers entering schools face this transition with a multitude of observations and understandings of teaching, however the transition from pre-service to early career teacher often confronts and challenges those pre-conceived beliefs. Aspects of their teacher identities therefore develop, change and subside due to their contexts, roles, and professional networks. As a result, teacher identity cannot be thought of as a universal understanding of oneself as a teacher, as being a teacher means so many different things within the various workplaces, schools and communities where teachers work. Rather, teacher identity represents the attempts to explain oneself within the various contexts and through a multitude of experiences of teaching.

Sfard and Prusak (2005) illustrate the complexity of attempting to understand and explain ourselves through our identities by likening it to 'collapsing a video clip into a snapshot' (p. 16). By doing so, they explain that we are able to make sense of the present through our understandings and experiences of the past while preparing for the challenges of the future. Similarly, Maclean and White (2007) state that professional identity is how we represent ourselves through our professional roles, both to ourselves and others, and we do this through the beliefs, values, language and resources that are embedded in such professions. In these ways 'professional action is doing professional identity' (Watson, 2006, p. 510).

These understandings highlight the complexities and the contradictions of identity formation. On the one hand we use identity to explain and describe ourselves in simple ways and to position ourselves in relation to others. On the other hand, identity is infinitely

complex and incorporates subtle representations and concealed understandings of ourselves that cannot and are not conveyed to others. Pre-existing perceptions and understandings of teaching combine with complex work environments and many other challenges to produce teacher identities. Together these influential factors produce spaces and circumstances for early career teachers to understand their work and themselves within it.

More experienced colleagues within the profession also provide important feedback about the progress newcomers are making. Their alignment with experienced teachers and with the profession more generally are seen to reflect their developing capacity (Sachs, 2001). Those who talk positively about themselves as teachers and who are developing a positive sense of themselves as a teacher, can be seen as having an innate or natural capacity for teaching. Therefore, identity can provide a lens within the early career phase that can sharpen the focus on those aspects of teaching that are progressing well and those aspects that are not.

As such, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009, p. 178) cite the following definition as a way of understanding teacher identity:

> *It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (Sachs, 2005, p. 15)*

This definition acknowledges that teacher identity is not an endpoint but a way of explaining oneself within their professional field and within the context of their own professional and personal lives.

Methods

This research explored teacher identity formation by drawing on the qualitative traditions of ethnography, narrative inquiry and phenomenology and the diverse contributions from the literature. The prioritising of individual meaning-making, personal perspectives and insights and the construction of concepts to explain personally significant understandings and responses are reflective of what these qualitative traditions share (Moustakas, 1994). As a result, this methodological approach provided a pragmatic orientation for exploring the experiences and responses of a cohort of early career teachers (Patton, 2002). This orientation allowed for the teachers to direct attention towards what emerged as meaningful, important and relevant to their identity formation throughout this early career phase.

Fourteen early career teachers were recruited from across South Australia. These teachers had a range of experiences and entry points into the profession. Half of the cohort had completed a four year undergraduate degree following completion of their secondary education. The other half had completed a graduate qualification following undergraduate studies in other fields or time spent in other professional spheres. These participants were selected because they had secured full-time teaching positions for the duration of the data collection phase (the 2010 school year) and they were either commencing or had just commenced their teaching careers (with less than two years of full-time teaching experience at the beginning of the data collection phase). Figure 1 shows the participants' point of entry into the profession and their subsequent teaching experience prior to and during the data collection phase.
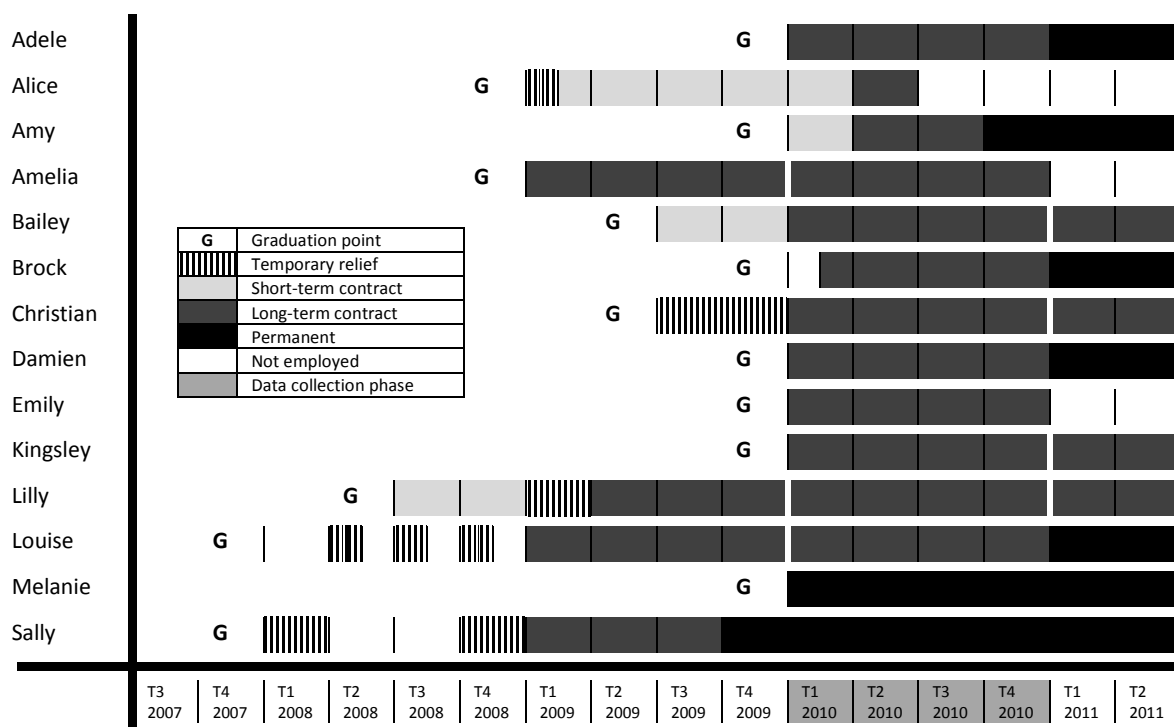
Figure 1: Participants' Teaching Experiences and Current Status of Employment

Some participants had entered teaching only weeks prior to their first interview and observations, while others had graduated nearly two years earlier and had interrupted teaching experiences throughout that time. Twelve of the fourteen teachers were employed on year-long contracts at the start of the year and two were employed as permanent teachers. All of the participants were employed by the two largest education systems in South Australia, Department of Education and Child Development and Catholic Education South Australia.

These early career teachers were interviewed and observed throughout their first or second year of teaching with the aim of exploring how they understood their developing teacher identities. Each participant was interviewed up to four times throughout the 2010 school year. The first round of interviews was conducted using a common interview schedule for all participants. Data gathered from these first interviews was analysed and then this informed the development of individualised interview schedules for subsequent rounds. These semi-structured interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and later transcribed. These interviews were regularly combined with in-class, non-participatory observations. Observational notes were used within interviews to inform questions or to seek clarification of previous interview responses. Field notes were also kept in the form of a written field diary, capturing the researcher's initial responses to these interviews and observations, often drawing connections and contentions between the interview and observation data.

These data were initially read and re-read to identify significant themes through an initial process of open coding (Richards, 2009). The constructed themes were then developed as the initial nodes for analysis using QSR Nvivo9 qualitative software. Data were analysed between each of the four rounds of data collection and the nodes were adjusted in response to the data. Each successive round of interviews provided opportunities to question the participants about earlier data and analysis, which helped to revise and hone the nodes for further analysis.

Findings

The importance of the processes of identity formation (how these identities were being shaped), in addition to the products (how these identities were explained) were important findings of this research. The experiences of and responses to early career teaching created innumerable circumstances for the participants to develop their understandings of themselves and this information was continually used to structure their evolving teacher identities in dynamic and fluid ways.

The use of semi-structured interviews across a year of their early career teaching illustrated the evolution of the participants' beliefs, values and understandings of themselves, as they grappled with them. This was particularly evident in the ways that the participants directed conversation towards their priorities within this meaning-making process.

What emerged from this process was a de-emphasis on individual characteristics or suitability for teaching and a prioritising of explanations that focused on the experienced social and professional environments of their schools (Day & Gu, 2010). For these early career teachers, their sense of who they were as teachers and who they were becoming as individuals were interwoven with the relationships they were building with school leaders, teaching colleagues, students and their school communities.

Exploring the process of identify formation in this way contributed to construction of three distinct trajectories of teacher identity. These trajectories were constructed during on-going analysis of the longitudinal data set. These trajectories of teacher identity, namely the *emergent*, *tenuous* and *distressed* trajectories, captured the twists and turns of becoming and reflected the distinctly different paths of the participants at this early stage of their careers. These trajectories became my way of explaining how the participants interpreted their current experiences and how they were interpreting their futures. The trajectories also reflected how the participants explained how others perceived them as teachers.

Emergent Teacher Identity

By the end of the year, eight of the fourteen early career teachers were exhibiting emergent teacher identities. These teachers saw hope and promise within themselves and they were looking optimistically towards their teaching futures. Their early experiences within the profession were confirming their sense of suitability and capacity and they were conveying that their identities as teachers were consolidating. They had a momentum within their teaching lives and there was positivity in what they were doing. They were experiencing success in their teaching practice and finding success in meeting the expectations of their roles.

Adele conveyed this sense of suitability with the profession through her love of school. It was a belief that she had held throughout her schooling and undergraduate studies and it was strengthened through her early experiences of teaching.

> *I loved being at school. I still love being at school. I know it's in a different role but I love being at school. I love everything about school so probably I knew I wouldn't be able to stay away for long. […] I like the whole idea and the structure and the environment. I think that's why I'm doing what I'm doing. (Adele, 3 March)*

Like other participants on this emergent trajectory, Adele was able to draw on the professional collaboration and relationships with more experienced colleagues to interpret her experiences and to strengthen her sense of purpose. Adele's teaching colleagues often did this on her behalf, while also offering their considered perceptions and responses about her experiences. This then allowed Adele to moderate and graft her own understandings around

those of her peers. As she explained, influential staff provided the guidance and support at pivotal times and provided an on-going sense of capacity. This included such things as managing student behaviour, coping with the complexity of teaching tasks and rationalising emotional responses to experiences. As Adele explained;

> *I'm always having chats with [the Middle School coordinator] and if I was*
> *her I would go home and just crash completely. It's amazing, but it's great*
> *to have someone like that at this school, because she's a great role model*
> *and not just for the kids, but for the teachers as well. I just feel really*
> *thankful to be working so well with her and we've got a very good*
> *relationship which is very good. (Adele, 3 November)*

In a time of constant self-assessments about her capacity and suitability for teaching, the input of other teachers and school leaders emerged as essential to how Adele understood herself as a teacher. Through feedback, guidance, direction, comfort, debriefing and care, she constructed understandings of herself that reflected this input, as she described;

> *I've received a lot of compliments […] I've received a lot more positive*
> *feedback which has helped I think, like looking at those things I think I'm*
> *doing really well. I've been given quite a lot of compliments, that a couple*
> *of people did not think I was first year, like in terms of the way I was coping*
> *or just the way they saw me. (Adele, 3 March)*

The participants' observations and interpretations of what they saw as successful teachers and school leaders were also incorporated into the participants' understandings of themselves. The participants within this emergent group explicitly acknowledged how and where they often adapted observable traits and skills of others in attempts to meet the challenges of their roles. The influence that these role models had over the development of the participants was therefore profound. They provided examples of how others navigated the challenges while also emphasising that their struggles were not unique. Adele explained this process in relation to her developing teacher identity as a construct that was constantly being shaped and re-shaped. The malleable nature of her professional identity was connected to how she responded to her experiences and how others helped her to make sense of them;

> *You're constantly constructing it and it's constantly changing as well,*
> *absolutely. It's not like we come off a production line and we're like that.*
> *You sort of create it and keep going. (Adele, 3 November)*

Consequently, the professional identity that Adele developed throughout this early career phase was therefore inextricably linked to the collaborations, relationships and shared understandings of herself and her work as a teacher, in relation to others around her. Importantly however, these beliefs were not the product of chance. School principals, coordinators and more-experienced teachers regularly provided the supports and opportunities for her to experience success and to be successful. She was given opportunities to collaborate with others, to draw on the expertise available and to debrief about her experiences. Adele talked about these experiences as influential in how she understood herself as a teacher and how they contributed to her developing capacity. Adele highlighted how this translated to opportunity and understanding, as she pointed out;

> *I'm well aware of all the other Year 8 homeroom teachers because we're*
> *often doing things, planning things together or else my house leader for my*
> *house…I'm in contact with him all the time. He's someone I look up to and*
> *he does a lot of organising for me or prepares me or shows me things.*
> *(Adele, 3 March)*

Opportunities were also taken to involve the early career teachers in the broader professional networks of their schools. For Adele this included formalised events, including where she was provided release time to meet leadership and administrative staff;

> *The school got all the new beginning teachers together and put on a lunch*
> *[…] with some of the more key people in school so we got to interact with*

> *them […] because sometimes you don't really see them when they're behind*
> *the scenes. So, they've definitely made the effort to make sure that we know*
> *everybody and that we're in contact. (Adele, 3 March)*

These opportunities to connect and identify with other staff proved to be essential in this early career phase. As Adele experienced the commonly experienced emotional peaks and troughs of teaching (Intrator, 2006), her ability to draw on others within the profession provided authentic assurances that they could continue to do this work well. Consequently, when challenges arose for her, she exhibited the confidence to take risks and to believe in herself to navigate them successfully. Crucially, she was also very aware of the support that she had from colleagues and school leaders to approach her work in such ways. As a result, Adele's beliefs about herself and her work were collaboratively generated and they continued to prosper via the momentum of collective intentions. Despite the inevitable challenges, insecurities and vulnerabilities, there remained an emergent perspective within her sense of herself as a teacher and a promise within her developing teacher identity of an upward trajectory.

Distressed Teacher Identity

The capacity for other participants to shape their teacher identities were also apparent in the ways that this did not occur. Where the participants were professionally or socially isolated, and where they were unable to participate or engage in the types of interaction and support discussed above, their beliefs about themselves as teachers were plagued by insecurities. Doubts about their capacity to meet expectations flourished. For example, the lack of opportunities to use others to interpret their teaching experiences seemed to drastically inhibit some participants' capacity to do this productively; so much so that over time the isolation and lack of dialogue with colleagues was interpreted as a sign of their lack of alignment with others and the profession. This professional isolation was interpreted as a product of their lack of suitability for teaching and so their understandings of themselves as teachers suffered. These developing beliefs included constant comments of their uncertainties about whether they could do the job well and whether they could continue to do the job into the future. Moreover, negative experiences dominated their reflections and subsequent challenges were related to on-going struggle.

Emily entered the profession with similar views to Adele and the other participants and had an initial period of positivity about her role and her place within the profession. Unfortunately for her, she was working largely in isolation and putting in enormous hours after school and on weekends. These experiences foreshadowed the early signs of her struggle as she attempted to compensate for her challenging realities of teaching, as she explained;

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

Emily struggled to maintain momentum from this point on. Her long-held and well-established and beliefs about herself as a teacher at this point became challenged by her isolating experiences and her lack of connection to staff within her rural school. As a result, her established understandings of herself and teaching were being re-focused towards her inability to cope and the experiences that compounded that belief, as she explained;

> *I find it hard some days to really switch off from it. It is just always there*
> *[…] some days I will just go home and things will be just going through my*
> *head, like what you can do better and just ideas that I have. They just don't*
> *go away […] Sometimes I am at home and I think 'Oh, I could go and do*

> *this' and because I live close to the school I tend to come over here but after*
> *I just get really tired and I can't switch off. (Emily, 17 May)*

Emily was aware of supports that were helping her to cope with her new experiences. She explained that the opportunity to debrief with a colleague had been an important time when she realised that other teachers went through similar struggles. These opportunities were limited however, and they did not happen regularly enough to provide the level of dialogue and support that she required.

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

Authentic and on-going engagement with her colleagues was what Emily was searching for and the lack of it was contributing to her distressed sense of identity as a teacher. Emily was surrounded by teachers in her school but she was not connected to them. There were not opportunities to collaborate and she felt disconnected from the staff, as she stated 'people come in and out but they are not really in here long enough to really comment' (Emily 17 may).

As a result of these experiences and insecurities, Emily had left the profession by the end of the year and her teacher identity could be best described as distressed. She had persisted in her role until the end of the year, but the emotionally draining experiences of persisting in the face of continued struggle meant that she finished the school year with a discernible belief that teaching was not a suitable fit for her. As she explained, '…no one really knows how tired you feel and how stressed you can be at times. They don't see that I guess' (Emily, 8 December).

Emily struggled with no longer seeing herself as capable of teaching and felt unsure of how to go about that work successfully. Her distressed teacher identity was in stark contrast to how she had explained herself and her work at the point of career entry, just a few months prior. Emily's sense of herself as a teacher had persisted from childhood and she described it as a core understanding she had about herself;

> *I think I always wanted to be a teacher […] I always thought that from a*
> *young age. It's funny because a lot of people at university said the same*
> *thing. I don't know, it's probably one of those professions that you kind of*
> *just know (Emily, 17 May)*

Throughout her first year of teaching Emily's sense of fit within the profession was severely eroded, however, and her teacher identity was distressed. She was emotionally vulnerable and struggled to bring herself to return to work each Monday;

> *I have asked for help when I did have a really low point, I just didn't think I*
> *could come back and my Mum made me call the acting principal at the time*
> *and I couldn't even talk to her I was crying so much (Emily, 27 October)*

These feelings of distress spilled over to Emily's personal life. Her struggles within the profession were not anticipated or desirable outcomes of entering teaching and her previous experiences and understandings of teaching and of herself as a teacher did not prepare her for this eventuality. Emily had prepared for teaching for a long time prior to entering her teacher education program at university and had been identifying herself as a good fit for the profession for a significant part of her life. Now, these altered understandings divorced her from this professional space and the colleagues that had promised so much. The result was a distinct divide between Emily and those teachers around her;

> *I mean the relationships haven't really changed. It's kind of like if you want*
> *help you either have to be bawling your eyes out and banging on someone's*
> *door. Like no one really checks up on you in a professional kind of way*

> *[…] Other than that I can't say that I have really built professional relationships…it's just not been…everyone is kind of out for themselves in a way. There is no team. (Emily, 8 December)*

The most notable aspect of this profound shift was that Emily was operating in relative isolation. She did not have the social and professional dialogue and interaction with teaching colleagues and school leadership to the same degree that the other participants did. The challenges that they faced were predominantly their own to face. In times of hardship there were often little or no collaborative opportunities to share the load. Equally, there was a discernible feeling of abandonment by colleagues and school leaders. This disconnect from colleagues was conveyed by Louise (a fellow participant and early career colleague of Emily), where she remarked about Emily's struggles in the school as a result of her isolation;

> *I've had certain discussions with Emily saying "Oh, in my first year that was hard" and I've tried to help her as well […] I can understand how she wants to go home on the weekends and how she wants to go back to the city. […] It must have been so hard for her, first year out, all big and new, away from home. So I support her for doing it, because I wouldn't have been able to do it. (Louise, 8 December)*

In contrast to Emily's experiences, the participants who were exhibiting emergent teacher identities were highly connected to a number of teaching colleagues. They participated in regular team meetings, often planned together, were physically situated close to other teachers and had opportunities to debrief on a daily basis. They also had on-going, formal and informal dialogue and interaction with leaders at various levels of school hierarchy around these matters. At times of struggle, leaders and more-experienced teachers assumed some responsibility for how these situations were managed and in these circumstances it appeared that the well-being and development of the early career teachers was not left to chance. As a result, Emily's reflections on her year often focused more heavily on those experiences that had confronted and distressed her and glossed over others;

> *For me the lows outweigh the highs, even though there are highs. Like for some reason I think I have been affected quite severely because when things happen it should be a high and you just don't feel very happy about it. Like I don't know – like when a parent comes to you and is just praising you and it just doesn't seem to affect you the way that it should […] It feels like…it's weird. I was saying to Mum that you just feel like your emotions are all out of whack. You feel like you should be really sad and upset about it but you just don't feel that way. (Emily, 8 December)*

Emily's experiences of teaching therefore contributed to her distressed teacher identity. She had navigated the first year of teaching but had come through it personally and professionally emotionally battered and bruised.

Tenuous Teacher Identity

Bailey was one participant who exhibited a tenuous teacher identity, as he oscillated between states of emergent and distressed teacher identity. At times he demonstrated the self-belief and promise of Adele and received affirmations from colleagues and his school principal to this end. At other times, he demonstrated a distressed sense of teacher identity akin to Emily's struggles, and described his unravelling sense of himself as a teacher. His oscillation between these states conveyed that his identity could follow either one of these other trajectories and that he could as easily flourish or fail.

There were times throughout Bailey's first year where he felt a close connection to colleagues. He was working closely with them and receiving feedback about his practice and development. His teaching colleagues were also lightening his load by providing resources,

guidance and practical support. As he stated, these measures provided him with a sense of capacity to meet expectations and to be successful;

> *[The teacher next door] is helping me out with a few of the kids that I am*
> *really struggling with so [I] send them down to her class. She is willing to*
> *help me out there and buddy up with the younger kids […] so that is*
> *fantastic and all staff here are bloody good […] Nothing seems to stress*
> *them - water off a duck's back. It's like "Don't worry about it. Do what you*
> *have to do. You are doing a good job!" and they are very encouraging and*
> *yeah that's just been good. (Bailey, 29 July)*

At other times, Bailey felt vulnerable and disconnected from staff as he struggled to manage the complexity and immensity of his new teaching role. Challenging experiences and his responses to them compromised his success and undermined his sense of himself as a teacher. His responses also put him in the principal's firing line, which further eroded his confidence;

> *things that are outside of teaching that you need to be responsible for, I*
> *wasn't. I probably just stuffed up a couple of times. I was getting a bit of*
> *anxiety and tried to hide from a few things […] I knew the principal was*
> *going to have a go at me and she wasn't happy […] she got me and she had*
> *a pretty hard go at me […] she made the point that you need to step up to*
> *the plate and it ended up I got teary […] I think I was just overwhelmed by*
> *it all and she ended up having a good chat to me but that was a real*
> *learning curve. (Bailey, 29 July)*

Each time Bailey bounced back from these challenges and continued to see himself positively as a teacher. He talked about the respect he was earning from students and the sense of purpose he was gaining from his professional role. These outcomes were personally significant and provided motivation to pursue his professional goals.

> *I feel like I can walk in and I feel confident about who I am and about what I*
> *am doing at the school and that's because they are all so supportive and*
> *everyone supports each other. You know everyone tells each other you are*
> *doing a good job so it makes you stand a bit tall. (Bailey, 29 July)*

The roller-coaster continued for Bailey throughout the year however, as each high was followed by a tremendous low. His oscillation between success and struggle was heightened by the emotional aspects of these experiences. His trajectory was much less predictable and seemed likely to shift at any point.

Discussion

Social participation is a crucial element in becoming part of a professional community (Wenger, 1998) and the role of early career teachers includes an expectation that they will become part of their professional networks. In many ways, we see the capacity of early career teachers as connected to their participation in the professional life of their schools and engagement with the broader social networks of their communities. This connection and participation in networks and the profession more generally speaks to the connection between becoming and identifying as a teacher. As Soong (2013) states, identity has long been used as a term to describe the sameness or unity of individuals. Gender or youth are two ways that we understand how individuals seek to find likeness with others within their lives social worlds (Malloy & Allen, 2007). Consequently, the developing identity of early career teachers is intimately and inextricably linked to their participation in their professional communities and how they understand their place within them, and that has been reaffirmed through these findings.

The social participation of these early career teachers underpinned emergent teacher identities and reflected opportunities for them to be constantly reflecting on their beliefs, understandings, values and experiences. Equally, this reflected their opportunities to be measuring their responses against those of more-experienced others. The need for these teachers to aligning themselves with other teachers and to use them to gauge their accuracy at interpreting and responding to their teaching experiences was therefore pivotal.

Importantly, there were clear indications that these important opportunities for early career teachers to work alongside others were not of the early career teachers' making. In circumstances where the participants were exhibiting an emergent sense of themselves as capable teachers, there were allocations of time, staffing and resources to support that work. These arrangements reflected a shared and intentional approach to supporting the early career teachers by surrounding them with opportunities to share the emotional, professional and practical implications of their teaching. As Pietsch and Williamson (2010) highlight, these opportunities are not always available to these teachers, and the circumstances of early career teachers' employment can make considerable difference. The lack of access to colleagues, professional learning opportunities and resources can confine early career teachers to the periphery of the profession and can hold them in a state of survival rather than allow them to thrive.

The roles that early career teachers perform subsequently carry a significant emotional component, which reflects both their personal motivations to be teaching and the level of emotional investment required to do the job well (O'Connor, 2008). The early career teachers' capacity to navigate this phase and these responsibilities is therefore connected to the opportunities provided and the support given to do this work well (Peters & Pearce, 2012). In order for the participants to learn about their roles and to make meaning of their experiences they needed their professional communities to be engaging with them and to be providing opportunities to understand this work at a personal and professional level. Wenger (1998, p. 5) highlights that when newcomers participate in the 'social configurations' of their professional communities, they gain access to the shared dialogue and iteration of the group and therefore benefit from the collective meaning that is made and conveyed within the group. Consequently, the task of identifying as a teacher and of establishing oneself as an emergent professional is linked to those who support that work. There is therefore a responsibility on those within the profession to welcome in the newcomers and to help them navigate their early work.

The participants' experiences, collaborative professional networks and quality of relationships that contributed to the identity formation were therefore as important as the expressions of identity themselves. The emergent, tenuous and distressed identities of the teachers were outward expressions of the participants' experiences with and through their schools, colleagues and students throughout an incredibly challenging and important phase in their professional lives. Their experiences were much more complex than just having or not having a mentor or induction program at the point of career entry. For these early career teachers who exhibited an emergent identity, there was a tangible value placed on the experiences, well-being and development of them by their school staff, and they shared in that responsibility.

With the knowledge of being held in high regard within their schools, these early career teachers were able to see a way through their immediate challenges of career entry and kept adjusting their gaze for future challenges and success in ways that Peters and Pearce (2012) describe as resiliency within the early career phase. In circumstances where this happened, the early career teachers demonstrated a capacity to respond to challenges and to shape their teacher identities in ways that incorporated the views and perspectives of others, including their school principals (Peters & Le Cornu, 2007). In these ways, the assessments that the

early career teachers made were sustainable in terms of what made teaching work for them. Where these were absent, significant areas of concern and uncertainty arose, which destabilised them.

Conclusion

This research consolidates understandings of teacher identity formation as being complex, dynamic, discontinuous and multi-faceted (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). While the participants' beliefs about teaching were shaped over a considerable period leading into teaching (Lortie, 1975), early career experiences challenged them in countless ways (Khamis, 2000). The participants possessed characteristics, skills and knowledge that aided them in managing these challenges; however, the alignment of these with external factors allowed them to construct concepts of themselves as teachers that were malleable and sustainable. Consequently, while developing successful teacher identities helped to negotiate some challenges of the early career phase, these teachers demonstrated that the strength and capacity gained from this construct were reliant upon the connections to contextual factors that enhanced their development.

The findings of this research suggest that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the experiences and circumstances of teacher identity formation. Just as early career teachers are mentored in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and practice, so too should professional dialogue include early career teachers' responses to and interpretations of experience, their areas of vulnerability, their pre-existing interpretations of themselves as teachers and their developing practice. The shared capacity that school leaders and teaching colleagues have to shape teacher identity needs acknowledging and needs harnessing as an essential component of learning how to be and identify as a teacher.

In many ways these trajectories of identity development reflect as much about the professional contexts of the early career teachers, as it does about their teacher identities. The emergent, tenuous and distressed identities convey similar understandings about the individual capacity of each participant but this was and is connected to the contexts in which they teach. Understandings of early career teachers and their professional identity formation therefore needs to be viewed in relation to the contexts in which they work, the nature of professional and personal support provided for them, and how responsibility is shared for making this influential time of development beneficial.

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