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Understanding, promoting and building resilience in initial teacher education programmes

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Background

Retention in the early years of a teacher's career is an ongoing source of national and international concern (Eurydice, 2002; OECD, 2005). Most recently, national discussion in the press and in Parliament has focused on 'hundreds of thousands of qualified teachers not working in the profession' (The Guardian, 01.01. 2010), and a worrying proportion not even taking up posts after completing training. Yet the body of research into recruitment to the profession shows that applicants are highly motivated to make a difference to young people's lives and to 'give something back' to society (Edmonds et al, 2002; Hobson et al, 2004, 2009; Smithers and Robinson, 2003; Totterdell et al, 2002, 2004). This discrepancy between prospective teachers' positive motivation towards teaching as a career and the high attrition rate in the early years of teaching is being considered increasingly in terms of teacher resilience (e.g. Day and Gu, 2007).

For example, studies focusing on teachers in the early years of their career have identified that successful early career teachers seem to have a 'resilience factor' (Ewing and Manuel, 2005; Peters and Le Cornu, 2007) which enables them to navigate the range of challenges and contradictions they experience in the first years in the profession. Recent studies, particularly in Australia, highlight the need for the promotion of resilience to be a focus of teacher preparation programmes (Le Cornu, 2009; Howard and Johnson, 2004). Le Cornu (2009) has developed these ideas further and employs Jordan's (2006) model of relational resilience as a conceptual framework for understanding how teacher education programmes can support the development of resilience in pre-service teachers. She also highlights the importance of resilience as a means to 'enhance teaching effectiveness, heighten career satisfaction and better prepare teachers to adjust to education's ever-changing conditions' (Le Cornu, 2009). The research reported in this study seeks to understand how resilience can be promoted in initial teacher education courses at one university in England.

Research Questions

This paper reports on research into student teachers' perceptions of well-being and resilience on three one year postgraduate teacher training courses which award credits at Masters level. The purpose of the research is threefold:

- to understand better the personal and systemic challenges beginning teachers experience during the training year;
- to identify the strategies beginning teachers employ to address identified challenges and to analyse them in relation to current theories of teacher resilience;
- to draw on the findings to develop existing courses to promote the development of the skills and strategies needed to develop resilience and so enhance retention and professional progression on teacher training courses.

Methods

In seeking to understand better beginning teachers' perceptions of professional and personal well-being we have taken a qualitative approach employing questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. A total of 99 beginning teachers studying across three one year post graduate teacher training programmes offered by the same institution are participating in the study. This paper focuses on the outcomes of questionnaires distributed in the first few weeks of school placement. The questionnaire

will be replicated at the midway point of each course, and a number of case study interviews will be conducted in the final phase of each of the three courses.

Frame

The data collected from the questionnaires distributed in the initial phase of the courses were analysed using 'human resilience' as a theoretical framework to develop our understanding of the perceptions of well-being reported by the beginning teachers. Our understanding of 'resilience' in this context is informed by the work of Johnson et al (2008) who have used the term to provide a frame with which to consider the issue of well-being in teachers and how well-being can be fostered. Four overarching themes relating to well-being emerged from initial analysis of the data set, and responses were grouped as directly relating to affective, social and intellectual issues. A fourth theme identified was related to the use of metaphors. The four broad themes provided the structural frame for detailed data analysis. The data were analysed as a complete data set and by individual course. In this way data are presented as: pre-service teachers; pre-service teachers on a secondary postgraduate teacher training programme; pre-service teachers on a secondary employment based teacher training programme; pre-service teachers on a primary school-based teacher training programme.

Research findings

Within, and across the themes, tensions perceived by the pre-service teachers after the initial weeks of experience on school placement emerge from the analysis. The initial findings further reveal common areas of enjoyment and concern across each of the four themes and across the three groups of respondents. One common area of concern relates to the recent changes to Masters level work being a component of postgraduate initial teacher training courses in England. A significant proportion of respondents identified academic elements of the courses as challenging. In particular, assignment writing and research projects were frequently perceived by the respondents as contributing disproportionately to the challenges associated with the early stages of initial teacher training courses. The findings from the initial questionnaires also offer insights into strategies employed by some beginning teachers in developing personal and professional competence, and in terms of promoting resilience in pre service teachers the findings add support to those reported in other studies (Le Cornu, 2009). The findings are used to propose strategies for promoting and building resilience in initial teacher education courses.