

**OBR07567 Burnout confirmed as a viable explanation for beginning
teacher
attrition.**

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Abstract

Intention to leave an organisation is one of many human resource management issues that affects morale and so organisational climate. The present study investigates the hypothesis that early career burnout is significantly and positively associated with serious turnover intention in teachers at the beginning of their careers. A sample of 98 teachers working in their second year as teachers in Australia was surveyed in 2006 and confidentially asked about their perceptions of their work and whether they had any serious intentions to leave their job and/or their profession. Respondents were also administered the Educators' version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI: Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996). Twenty-eight respondents indicated that they were serious about intending to leave the school at which they were working. Ten of these respondents indicated that they intended to leave the teaching profession altogether. Significant associations between intentions to leave school/profession and all three MBI subscales were found. These findings replicate the results of two other independent studies investigating turnover intention and the experience of burnout in beginning teachers working in Australian education systems and calls for focussed human resource management strategies to address this serious problem. Together these studies provide strong support for the view that early career burnout is a realistic and straightforward explanation for high early career attrition rates that have been reported as problematic for the teaching profession in a number of countries including Australia.

Introduction

Teaching is usually considered a vocation, one involving a long term career path. Manuel (2003, p. 142) states that teaching isn't usually a "drop in, drop out or revolving door" type profession. Huberman as early as 1989 established that those who leave the profession usually do so in the first five years of entering the profession. For beginning teachers, how they survive the first year, if they do, can be a significant factor in decisions about remaining in or leaving the profession (Lang, 1999). This paper investigates the link between an intention to leave the profession and early career burnout.

Teacher attrition has been a topic in the Education literature for many years. It has been claimed that teacher attrition is a major problem in our schools and that between 20% and 50% of beginning teachers decide to leave the profession in the first three to five years (Ewing, 2001; Ewing & Smith, 2002). There seems to be little variation of these figures internationally (Macdonald, 1999). For example, a 2003 Victorian Department of Education and Training Report reported that in the United States, a third of teachers leave the profession within three years and almost half within five years. In Britain, a 2003 survey by the University of Buckingham found that 30 per cent of British teachers who left teaching that year had been in the profession for less than five years (Hogan, 2007). Researchers have long argued that beginning teacher induction programs that display exemplary practice (extended internship, specially trained mentors, comprehensive in-service training and reduced teaching assignments for beginning teachers) ease the transition into schools for beginning teachers (Howe, 2006).

Literature Review

A number of hypothesis have been tested in relation to the causes behind teacher attrition. Buckley, Schneider and Shang (2004) (in their paper supported by the Ford Foundation and the 21st Century School Fund through its BEST (Building Educational Success Together) program) propose that there are teacher factors school factors and community factors. Teacher factors include wages, idealism and teacher preparation courses. School factors include working conditions, organisational factors, the lack of resources and accountability. Community factors include government policy, budgeting policy, public stereotypical thought about teacher hours and mandates that have legislated for quality teachers only.

As early as 1990 a report to the National Board for Employment Education and Training: *Australia's teachers: An agenda for the Next Decade* (1990) listed factors that significantly impacted upon early resignation and the general quality of the experience of transitioning into the workforce. The report examined pre-service education, induction, the notion of internship, in-service education and training, and appraisal. At the same time researchers such as Kyriacou (1989) were reporting the “proven role in the reduction of attrition in developed countries for individual support to teachers nearing burn-out” (Macdonald, 1999; p. 845). More than a decade later the very same concerns mentioned in this 1990 Australian report remain central to debate about the future of the teaching profession (Manuel, 2003).

The real school staffing problem is teacher retention. It is as if we (are) pouring teachers into a bucket with a fist-sized hole in the bottom ... And attrition, the leak in the bucket, has been getting worse. (NCTAF, 2003, pp. 6, 8, 10)

All countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), except Poland, face massive problems in the area of staffing, due to retirements and resignations (McGaw, 2002). Recent initiatives in Australian Retirement Benefits to over 60's, may result in teachers staying in the workforce for longer periods of time but this could prolong the inevitability of workplace shortages resulting from attrition and not address the problem. The OECD's project on teacher retention highlights the serious international quantitative problem of teacher supply and retention with qualitative research honing in on the factors which shape teachers' career choices, particularly during the early formative years (Manuel, 2003).

A study (Dinham, 1992) into resignations of teachers in New South Wales is one of a few investigations into why teachers resign. The study focused on interview data following the resignations of 57 teachers and lamented how studies to that date had concentrated on quantifying the extent of resignations and the characteristics of those resigning. Of importance to this study is the finding that a teacher's resignation is the result of a critical point in that teacher's "attitude to teaching" being realized (p. 24). Dinham mentions the particular problems of beginning teachers in the paper but little about attempts to understand and intervene before and after that *critical point* or to intervene in what the authors continually describe as an observed pattern of increasing dissatisfaction and increasing stress. There is no indication of enquiry in the study as to when teachers formed an intention to leave or specifically what it was that motivated the teacher's original ongoing intention to leave the profession.

A current longitudinal study by the University of Technology Sydney is in its second year. Entitled *Retaining Effective Early Career Teachers in NSW Public Schools* the study involves researchers from the Teacher Learning and Development Program of the Designs for Learning Research Cluster, Faculty of Education at the University of

Technology, Sydney. A review of the literature associated with the study does not reveal any intention to investigate a link between early career burnout and either actual attrition or intention to leave the profession (intended attrition). As the link between intended attrition and actual attrition has been well established both in the literature for several professions as well as for the teaching profession, this lack of focus on burnout appears to be more consistent with an oversight rather than the result of over complexity of research design or practical implementation difficulties.

The link between intention to leave teaching and the experience of burnout has been periodically reported in the literature by researchers such as Drake and Yadama, (1996), Guerts, Schaufeli & De Jonge (1998), Kyriacou (1989), Weisberg and Sagie (1999) and others, but overwhelmingly the populations that have been investigated and reported on in these studies have been drawn from a general population of teachers and/or other human service worker populations, without a specific early career focus. Only recently have researchers begun to investigate the relationship between early career burnout and intended attrition, and there is a need to replicate reports of a strong and consistent association between these two parameters.

In summary then, while there is significant global concern about the rates of teacher attrition, particularly early career attrition, and consequently concern for the future supply of teachers throughout the world, frequent calls to investigate the phenomena of early career teacher attrition or the related phenomenon of intended attrition in beginning teacher populations are continuing to be made. Furthermore, while the link between burnout and teacher attrition has been established in the general teaching population, this association as a possible explanation of early career attrition has attracted limited attention to date and reports of strong association between burnout and intention to leave requires further confirmation.

Method

Participants

Participants were beginning teachers working in Australia after graduating from a prominent Australian university in 2005. All participants were approached in their final year of their teacher training at university to secure permissions to be approached over subsequent years as part of a series of investigations into beginning teacher well-being. In the present study, 296 respondents were surveyed by mail approximately two years after they had graduated as teachers with 98 indicating their consent to continue to participate in the present study by returning a completed survey directly to the researchers in the stamped addressed envelope provided for this purpose.

Instruments

Whether or not respondents' expectations about teaching had been realized by the activities associated with their current teaching position was assessed by asking the

following hypothetical question which also sought to determine the extent to which respondents felt they had, after experiencing teaching work for several months, chosen the wrong profession (Actual question: “*If you could begin your career again, would you choose teaching as your first choice?*”). This question also provided an estimation of the proportion of respondents who were regretting their choice of profession and therefore who were perhaps more likely to leave the teaching profession early in their career.

Burnout. Burnout was measured by the Educator Survey version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1996). This is a 22 item self-report instrument described by Lee and Ashforth (1996, p. 124) as “the most widely used operationalization of burnout”. The Educator Survey consists of three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion (EE: sample item, “I feel emotionally drained from my work”), Depersonalization (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 for the Educator Survey version of the MBI have been reported by several researchers (e.g., Pierce & Molloy, 1990) and have consistently demonstrated the high reliability of this instrument. Previous research that has used the Educator Survey to estimate burnout for Australian teachers at the beginning of their careers has consistently reported acceptable reliability levels for this instrument. In the present study, the corresponding coefficient alpha scores were .92 for EE, .79 for DP, and .79 for PA.

Turnover Intention. Turnover intention was investigated by asking respondents the following question: “*Are you seriously considering leaving your current 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.

Procedure

A sample of University graduates in their second year of their teaching career was contacted via mail with an invitation to participate in a survey into beginning teacher well-being. Included with this invitation was a survey booklet that included the Educator Survey version of the MBI (Maslach, et al., 1996), and a questionnaire that asked participants about serious intentions to leave their job and profession as described above. Stamped addressed envelopes were provided for the return of the survey directly to the researchers.

Results

Summary Data

Ninety-eight (98) teachers who were in their second year of teaching indicated their willingness to participate in the present study by returning completed surveys directly to the researchers. Seventy-six respondents (78%) were female, twenty (20%) were male and two respondents did not indicate their gender. The average age of the group of beginning teacher respondents was 27.46 years ($SD = 7.32$), and group mean duration of employment as a teacher was 18.56 months ($SD = 4.11$). Eighty-seven respondents estimated working an average of 43.10 hours ($SD = 11.84$) each week, however this figure included the responses of eight respondents who indicated they were working on a part-time basis. Average estimated working hours for the 79 (80%) respondents who indicated that they were working in full-time teaching positions was 45.18 hours ($SD =$

9.30). Forty-two percent (42%) of respondents were primary school teachers, forty-three (43%) secondary teachers, eight percent (8%) early childhood teachers, and six percent (6%) of respondents selected the “other” option to describe their teaching position. Thirty percent (30%) of respondents indicated they were teaching in a rural location. Fifty percent (50%) of respondents indicated that were in a married or in a defacto relationship and ten percent (10%) of respondents indicated that they had children.

Intention to Leave

When asked whether they were “seriously considering leaving their current job”, 29% of respondents ($n = 28$) indicated that they were seriously considering this course of action at the time they were surveyed. All respondents who indicated a serious intention to leave their current job were also asked whether they would be seeking another teaching job (movers) or whether they would be seeking a non-teaching alternative (leavers). While the majority of respondents with serious turnover intentions (19%, $n = 18$) indicated that they would be seeking another teaching position, 10 (10%) respondents indicated that they would be seeking a non-teaching alternative to replace their current employment activities. When asked the hypothetical question about what university course they would choose to study if they could begin their career path again 67% ($n = 66$) indicated that they would again choose to study teaching as their first career choice while 27% ($n = 26$) indicated that they would not. Only one respondent indicated that they were undecided and five respondents did not respond to this question. Therefore, after approximately 18 months working as a teacher 10% of respondents surveyed were indicating a serious intention to leave the profession altogether and one quarter of respondents were indicating that they had significant regrets about choosing to study education at university and to subsequently pursue a teaching career.

To determine whether there was any evidence of an association between early career burnout levels and turnover intention, mean burnout levels for respondents who indicated that they were seriously considering leaving their current job were compared to the mean burnout levels of the cohort of respondents indicating that they did not have a serious turnover intention. Three respondents who did not complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory were excluded from this and subsequent analyses of burnout. As hypothesised, significant differences on all three MBI dimensions were found in the expected directions, that is respondents indicating a serious intention to turnover had mean scores consistent with significantly higher burnout on all three dimensions of the MBI. Details of these burnout comparisons are presented in Table 1 along with comparisons of group means for age, total weekly work hours and for total time teaching.

Insert Table 1 about here

Two similar analyses were conducted to clarify the association of burnout with beginning teacher turnover. First, the above analysis was repeated for those 10 respondents who also indicated that they were seriously considering seeking a non-teaching job alternative to their present employment. Comparisons were again made on all three MBI subscales between those respondents (10% of all respondents) who after an average of 18 months teaching were clearly indicating that they had a serious intention to leave the profession without first attempting to teach at another school with the 65 respondents who indicated they were not seriously considering leaving their current job. Again as hypothesised, significant differences on all three MBI dimensions were found in the expected directions, that is respondents indicating a serious intention to leave the profession had mean scores indicating significantly higher burnout on all three dimensions of the MBI. This analysis is summarised in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

In the final analysis mean MBI subscale scores were compared between those respondents who indicated that they *would* and those indicating that they *would not* choose teaching as their first career choice if they could hypothetically rewind the clock and start their university studies again. The group of teachers who reported that they would not choose to study to become a teacher again reported significantly higher mean Emotional Exhaustion scores and significantly lower mean Personal Accomplishment scores, both corresponding to higher burnout levels, than those respondents indicating that they would again choose to study for a teaching career. This analysis is summarised in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate a significant and positive association between beginning teacher burnout and serious intentions to leave the current teaching assignment and the teaching profession. Those beginning teachers who indicated they would not choose teaching as a career again if they could ‘wind back the clock’ also demonstrated characteristic traits of burnout including significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion and significantly lower levels of personal accomplishment than teachers who would again, with hindsight, choose to become teachers. Like two previous studies that have investigated a possible/probable association between burnout and turnover intention in teachers at the beginning of their careers (Goddard & Goddard, 2006; Goddard &

O'Brien, 2003), this study again confirms the finding that there is a clear link between beginning teacher burnout and turnover intention. By extension there is, therefore, a link between burnout and teacher attrition. The present study adds to an already strong body of evidence that clearly identifies those beginning teachers who have the highest likelihood of leaving the profession shortly after commencing as those teachers who have developed emotional burnout. The authors call upon the profession to now actively assume responsibility to provide a safe working environment for all of its new inductees and therefore to provide adequate support strategies to reduce the unacceptable and deplorable levels of beginning teacher burnout that continue to manifest in recent education graduates who are fortunate enough to obtain work in Australian education systems.

How should this support be rendered? By reframing the problem of beginning teacher attrition as a symptomatic response to burnout and drawing upon three decades of burnout research, the teaching profession will have no difficulty making a positive impact on the unacceptable burnout levels in beginning teachers. In the first instance, beginning teachers should be informed of the nature of burnout. The qualities and characteristics of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment should be sufficiently familiar to all teachers so its occurrence will be identified early and considered a warning sign for further emotional pain of burnout and possible career disengagement unless remedial action is taken. The burnout literature clearly identifies effective remedial programs as ones which contribute to the provision of both internal and external resources to deal with the complex demands that are placed upon beginning teachers as they learn to apply their university training effectively. Counselling support will be an integral part of such support and should be available for beginning teachers so they may implement personal strategies that build resilience. The role of an appropriate (non-supervisor) mentor and the opportunity to be innovative and apply the skills,

knowledge and understanding gained at university will also be important. Care must be taken, however, in regarding beginning teacher burnout as a personal, rather than a professional problem. Clearly, beginning teacher burnout is a problem that not only has a devastating influence on the personal lives of beginning teachers and their families but the associated attrition also negatively impinges on the entire teaching profession. Beginning teacher burnout is symptomatic of widespread organizational problems.

Beginning teacher attrition that has occurred at worrisome rates over the past decade and across most OECD countries strongly suggests that the problem of beginning teacher burnout will remain pervasive and persistent until the profession takes a collective responsibility to address the issues involved. The present research, together with previous investigations that have reported almost identical results, demonstrates that beginning teacher burnout is one of the significant issues that the profession will have to address.

Undoubtedly more information will be needed about the nature of the first five years of teaching, particularly as it relates to teacher attrition and burnout and the provision of effective support strategies that ameliorate burnout and build resilience. Exit studies from teachers who have left the profession would be an invaluable tool to provide insight into the pervasive and persistent nature of the burnout phenomenon. In this way, ex-teachers who have experienced burnout may be strategic in identifying the barriers to active, long term engagement with their profession. Exit studies also have the potential to gather information and identify strategies that build resilience and ameliorate burnout. Information should also be gathered from those beginning teachers who do not find teaching overwhelming and who are resilient in the face of challenges that are inherent in commencing a career in teaching.

In summary, by replicating the results of previous investigations, the present study has confirmed that beginning teacher burnout is associated with intended teacher attrition. This finding leads to a conclusion that the experiences of beginning teachers are a responsibility of the whole profession and the profession will need to act responsibly and cohesively if the negative impact of beginning teacher attrition is to be addressed effectively.

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Table 1

Comparison of Maslach Burnout Inventory Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers who indicated a serious intention to leave their current teaching job with those who indicated no intention to leave their current job, two-tail significance.

MBI Subscale	Seriously considering leaving current job?				Test of
	YES (<i>n</i> = 28)		NO (<i>n</i> =65)		Difference
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Emotional Exhaustion	30.52	12.90	20.12	10.08	4.15***
Depersonalization	10.81	7.12	5.74	5.17	3.78***
Personal Accomplishment	33.92	7.08	38.11	5.71	2.93**
Demographics					
Age	27.59	9.35	27.49	6.52	0.95
Average weekly work hours	45.96	10.77	41.95	12.13	1.46
Total months teaching	18.95	2.72	18.41	4.54	0.60

Note. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. MBI = Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Table 2

Comparison of Maslach Burnout Inventory Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers who indicated a serious intention to leave their current teaching job for a non-teaching alternative with those who indicated no intention to leave their current job, two-tail significance.

	Seriously considering leaving the teaching profession?				Test of Difference <i>t</i>
	YES (<i>n</i> = 10)		NO (<i>n</i> = 65)		
MBI Subscale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Emotional Exhaustion	30.00	10.65	20.11	10.08	2.87**
Depersonalization	11.40	6.95	5.74	5.17	3.07**
Personal Accomplishment	29.70	7.60	38.11	5.71	4.13***
Demographics					
Age	32.10	12.29	27.49	6.52	1.16
Average weekly work hours	42.22	13.94	41.95	12.13	0.06
Total months teaching	17.78	2.86	18.41	4.54	0.40

Note. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. MBI = Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Table 3

*Comparison of Maslach Burnout Inventory Summary Scores for Beginning Teachers who indicated (i) that they **would** again choose to become a teacher with (ii) those beginning teachers who indicated that they **would not** again choose to become a teacher if they could hypothetically revisit their earlier choice to study teaching, two-tail significance.*

MBI Subscale	Would you choose to study teaching again?				Test of
	YES (<i>n</i> = 66)		NO (<i>n</i> = 26)		Difference
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Emotional Exhaustion	20.35	10.49	30.50	12.15	3.88***
Depersonalization	6.75	6.28	8.63	6.16	1.25
Personal Accomplishment	37.73	6.01	34.39	6.60	2.22*

Note. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$. MBI = Maslach Burnout Inventory.