

Editorial: Beginning to teach: Experience, reflections and critique

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In this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, we offer a range of papers by internationally recognized educational researchers and practicing teachers that, taken as a suite, explores the complex and highly topical theme of the early years of teaching.

If we consider the continuum of *initial* teacher professional development beginning with pre-service preparation courses, incorporating practicum (school experience) and internship (trainee status) and culminating in employment and induction into the profession, it is clear that the formative stages of this continuum mark a watershed in the emergence of professional identity. Education systems throughout the Western world are confronting the challenge of teacher recruitment and supply, and perhaps more significantly, the *retention* of these teachers well beyond the first few years of their career. Alarming rates of attrition amongst early career teachers, with reports of as many as one in three or more of teachers leaving the profession for good after only one to three years of teaching, signal deep and worrying trends within the profession that cross boundaries of educational sectors, curriculum areas and geographical borders.

Redressing this trend is, in part, reliant upon thorough research into the early phases of teachers' careers to identify the motivations, challenges, aspirations, expectations, and experiences at each stage of the newly-emerging teacher's life. Whether it be at the outset of or during a pre-service preparation programme, in the introductory days of a first appointment, or after several years of teaching, it is imperative that we systematically map the territory in ways that will provide meaningful insights into questions impacting on the profession. We need to know:

- What are the values, philosophies and attitudes of those entering the profession in this new century?
- Are there characteristics of the early-career experience that are particular to teachers of English?
- What are the forces that shape and drive the development of the English teacher – and teachers across the educational spectrum – through the professional preparation and employment continuum?
- With the issue of teacher supply and retention at the forefront of policy, how and in what ways does the early career experience influence the longer-term career goals of the newly appointed teacher?
- To what extent do initial teacher education programmes impact upon the early-career experience?

The research and scholarly papers in this special edition present rich and detailed responses to these and other pressing questions. The papers by Viv Ellis, Robyn

Ewing and David Smith, and Lexie Grudnoff and Bryan Tuck provide compelling evidence of the challenges that emerge during the early career phase in the light of initial teacher preparation and induction. The research upon which these papers are based are large-scale, and in the case of Ellis and Grudnoff and Tuck, longitudinal studies that set forth clear evidence on the critical role of early career experience in teacher retention. While Ellis' paper offers penetrating and thought-provoking insights into the links between motivations to teach and the constitution of subject English, and the consequent impact of this nexus on the retention and attrition of early-career teachers, Ewing and Smith's research proposes strong recommendations for enhancing and emboldening current systems of support for newly-appointed teachers.

One of the features of this special edition is the international perspective brought to bear on the theme of early career teacher development and experience. The work of Burley and Ellis, for example, is located within a specifically British context, yet the conclusions drawn from their respective studies find strong echoes and parallels in the work of Ewing, Smith and Anderson from Australia, and Grudnoff and Tuck from New Zealand. Grudnoff and Tuck's paper presents thorough and detailed insights into the career patterns and pathways of a large cohort of beginning teachers with the findings, once again, resonating with those of Ellis, and Ewing and Smith. Burley offers a particularly interesting positioning by exploring the development of professional identity in English teaching, specifically through the use of the personal voice in language teaching. This claiming of identity is critical if we are to retain the strength of English teachers with individual voices in a profession increasingly subject to centralised control.

While several of the papers in this edition report on the findings of large-scale studies, other papers provide a more fine-grained perspective on the experience of individual beginning teachers. Michael Anderson's paper takes us, first hand, into the world of the neophyte professional, drawing upon case studies and personal narratives. The accounts of early career experience, expectations, challenges, and aspirations evocatively detailed in Anderson's paper, provide an engaging "insider's view" from new English and Drama teachers. Similarly, Anna Wild's contribution weaves a colourful tapestry of the often diverse, frequently challenging, and at times unsettling day-to-day experience of English teachers. Her paper provides us with a grounded perspective on the bread-and-butter concerns of the early-career teacher through a record of conversation, interview and focus group responses.

We know from an expansive body of research that effective schools are largely created and sustained by effective teachers. It follows, then, that if good teachers make the crucial difference in students' educational experience, then it is incumbent upon the profession, employers, and the wider educational community to seek to understand more fully the reasons why good teachers stay, and the reasons why good teachers leave. It is timely, therefore, with the international focus on teacher quality, teacher retention and teacher attrition, that this special edition of ETPC contributes to our growing understanding and knowledge of the experiences of beginning teachers in ways that may move the profession, and in particular, the international English teaching profession, forward in its efforts to enact meaningful change.