

Beginning teacher perceptions of their work, well-being and intention to leave

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Abstract

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 123 graduate teachers six weeks after they first commenced full-time teaching in 2002 in the Australian state of Queensland and again six months later. Standard surveys indicated graduate teachers were experiencing relatively high levels of work pressure and emotional exhaustion, and increasing frequencies of emotional exhaustion and depersonalizing behaviour through the year. Almost a third of respondents indicated a serious intention to leave their current employment after the first 8 months teaching and this intention to leave was significantly correlated with burnout. Qualitative analyses of teacher feedback about issues of major concern to beginning teachers supported the results of the quantitative investigation and depicted increasing concern with a lack of support in an emotionally demanding work environment. Mentoring programs, where implemented, did not ameliorate concern about the absence of support or influence burnout symptoms. Findings were consistent with calls to implement effective programs to support teachers during their first year of employment.

Introduction

Relatively high rates of teacher attrition have been identified as a major issue for the teaching profession over several decades now (e.g., see Gold, Roth, Wright, & Michael, 1991). Along with concerns about the transmission of teacher training to effective practice, concern about relatively high attrition rates has clearly influenced many of the investigations into work pressure, stress and burnout experienced by teachers at the beginning of their careers (Elkerton, 1984; Schonfeld, 2000). Despite strong evidence that actual attrition as well as the expression of serious turnover intentions is strongly related to burnout, relatively few investigations focussing on beginning teacher well-being and attrition have investigated early career burnout as a possible explanation for attrition in beginning teachers (see Fimian & Blanton, 1987 and Friedman, 2000 for exceptions).

Perhaps the reason that beginning teacher burnout has been a neglected area in research focused on the transition of graduate teachers to professional practice arises from the view that the burnout phenomenon is usually considered to develop later in a professional's career, after they have become 'worn-out' and exhausted as a long-term result of unremitting work pressures.

However, despite this view, where burnout has been investigated in beginning teacher populations, significant case rates have been reported. For example, Fimian and Blanton (1987) used a survey methodology to compare burnout in less experienced teachers and trainees with groups of more experienced teachers and found burnout rates in the less experienced and trainee groups to be almost identical to that reported by more experienced teachers. Furthermore, the large discrepancies between actual teaching experience and what the experienced teacher who is experiencing burnout aspires to within their career may be evident in beginning teachers during their first year of practice as discrepancies between actual experience and pre-employment expectations. Friedman (2000) and Schonfeld (2001) both report beginning teacher disappointment arising from unrealised expectations and suggest significant adverse consequences consistent with early career burnout.

Clearly if one is to seriously investigate high attrition rates in beginning teachers, estimated to be in the order of 20 to 25% within the first three to five years of employment (Gold et al., 1991), then the literature linking burnout to turnover should not be ignored simply because the general view of burnout is that it is a long-term consequence of work stress.

Previous work in the burnout field (see Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Kahill, 1988; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; and Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996 for comprehensive summaries) clearly identify several work climate factors, such as work pressure, role clarity and support, as influential in the determining burnout

case rates, however these variables have not been systematically investigated for beginning teachers where other factors, such as the presence or absence of a mentor or other induction program elements may be more influential in determining whether burnout develops at the beginning of a teaching career.

The Present Study

The aim of the present study was to investigate beginning teacher perceptions of their work climate, their turnover intentions and the levels of burnout reported during the first year of professional practice. This study is part of a longer on-going investigation into the relationship between work climate and early career burnout in teachers over the first two years of their professional practice.

Burnout has been defined according to the most widely accepted definition of burnout discussed in the literature, that is Maslach's assertion that burnout is "...a three dimensional syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that occurs among individuals who work with people in some helping capacity" (Maslach, 1982, p. 3).

Method

Beginning teacher perceptions of their work climate were investigated using both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, work climate was investigated by administering a standard survey of work climate, the Work Environment Scale (WES; Moos, 1994), along with supplementary questions seeking to define the type and relative intensity of work being performed. Second, beginning teachers were invited to comment about their current view of their work, work expectations and turnover intentions. Finally, as respondent perceptions of their work environment were expected to systematically change as they became more experienced over the course of their first year of employment, the present study collected work climate data on two occasions, first after only 7 weeks employment (T1) and then again after a further 6 months of continuous employment as a teacher (T2).

Participants

Participants were teachers registered in the Australian state of Queensland and working as teachers in the year following their graduation from a university as teachers. The sample was drawn from contact details held by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration. When first surveyed (T1; March-April 2002), 142 teachers responded to the survey. The same teachers were surveyed again 6 months later (T2). Nineteen of the respondents who completed the survey at T1 and who either failed to return the second survey or were uncontactable at T2 were discarded from this first year analysis. A series of *t*-tests and chi-square analyses concluded that no attrition bias was apparent for those nineteen respondents (13.4%) who dropped out between the initial and subsequent survey.

Instruments

Work Climate

Beginning teacher perceptions of work climate were investigated by administering the Work Environment Scale (WES; Moos, 1994) modified for teacher respondents according to Fisher and Fraser (1991). The modified WES was administered at both T1 and T2. The WES is a 90-item self-report questionnaire that asks respondents about their working environment using a true/false forced choice format (WES: sample item, "I feel under pressure at work"). The scale yields summary scores with respect to 10 subscales described by Moos (1994) as "distinct though somewhat related aspects of work environments" (p. 23). The technical manual reports alpha reliability coefficients for the 10 individual WES scales in a range between .84 and .60 for a sample of Australian teachers. In the present study, corresponding Alpha coefficients for the 10 individual WES scales ranged from .80 to .45. Respondents were also asked a series of questions to assess the work demands of their current job relative to pre-

employment expectations, relative to more experienced teachers and relative to the rewards they perceived they were receiving by undertaking their current job. Together these series of additional questions were designed to supplement WES data and establish whether or not beginning teachers believed, at the time they were surveyed, their workloads were equitable.

In addition to the specific questions described above, respondents were also asked open-ended questions about their work and invited to make suggestions about the content of future surveys seeking to investigate the perceptions and experience of beginning teachers. In particular respondents were asked to outline the feedback that they would like to give their current employer and their teacher training institution about their current experience of work as a first-year teacher.

Burnout

Burnout was measured at both T1 and T2 by using the Educator Survey version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1996). This is a 22 item self-report instrument described in the literature as “the most widely used operationalization of burnout” (Lee & Ashforth, 1996, p. 124). The MBI consists of three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion (EE: sample item, “I feel emotionally drained from my work”), Depersonalisation (DP: “I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal objects”), and Personal Accomplishment (PA: “I feel I am positively influencing other people’s lives through my work”). Participants respond on a seven-point frequency rating scale, ranging from “never” (0) to “every day” (6). High scores on the EE and DP subscales and low scores on the PA subscale are characteristic of burnout. Reliability coefficients published in the technical manual were .90 for EE, .79 for DP, and .71 for PA (Maslach et al., 1996). In the present study, at T1 the corresponding coefficient alpha scores were .89 for EE, .68 for DP, and .86 for PA, and at T2 were .92 for EE, .79 for DP, and .88 for PA.

Turnover Intention

Turnover intention was investigated at T1 by asking respondents whether, at the time of being surveyed, they were considering leaving their current job. (Actual question: “Are you considering leaving your job?”). So as not to confound idle speculation with serious intention, at T2 this question was modified so as to ask whether respondents were seriously considering leaving their current job. (Actual question: Are you seriously considering leaving your job?). All respondents who indicated a serious intention to leave their current job were also asked whether they would be seeking another teaching job or whether they would be seeking a non-teaching alternative. In an unrelated section of the survey administered at T2, all respondents were asked if they could begin their career again whether they would choose teaching as their first career choice.

Procedures

Initially a sample of more than 600 Queensland teacher graduates was contacted via mail to secure written consent to participate in a longitudinal study into beginning teacher well-being to be conducted over the following two years of professional employment. As a result of this recruitment exercise, survey booklets containing the MBI and the WES, and a questionnaire asking respondents for demographic information, as well as asking about expectations and perceptions of the work environment were then forwarded directly to the 180 individuals who had agreed to participate in the study and who also satisfied the criterion that they had secured employment as a teacher. Reply paid envelopes were included with the survey so that completed forms could be returned directly to the researcher. Six months later all 142 teachers who responded to the initial survey at T1 were forwarded another survey booklet containing the MBI, the WES and a questionnaire asking about current perceptions of work, well-being, and current turnover intentions. Again reply paid envelopes were included.

Results

Summary Data

At T1, the average age of the beginning teacher sample was 26.25 years ($/SD/ = 7.21$), and the average duration of employment as a teacher was, as expected, only 7.37 weeks ($/SD/ = 4.46$). At T2 respondents had been employed for an average of 8.37 months ($/SD/ = 1.16$) and estimated working an average of 45 hours ($/SD/ = 11.30$) each week. One hundred and two (83%) respondents were female, a higher proportion than recent National and Queensland estimates of overall female teacher frequencies of 65% and 59% respectively (Dempster, Sim, Beere, & Logan, 2000).

Thirty four percent (34%) of the respondents were married and all respondents reported having graduated from one of three Queensland universities in 2001. Forty one percent (41%) were primary school teachers, forty seven percent (47%) secondary teachers and twelve percent (12%) early childhood teachers. Forty five percent (45%) of respondents had a second degree, (i.e., in addition to the Bachelor of Education).

At T1, forty one percent (41%) of respondents had changed residences to take up employment and twenty two percent (22%) were working in a rural location. Seventy seven percent (77%) of respondents held permanent teaching positions and eighty one percent (81%) worked in the public school system (i.e. were employed by Education Queensland). Ninety three percent (93%) of respondents described their teaching position as a “full-time” position.

At T2, forty six percent (46%) of respondents reported that they had experienced regular contact with a more experienced teacher who had acted as a mentor sometime during the past 8 months. Eleven respondents (9%) had changed schools since returning the first survey.

Work Climate

The WES was administered at both T1 and T2 and summary data describing within-subject comparisons across the 10 WES dimensions are presented in Table 1. Beginning teacher responses on seven of the 10 WES dimensions registered significant declines in teacher perceptions of their working environment between T1 and T2. However despite these declines, graduate teachers continued to maintain a positive view of their working environment relative to the Work Environment Scale norms on most dimensions.

Table 1
Comparison of Work Environment Scale Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers Surveyed at T1 and T2, Two-tailed Significance

WES Subscale	Beginning Teachers				Test of difference <i>t</i>
	At T1		At T2		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Involvement	7.25	2.03	6.83	2.06	2.40*
Co-worker Cohesion	7.02	2.08	6.38	2.28	3.58***
Supervisor Support	5.72	2.05	5.42	2.29	1.66
Autonomy	6.90	1.60	6.47	1.69	2.79**
Task Orientation	6.96	1.56	6.64	1.77	2.60*
Work Pressure	6.33	2.24	6.33	2.31	0.09
Clarity	5.29	2.32	4.68	2.66	3.22**
Managerial Control	5.84	1.82	5.23	2.12	3.17**
Innovation	5.40	2.62	5.20	2.73	0.85
Physical Comfort	4.49	2.34	4.04	2.60	2.30*

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Particularly noteworthy were significant reductions in perceived autonomy, role clarity, co-worker cohesion and task orientation from T1 to T2. These changes run counter to the expectation that after 8 months in a new job graduates might be expected to be clearer about their roles and have better relationships with co-workers than when first commencing. Furthermore the results run counter to any expectation that either orientation to the task of teaching students or that the opportunity to exercise autonomy in the teaching role would increase with experience. Overall beginning teacher responses on the WES at T1 and T2 indicate that initial good perceptions of the working environment had declined significantly within the first 8 months of work.

On the WES subscale describing work pressure beginning teacher responses consistently indicated the perception of high work pressures. Relative to a normative population comprised of 8,146 workers from various occupational categories (Moos, 1994), beginning teachers in the present study consistently indicated perceptions of significantly higher work pressures at both T1 and T2, $t(122) = 5.09, p < .001$ and $t(120) = 4.86, p < .001$ respectively.* *

Responses to the series of additional questions investigating perceptions of the work environment and equity also supported the view that beginning teachers involved in this investigation considered that they were working under high work pressures. At T1, almost twice as many respondents indicated that the effort they were putting into their job was greater than the rewards they believed they were getting back compared to the reverse proposition (i.e., that the rewards of the job were greater than effort). By T2 this 2:1 ratio had increased to more than 3:1.

When beginning teachers were asked to compare the effort they were putting into their work with the effort that more experienced teachers appeared to make, 64% of respondents indicated that they thought they were required to work harder than their more experienced colleagues. Only 33% considered their workloads to be about the same as more experienced teachers. Clearly beginning teachers participating in the present study did not perceive that a reduced workload was part of their overall induction program during their first year of employment.

At T2 beginning teachers were also asked to indicate whether the work effort required in their current position was approximately commensurate with what the respondent had expected at the time of applying for teacher registration (i.e., before they had commenced work). One third of respondents (33%) indicated that the work effort required was higher than they had expected. While not carrying the authority that is inherent in a prospective methodology, this finding, albeit based on hind-sight, does raise a question about the adequacy of pre-service training programs, including practicum experience(s), to bestow a realistic appreciation of the demands of first year teaching.

Burnout

Mean burnout levels for beginning teachers participating in the present investigation are presented in Table 2 where they are compared to a 1990 investigation of burnout reported by teachers working in the south eastern Australian state of Victoria (Pierce & Molloy, 1990). Although conducted more than 12 years prior to the present investigation, this Victorian study is one of the most recent that has published summary scores for a large-scale investigation into burnout in Australian teachers. It was notable therefore that while mean emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores for the beginning teachers of the present study were not significantly different to the large sample of ($N = 750$) of Victorian teachers at T1, by T2, mean emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores for the beginning teachers of the present investigation were significantly higher, signifying higher burnout in beginning teachers, than the level for an undifferentiated sample of Victorian teachers surveyed 12 years ago, $t(122) = 3.01, p < .001$, and $t(119) = 2.02, p < .05$ respectively. In contrast, at both T1 and T2, beginning teachers reported significantly higher levels of personal accomplishment, corresponding to lower burnout, than the corresponding mean for the Victorian teachers, $t(120) = 6.13, p < .001$ and $t(122) = 4.80, p < .001$ respectively.

Within-subject comparisons of beginning teacher burnout scores indicated that mean emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores on the MBI had both increased significantly between T1 and T2, $t(122) = 4.11, p < .001$ and $t(119) = 2.37, p < .05$. However the corresponding decrease in mean personal accomplishment scores for the beginning teachers between T1 and T2 was not significant, $t(120) = 1.40, p > .05$.

This overall pattern of results is consistent with the observation that serious levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were developing in the sample of beginning teachers being investigated by the present study.

Table 2

Comparison of Maslach Burnout Inventory Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers at T1 and T2, with Mean Scores for Victoria Teachers (Pierce & Molloy, 1990), Two-tailed Significance

Subscale	Present Study		Pierce and Molloy (1990)	
	Beg. Teachers (n = 123)		Vic. Teachers (n = 750)	
	M	SD	M	t
T1				
Emotional Exhaustion	22.15	11.66	21.97	0.18
Depersonalization	6.33	5.81	6.13	0.37
Personal Accomplish	37.64	7.37	33.98	5.47***
T2				
Emotional Exhaustion	25.29	12.23	21.97	3.01**
Depersonalization	7.35	6.68	6.13	2.02*
Personal Accomplish	36.78	7.48	33.98	4.15***

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Evidence supporting the significant increases in respondents' levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are also clearly reflected in the qualitative data analysis. For example, initial indications of exhaustion are revealed by particular text in the T1 data:

There are never enough hours in the day. Always have paperwork up to date and always be organised. (Respondent X)

I have learnt that I am a teacher 24 hours a day. When I wake up during the night I am thinking about lessons. (Respondent Y)

TABLE 2

These comments were amplified in T2 with respondents almost doubling the amount of text devoted to statements related to exhaustion (from 28 text units to 48 text units). Comments included:

Be prepared to have no social life, less sleep and especially allow yourself to screw up! (Respondent K)

Perhaps some questions about health and stress. I have been ill this winter, and I believe stress extended its duration. (Respondent L)

Health issues- I find my immune responses to be weak and apparently this is usual for first year teachers. This makes it hard to plan effectively (Respondent L)

A more realistic idea of the amount of work required each week is required. Teacher's work is stressful, time consuming and unrewarding. (Respondent M)

Depersonalization was evident in T1 but no comments could be ascribed to depersonalization in T2. In T1 comments that indicated depersonalization of students included these two:

Year 12's are lazier than most year 9's and no matter what you do they cannot get motivated. (Respondent Y)

Not take everything so personally there will be some peers you don't get on with and there will be some children you can't reach. (Respondent N)

A lack of feeling of accomplishment was apparent in the comments made by respondents at both T1 and T2. Examples that capture the flavour of these feelings in T1 include:

Behaviour management has become a priority, every class I am involved with has behaviour problems, children are aggressive, unhelpful and uninterested in school. In most grades my time is taken up trying to settle the class. (Respondent O)

Teaching is very unrewarding, current discipline systems are highly ineffective and the supposed support system is non-existent. (Respondent P)

After 8 months teaching, at T2, the number of text units devoted to accomplishment varied little (from 30 to 27 units) which is highly consistent with the quantitative analysis, however it is again notable that comments begin to reveal a frustration that many beginning teachers report as their lived experience.

Don't expect to change the world; or believe that you will be able to help or improve every child in your class- you can't! (Respondent Q)

That teacher's work is stressful, time consuming and unrewarding.

That I am not a machine or a servant, I have my own expectations and after hours is my time, not school time. An understanding that the sink or swim technique is not an appropriate introduction to a new career.

In summary, both qualitative and quantitative analyses emphasized that evidence of increasing burnout levels has been detected in beginning teachers after only 8 months teaching experience and that the problem in Queensland is significant in comparison to other studies that have been conducted elsewhere.

Support

The importance of support from the perspective of the beginning teacher respondents was most clearly demonstrated by the qualitative analyses. In particular the overall change in focus between T1 and T2 of respondent comments clearly indicated that beginning teachers had, by T2, formed a very strong perception that they were unsupported and that they would benefit from having support.

Qualitative data collected at T1 is summarised in figure 1 which shows that respondents were concerned with the need to gain additional skills in personal organization (40% of text) and behaviour management (35% of text).

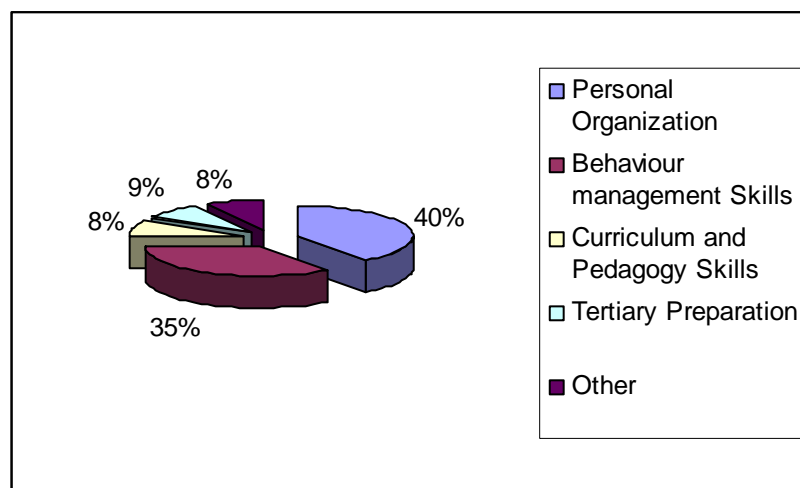


Figure 1: *After 6 Weeks Teaching, Beginning Teacher Are Concerned with the Need to Acquire Skills to Meet the Job Demands*

After 8 months of teaching (T2) respondents indicated concern over a similar range of issues, however the relative importance of these issues had changed markedly. At T2 only 5% of text was used to discuss personal organization and 4% of text to discuss behaviour management skills whereas 24% of text was

devoted to the need for teacher support and the need for mentoring. Analysis of T2 data is summarised in figure 2.

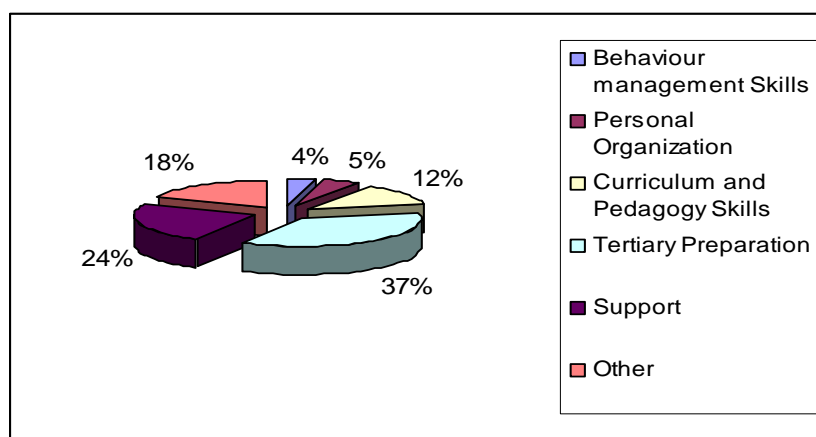


Figure 2: *After 8 Months Teaching, Beginning Teachers Are More Concerned with Support Than when They Commenced Teaching.*

Concern with a lack of support were also clearly evident within the text units that formed the basis of the above analysis. For example:

That the staff are unsupportive, provide little or no encouragement and no rewards- therefore why do this job? (Respondent M)

Comments about tertiary preparation were equally prominent at T1 and T2 and were generally critical of pre-service training conducted on campus and supportive of practicum experiences conducted in schools.

The need for support was also reflected in overwhelming support for a mentor. At T2, respondents were asked about whether they thought a mentor would be helpful to them and whether they had been mentored over the previous 8 months. While ninety three percent (92.5%) of respondents indicated that they thought a mentor would have been helpful to them in their first year of employment, only forty six percent (46%) considered that they had any sort of mentoring experience. Of those respondents who reported that they had experienced regular contact with a more experienced teacher who had acted as a mentor (either formally or informally) evaluations of this experience were mixed. Those teachers who reported that they had the support of a mentor also reported higher mean Emotional Exhaustion scores but lower mean Depersonalization scores than those respondents without a mentor, however these differences were not significant, $t(116) = 0.70, p > .05$ and $t(115) = 0.48, p > .05$ respectively. Similarly, beginning teacher perceptions of the support they were receiving from co-workers and their supervisors did not appear to be influenced significantly by the experience of having a mentor, $t(116) = 1.55, p > .05$ and $I(107) = 1.47, p > .05$ respectively.

Turnover intentions

Surprisingly, after an average of only 7.37 weeks employment (i.e., at T1) thirty three percent (33%) of respondents indicated that they were “considering leaving their current job”. Six months later that is after an average of 8.34 months of teaching twenty nine percent (29%) of respondents indicated that they were “seriously considering leaving their current job”. Nineteen percent (19%) of respondents indicated that they intended to leave their current job at both T1 and T2.

Given the substantial proportion of respondents indicating their intention to leave their current employment at T1, additional questions designed to explore this finding were included in the second survey. At T2, all respondents were asked if they could begin their career again whether they would choose teaching as their first career choice. Twenty-four percent (24%) of all T2 respondents indicated that they would not choose teaching as their first career choice if given the opportunity to choose their

career path again. Finally, all respondents who indicated a serious intention to leave their current job (29%) were asked whether they would be seeking another teaching job or whether they would be seeking a non-teaching alternative. Only twenty-four percent (24%) or 7 respondents with serious turnover intentions indicated that they would be seeking a non-teaching alternative to replace their current employment activity.

Mean burnout levels for respondents who indicated that they were seriously considering leaving their current job at T2 were compared to mean burnout levels of respondents not indicating a serious turnover intention. Significant differences on all three MBI dimensions were found in the expected direction, that is respondents indicating a serious intention to turnover had significantly higher mean burnout scores, at both T1 and T2, than respondents who did not indicate that they were seriously considering leaving their current position.

Similarly for those respondents who indicated that they would not choose teaching as their first career choice if they could start their university studies again, these respondents endorsed responses indicative of significantly higher burnout on all three MBI dimensions than respondents who indicated they would choose teaching again if they were restarting their career.

Intention to leave was also evident in the qualitative analyses of respondents' written answers to the survey's open-ended questions. While only two comments relating to leaving current employment were detected at T1, the intention to leave becomes more frequent and unmistakable at T2.

Move to the northern territory or remote areas where the stress level is lower and the workload is more manageable! (Respondent S)

However the lack of support and encouragement from staff members is terrible. It is because of this I feel like quitting. (Respondent T)

That the staff are unsupportive, provide little or no encouragement and no rewards- therefore why do this job? (Respondent R)

Discussion

The present study adds to the literature on the experience of beginning teachers by presenting a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data to describe the perceptions of first year teachers. As with other research that has had a focus on this important cohort (for example see Gold et al., 1991), the above results have consistently painted a picture of beginning teacher work overload along with a lack of professional support and increasing levels of burnout. It was notable that approximately a third of respondents had underestimated the work demands that they would be facing despite a series of practicum placements during university training prior to their appointments as teachers. As the cohort of students were drawn from three different universities, this finding cannot be attributed to a single institution and therefore may, if consistently replicated in other cohorts of beginning teachers, have duty of care implications for some teacher training institutions. This concern is supported by the WES data.

Relative to normative studies, beginning teachers start their careers with more positive views of their work and work environment than most other professions. However after only 8 months teaching the significant declines in these positive work environment perceptions suggest that the positive perception of teaching and the teaching environment could not be sustained long into the future and may have been based on overly optimistic pre-service views of the profession. Indeed significant declines in role clarity and co-worker cohesion over the first 8 months, while consistent with the increases in emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation that were reported, are worrisome as they suggest that either first year inductions are, as a whole, problematic or that beginning teachers commence their careers with large gaps between their view of what teaching will be like and the reality of teaching. Friedman (2000) has linked large discrepancies between the expected and actual teaching experience to burnout in beginning teachers previously. The perception that beginning teachers thought that they were required to exert more

effort than their more experienced colleagues and the increasing trend for respondents to report that the effort required to undertake teaching was greater than the rewards that resulted from being a teacher may suggest that the beginning teacher, in their first year, is becoming aware of discrepancies between the expected and actual teaching experience and this growing awareness is associated with increasing levels of burnout. It is noteworthy that the present study, having commenced *after* respondents had commenced work cannot do more than suggest hypotheses involving pre-service expectations, however the series of comparisons between rewards and effort, with the work effort of experienced colleagues, coupled with significant declines in perceptions of work climate do suggest declining overall perceptions of a teaching career during the first 8 months of service, whatever the pre-service benchmark may be.

Perhaps the most surprising finding was the observation of relatively rapid increases in emotional exhaustion levels to levels that correspond to Maslach's high burnout category, and which were significantly above levels reported for a large cohort of more experienced teachers (Pierce & Molloy, 1990) after only 8 months employment. As indicated earlier, the burnout phenomenon is usually considered to arise later in a professional's career, after they have become worn-out, and has consistently been neglected by researchers attempting to understand the high rates of early career turnover in beginning teachers. The results of the present study suggest that burnout in this cohort should not be ignored. Indeed, if early career burnout does explain a significant proportion of teacher turnover then other studies of burnout that have focussed on populations of established teachers may have underestimated burnout levels for teachers because those teachers who had, as a result of burnout, left the profession within their first years of employment would have created a bias towards more resilient teachers in the remaining established teacher population. Perhaps in this way, the core elements of burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment (a lack of) have been overlooked as explanatory variables for earlier career turnover in teachers.

Turnover intentions

To summarise the evidence in respect of early career turnover intentions, the present study has found that a significant proportion of respondents (almost one third of respondents surveyed) are indicating serious intentions to leave their current position. Furthermore, quantitative analyses indicated that turnover intentions were strongly related to all three dimensions of burnout. The qualitative analysis also depicted increasing turnover intentions as a result of high work pressures, and lack of support, both key variables in the aetiology of burnout.

High frequencies of intention to leave the profession early within the participants' induction (8 months of) were also demonstrated by the data collected at both T1 and T2. At T1 almost a third of respondents signalled an intention to leave their current job and at T2 a quarter indicated that they would not choose teaching as their career again if they could, hypothetically, revisit this choice. Such high 'intention to leave' frequencies were greater than expected after six weeks and were sustained eight months and are surprising for a new career that has as an entry requirement four years of full-time study. This finding must raise concerns with educators, particularly given the training investments that the training institution has made in respect of preparing these respondents for a productive career in teaching. The strong correlation between burnout and intention to leave and the results of the qualitative analyses leaves little doubt that work overload and lack of support are likely to provide a suitable explanation for these findings, however future research should thoroughly investigate intention to leave findings and the specific links to how burnout develops in beginning teachers to verify this interpretation. These results suggest some potentially important research questions for future, more in depth studies.

Finally there is a need to stipulate some of the limitations of the present study and to call for future research before the results of this investigation are widely adopted. First, the present study has been limited by a relatively small sample size, one that limits the investigation of complex relations to the exploration of large-scale main effects. Although this investigation has indeed found significant main effects, to have the requisite power to conduct the more in-depth analyses that are required to fully understand the complex relationships between work, family support, marital status, gender, work pressure and the development of burnout, subsequent investigations will need to have larger sample sizes. Furthermore, given the dearth of reports available that detail large-scale studies into teacher

burnout in Australia, a future investigation would be well advised to concurrently survey a large sample of experienced teachers in order to make comparisons between beginning teachers and their more experienced colleagues. Such a “control” group will also allow for meaningful comparisons to be made within important teacher sub-groups such as primary and secondary level, rural and urban based, marital status, etc.

And second, another limitation of this investigation concerns the ‘general instability’ of the present study’s sample of beginning teachers. This is also another compelling reason for a subsequent investigation. The concern here is that the pool of teachers that were initially invited to participate in this research project may not have been representative of all university graduates in Queensland, being as it was based upon publicly available graduation lists, newspaper result lists and then a laborious manual interrogation of the Queensland teacher registration data base. Therefore the possibility of a sampling bias cannot be discounted. Furthermore, one cannot discount the possibility that those teachers who agreed to participate may have systematically differed from those that declined to be involved in this two-year study (participation bias). Ideally, a future replication should gain the active cooperation and support of the Board of Teacher Registration and various employer groups to help minimise the possibility of systematic bias being present in either sample selection or participation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has presented qualitative and quantitative data drawn from the first year of an on-going study into beginning teacher perceptions of their work and well-being. The results suggest that Queensland teachers in their first year of professional practice are concerned about high work pressures and a lack of professional support. Beginning teachers reported significant and increasing burnout levels, and burnout was significantly associated with high turnover intentions. Both the qualitative and quantitative analyses provided consistent support for the hypothesis that early career burnout may explain a significant proportion of the high attrition rates commonly observed in beginning teachers. The authors call for larger scale longitudinal studies into beginning teacher burnout to test this hypothesis.

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Table 1

Comparison of Work Environment Scale Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers Surveyed at T1 and T2, two-tail significance.

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Teachers	At 6 weeks (T1)	At 8 months (T2)	Beginning Test of difference
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_WES Subscale				/M
SD			t	/_
M	SD			
Involvement				7.25
2.03				
6.83	2.06		2.40*	
Co-worker Cohesion			7.02	2.08
6.38				
2.28		3.58***		
Supervisor Support			5.72	2.05
5.42	2.29		1.66	
Autonomy				6.90
1.60				
6.47	1.69		2.79**	
Task Orientation				6.96
1.56				
6.64	1.77		2.60*	
Work Pressure				6.33
2.24				
6.33	2.31		0.09	
Clarity				5.29
2.32		4.68	2.66	3.22**
Managerial Control			5.84	1.82
5.23	2.12		3.17**	
Innovation				5.40
2.62				
5.20	2.73		0.85	
Physical Comfort				4.49
2.34				
4.04	2.60		2.30*	

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/Note/. * /p/ < .05. ** /p/ < .01. *** /p/ < .001

Table 2

Comparison of Maslach Burnout Inventory Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers at T1 and T2, with mean scores for Victoria teachers (Pierce & Molloy, 1990), two-tail significance.

Present Study		Pierce & Molloy (1990)	
Beg. Teachers (/n/ = 123)		Vic. Teachers (/n/ = 750)	
Subscale	M	M	t/
SD			
T1			
Emotional Exhaustion	22.15	11.66	
21.97	0.18		
Depersonalization	6.33	5.81	
6.13	0.37		
Personal Accomplish.	37.64	33.98	
5.47***	7.37		
T2			
Emotional Exhaustion	25.29	12.23	
21.97	3.01**		
Depersonalization	7.35	6.68	
6.13	2.02*		
Personal Accomplish.	36.78	7.48	
33.98	4.15***		

/Note/. * /p/ < .05. ** /p/ < .01. *** /p/ < .001

Figure 1. After 6 weeks teaching, beginning teacher are concerned with the need to acquire skills to meet the job demands.

Figure 2. After 8 months teaching, beginning teachers are more concerned with support than when they commenced teaching.