Chapter 11
Teacher Retention: Some Concluding Thoughts

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Abstract This concluding chapter draws together the main ideas presented in preceding chapters about how to address the problem of early career teacher attrition. It organises authors' viewpoints within several themes relating to the negative portrayal of early career teachers, how these pervasively damaging representations can be countered and what paradoxical challenges arise when unintended consequences flow from poorly conceived 'solutions' to the problem. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of the gaps in our knowledge as a reminder of the need for further research to promote early career teacher retention.

11.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, we examine the central themes of the book and summarise the arguments presented by the authors against the positioning of early career teachers as problems and liabilities in schools.

In this book we aimed to achieve several things. Firstly, we sought to examine why there is such unprecedented political and public interest in early career teachers and their retention in the profession. Secondly, we sought to critique the ways in which early career teachers have been negatively portrayed as 'problems' that need to be 'fixed' to improve the 'quality' of our schools. Finally, we sought alternative

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perspectives on the challenges associated with attracting, recruiting, developing and retaining 'quality' early career teachers. To reflect these aims, we assemble the key ideas presented in the book that address the following questions:

- What is wrong with the ways early career teachers are currently viewed and positioned?
- Why are they viewed and positioned in these ways?
- How does this affect early career teacher retention?
- What can be done to challenge negative, deficit portrayals of early career teachers and promote their retention in the profession?

11.2 The Problem: Negative Portrayals of Early Career Teachers

In Chap. 3, Down and Sullivan identify an international trend to implicate 'poorly prepared teachers' in the deteriorating 'quality' of our schooling systems. They use Berliner and Biddle's (1995) concept of a 'manufactured crisis' to expose a raft of 'neoliberal and neoconservative views about standards, teacher quality, teacher training and back-to-basics teaching methods' that seek to reassert control over what is perceived to be a 'failing' schooling system. They summarise 'seven key concerns' with initial teacher education which contribute to the production of early career teachers who supposedly lack 'classroom-ready' knowledge and skills, and who are susceptible to burn-out and an early exit from the teaching profession. They see the negative portrayal of teacher education graduates as part of a deliberate 'moral-political' campaign to challenge the tenets of progressive education and address the 'problem' of poor teacher quality.

In Chap. 4, Mockler adds to this analysis by documenting a dramatic change in the way early career teachers are currently represented in media texts, compared with earlier times. She suggests that 'the media's consistent reinforcement of the notion that both initial teacher education programs and their students are substandard seems unlikely to attract the 'best and brightest to teaching'. She makes the telling point that the negative 'media framing of early career teachers holds the potential to shape not only community attitudes, but also the attraction and attrition of early career teachers themselves'.

The policy responses to this 'manufactured crisis' typically constitute what Down and Sullivan call 'muscular forms of accountability'. These include more rigorous quality assurance processes for initial teacher education programs, tightened university selection criteria for entry to teacher education, compulsory literacy and numeracy testing of graduating teachers, and the application of 38 Australian Professional Standards for Graduate Teachers. The chapters by Flores (Chap. 2) and Keltchermans (Chap. 5) show that these are not solely Australian responses to a perceived problem with the quality of early career teachers; similar policy drivers operate in other jurisdictions. The pressure to be internationally competitive in the all-important measures of comparative schooling achievement – the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) – means that ‘policy borrowing’ (Lingard 2010) to address the ‘quality teacher problem’ is rife among OECD countries.

Given the negative macro policy environment which implicates early career teachers in the perceived decline in educational standards in developed countries like Australia, the revelations by Johnson et al. (Chap. 6) that some local school leaders actively seek to attract, recruit and invest in the development of early career teachers challenges the dominant pejorative narrative. Their chapter provides many examples of strategic micropolitical activities undertaken by school leaders that focus on early career teachers’ strengths rather than their perceived weaknesses.

Other writers problematise deficit thinking about early career teachers. In Chap. 5, Keltchermans analyses the unintended consequences of embracing induction and support practices, like mentoring, that are predicated on assumptions about early career teachers’ perceived lack of essential knowledge, skills and dispositions. He writes that ‘[t]his framing of early career teachers in terms of individual shortcomings (deficits) automatically results in a remedial perspective. In this logic, the ultimate purpose and justification of support for early career teachers is the remediation of their deficits’. He presents a number of ‘alternative representations’ of early career teachers that stress and acknowledge their *agency*: ‘the human capacity to interpret and judge the particular situations they find themselves in and to act upon this sense making’. Their ‘eventual decision to stay in the job or leave’ is influenced by the ‘degree of fit’ between ‘active, knowledgeable and sense-making agents and the working conditions they find themselves in’.

Both Sisson (Chap. 7) and White (Chap. 8), although writing about different ‘problems’ with initial teacher education, identify the sources of deficit thinking that position student teachers and graduate teachers as lacking practical knowledge and skills, and an understanding of teaching in rural contexts. Rather than ‘blaming’ these teachers (one of six features of deficit thinking: Valencia 2010, pp. 7–9), White implicates systemic flaws in the ways pre-service education is structured to explain why ‘novice teachers … who take up a rural position … leave within the first couple of days or months of teaching’.

In summary, many of the authors in this book have implicated the negative portrayal of early career teachers as a factor that compromises teacher retention. Some explain deficit thinking benignly as a form of unconscious bias or as the consequence of holding common, taken-for-granted assumptions about novice teachers (Mockler, Sisson and Keltchermans). Others are more inclined to link neoliberal beliefs and anti-progressive education proponents with persistently negative appraisals of the quality of teacher graduates (Johnson et al., Down and Sullivan, and Flores). The consequences of promoting such adverse representations of early career teachers are quite profound:

- They make teaching a less attractive destination profession. In a reconceptualised understanding of the retention process (Johnson et al.), this means that issues at the teacher attraction stage significantly impact on the longer-term retention of teachers.

- They affect the morale of early career teachers as they internalise negative messages about their competence. This compromises their level of commitment and leads to higher levels of attrition, particularly in 'difficult-to-staff' schools (White).
- They shift the focus of analyses of the determinants of the quality of teachers' work away from contextual factors to individual factors (Keltchermans; Flores).
- They encourage the development and use of accountability regimes which involve greater standardisation and regulation of initial teacher education programs and their graduates (Down and Sullivan).

11.3 What Can be Done?

11.3.1 Discredit Deficit Thinking

Perhaps the most obvious response to these damaging depictions of early career teachers is to challenge the validity and veracity of these narratives and to directly and explicitly implicate them in the creation of the problem of teacher attrition. By 'naming and shaming' the purveyors of deficit thinking, several authors offer alternative ways of representing early career teachers that recognise their positive contribution to their colleagues' professional learning and school development. As Keltchermans (Chap. 5) notes, 'Acknowledging their expertise and treating them as sense-making agents who represent rich networks and bring valuable ideas and practices to the school does more justice to early career teachers than the remedial perspective'. In a similar way, Johnson et al. (Chap. 6) use the voices of key school leaders to construct an alternative positive narrative about early career teachers' virtues that speaks against traditional deficit-oriented portrayals. These leaders set the groundwork for higher levels of teacher retention by 'talking up' graduate teachers during the attraction and recruitment phases of the retention process. This is timely and significant work as it fundamentally repositions early career teachers as valuable, essential contributors to the quality of education in the twenty-first century, rather than as liabilities to be spurned.

11.3.2 Rethink the Retention Process

The second strategy suggested by some of the contributing authors is to rethink and reconceptualise teacher retention as a more complex, elaborate and time-intensive process than other approaches that focus on the provision of post-appointment induction and mentoring support. In Chap. 8, White points out that the 'problem' of staffing rural schools in Australia needs to be addressed long before graduating teachers take up appointments in regional, rural or remote schools. She calls for the development of new models of initial teacher education in which 'pre-service teachers are well supported and scaffolded to understand the diversity of rural places and the importance of understanding the "funds of knowledge" …of the students they teach … [I]t is time for a transformative, system approach to teacher education'.

In Chap. 6, Johnson et al. also shift the focus of retention processes to 'early' interventions designed to ensure that graduate teachers 'fit' the quite specific requirements of employing schools. As they point out, 'The most common strategy involved entering the competition to attract and recruit graduate teachers quite early, in some cases before prospective teachers had completed their undergraduate teacher education. The use of "try before you buy" initiatives was common'. They then link these attraction and recruitment strategies designed to identify early career teachers who 'match' and 'fit in' with longer-term initiatives that modify beginning teachers' working arrangements and that invest in their professional development.

In contrast, Day (Chap. 10) recognises the importance of working with early career teachers to ensure their continued commitment to the profession but then shifts his concerns to how mid- and late-career teachers sustain 'their commitment to teaching to the best of their ability'. His contribution is significant in that it uses a resilience perspective to explore how mature teachers navigate changing policy contexts and cope with challenging personal and professional life experiences that impact on their capacity to 'stay in teaching and remain committed'. While Day's concerns with the retention of experienced teachers is different from those of other authors in this book, his nuanced depiction of the changing teacher retention process over time challenges and disrupts simplistic career-stage explanations of why teachers leave or remain in the profession as committed teachers.

11.3.3 Modify Early Career Teachers' Work

The third suggestion to address the problem of early career teacher attrition is to rethink what work we expect our graduate teachers to perform as they transition into the profession (den Brok et al. 2017). As Johnson et al. (2016) point out, 'few concessions are given to early career teachers as they negotiate complex roles. Most are expected to do the same work and perform to the same levels as more experienced teachers' (p. 49). This bizarre and ultimately cruel expectation has been recently reinforced by the Australian federal government's Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report, *Action now: Classroom ready teachers* (2014). The chair of TEMAG reportedly said that teachers 'deserve the very best' pre-service preparation so that they can be 'classroom ready' and 'be successful from their first day in the classroom' (quoted by Down and Sullivan in Chap. 3). Not unexpectedly, many early career teachers ‘struggle to achieve this level of performance’ (Johnson et al. 2016, p. 49). Several authors in this book implicate unreasonable and repressive work expectations and arrangements in the complex mix of factors that contribute to early career teacher attrition. Their responses challenge orthodox practices and propose alternatives that reconfigure the ways early career teachers work.

In Chap. 6, Johnson et al. describe the ‘re-engineering’ of early career teachers’ work undertaken by school leaders in their study. They reveal that this involved ‘carefully allocating new teachers to teams to promote collaboration; structuring the timetable and workspaces to support other collaborations; and reducing their workloads’. The ‘intended outcomes of these efforts to re-engineer teachers’ work were the promotion of teacher collegiality, sense of belonging and shared responsibility – leading to higher levels of commitment and improved early career teacher retention’.

In Chap. 9, Preston offers the most dramatic and critical analysis of the ‘stressful and damaging introduction to teaching and the teaching profession experienced by most early career teachers as they begin their careers in insecure replacement work’. She identifies that the pathway to teaching for many early career teachers is through ‘insecure casual or limited term contracts in different schools. They receive relatively low pay with little or no increments for experience and have few opportunities for career development’. She exposes the exploitative nature of replacement work and warns of the long-term dangers of relying on a teaching force made up of 40 per cent casuals. She points to the scandalous way casual early career teachers are treated with ‘a lack of respect from colleagues and students, [which contributes to their] isolation, feelings of powerlessness, and professional dislocation’. The litany of evidence she presents from numerous studies in Australia and overseas leads her to propose a set of alternative strategies that:

- ‘Reduce the amount of replacement work undertaken by teachers in insecure casual or fixed term employment’.
- ‘Professionalise replacement work’ by appointing permanent teachers as relief teachers.
- ‘Regulate the forms of employment that can be undertaken by early career teachers’.
- ‘Better manage the entry into the teaching workforce’ by adjusting initial teacher education intakes in response to teacher supply and demand forecasts.

These suggestions may seem radical in that they challenge longstanding practices based on assumed-to-be-sound evidence. However, the plight of early career teachers who are locked into insecure replacement work requires a fundamental re-think of these arrangements. Preston offers new solutions to previously intractable problems that impair the transition of graduate teachers into the profession.

11.4 Paradoxes and Contradictions in the Field

Paradoxes and contradictions are revealed in policy and practice when mostly well-intentioned actions have unintended negative consequences. These occur when a situation is difficult to understand because it contains two opposite characteristics (Cambridge English Dictionary 2018). The contributing authors expose many perplexing conundrums that beset the field and unsettle taken-for-granted 'solutions' to the problem of early career teacher attrition. For example:

- Keltchermans (Chap. 5) exposes mentoring as a well-meaning but flawed way to help early career teachers as it frequently manifests as a paternalistic, unequal and contrived process that 'remediates' beginning teachers' 'deficiencies'.
- Preston (Chap. 9) reveals that 'giving early career teachers a start' in the profession via short-term contracts and replacement appointments affords them an uncertain and unrewarding introduction to teaching that challenges their commitment and durability, and ultimately influences their decision to stay in or leave the profession.
- Sisson (Chap. 7) shows that an emphasis on theory and rigour in initial teacher education programs contributes to an unhelpful and divisive theory–practice binary between school-based and university-based teacher educators.
- Down and Sullivan (Chap. 3) reveal the consequences of explicitly codifying teachers' work: greater accountability, work intensification, loss of teacher autonomy and the framing of teachers as technicians.
- White (Chap. 8) maintains that investing in monetary incentives for rural and remote teachers will not address the fundamental issues affecting their retention in rural schools: flaws in the preparation and education of pre-service teachers.
- Flores (Chap. 2) argues that the individualised and narrow focus of debates about 'teacher quality' largely ignores the 'contextual, professional, political and personal dimensions' of the notion; context is everything.
- Johnson et al. (Chap. 6) question the taken-for-granted assumptions of conventional human resource development, fit-for-purpose approaches to teacher recruitment by exposing the operation of systemic biases that exclude minority groups from teaching due to their 'differentness'.

These paradoxes were identified by the contributing authors because they were prepared to 'challenge the status quo by unsettling common-sense beliefs, routines, habits and practices' about the recruitment and retention of early career teachers (Johnson et al. 2016, p. 143). In Arendt's (1968) terms, they were prepared to engage in deep 'thinking' – 'the habit of erecting obstacles to oversimplification, compromises, and conventions' (cited in Berkowitz 2010, p. 8). While their efforts broaden 'the debate about teacher retention to include considerations of fairness, equity and civility' (Johnson et al., Chap. 6), gaps still exist in our understanding of the 'dynamic and complex interplay between individual, relational and contextual conditions that either enable or constrain' early career teachers' agency (Johnson et al. 2016, p. 7). These gaps provide fertile ground for further research into early career teacher attrition and retention.

11.5 Gaps

While some of the chapters in this book directly draw on accounts of early career teachers' experiences, there is a notable gap in our knowledge of what contributes to teacher attrition from the perspective of those who leave. Johnson et al. (Chap. 6) report on the views of 16 recent graduates who were in the first few months of their initial appointments as teachers. Their insights into their transition to the profession were important in identifying a range of school leadership practices that encouraged them to enter into an implicit psychological contract to remain in their jobs. However, they offer little insight into the thinking and decision making of early career teachers who become disenchanted with teaching and subsequently leave the profession. What is needed are more studies of 'the leavers' (Buchanan 2010) or 'the switchers' (Watt and Richardson 2008) that probe the difficult separation process that precedes the eventual decision to discontinue teaching (see also Smith and Ulvik 2017).

In 2012, legislation was introduced in Australia's federal parliament that uncapped university places in a new demand-driven system. This effectively allowed universities to increase enrolments – and revenue from student fees – according to the demand for undergraduate university places. In initial teacher education, this policy encouraged universities to offer more places without a thorough examination of the impact on teacher supply and demand. According to Weldon (2015), the supply of graduating teachers 'increased considerably' in the years following the introduction of the 2012 policy, leading to a situation in which 'supply generally has outstripped demand, particularly for generalist primary teachers and in some secondary subjects' (p. 15). However, population projections – even the most conservative – show 'high levels of growth in the population of primary school-aged children in the next five to ten years' (2015–2025) with increases in secondary enrolments flowing through from 2018: 'Demand for teachers is on the rise' (Weldon 2015, p. 1). Given these vicissitudes in demand, there is a clear need for more sophisticated Australian research into teacher supply and demand at the state and national levels. This is echoed in the Dutch context by den Brok, et al. (2017) who suggest a more systematic approach to collecting and analysing data on teacher attrition and related supply and demand issues. Further research would satisfy Preston's call (Chap. 9) to better balance 'supply and demand by adjusting initial teacher education intakes according to forecasts … to facilitate the smooth absorption into the profession of recent graduates'. Universities have a social responsibility to engage in this research and to resist the temptation to profit from an unregulated 'market' that produces more teachers than needed.

In Chap. 5, Keltchermans is critical of ‘remedial’ approaches to induction and mentoring. However, research conducted by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership suggests that ‘there is broad agreement in the education sector around the value of induction as a support for beginning teachers, but less clarity about how best to implement it in practice’ (AITSL 2016, p. 3). The striking disparity between the views of school leaders and early career teachers about the nature and range of induction strategies used in schools suggests that more research needs to be undertaken in this area.

Finally, there is a need to continue research into the professional lives of early career teachers that exposes the exploitative and unjust ways they are ‘used’ to satisfy the needs of schools and schooling systems that persistently violate the psychological contract between newly appointed teachers and their employers. Such research is needed to address the wasteful loss of 25 to 40 per cent of early career teachers who leave the profession within five years of their first appointment (Ewing and Manuel 2005). Further critical research will focus on this major social, economic and educational problem by providing further evidence that:

- Educating teachers who leave the profession early is a wasteful and inefficient use of public funds.
- Schools are destabilised and disrupted by high staff turnover.
- Schools lose the expertise of new, high-achieving graduates.
- Student learning is compromised.
- The individual’s costs are high when graduates’ personal and career aspirations and plans are thwarted due to a negative transition to the teaching profession.

11.6 Conclusion

By way of summary, this book has drawn on a number of theoretical and research insights into a persistent issue confounding education systems, schools and teachers: how to keep ‘the best’ teachers in the profession. We invited key thinkers and researchers in the field to analyse why early career teachers have been targeted in a damaging assault on their integrity that compromises their ongoing commitment to the teaching profession. We brought their ideas together within several themes relating to the negative portrayal of early career teachers, how these pervasively damaging representations can be countered, and what paradoxical challenges arise when unintended consequences flow from poorly conceived ‘solutions’ to the problem. We concluded with a short discussion of four ‘gaps’ in our knowledge related to:

- The thinking and decision making of those early career teachers who chose to leave the profession.
- How the teacher supply and demand ‘market’ works or, more importantly, should work.
- The effectiveness of the induction process and other school support processes.
- How issues of fairness and civility can unsettle orthodox approaches to the attraction and recruitment of early career teachers.

Ultimately, we hope that this book will stimulate debate about how to promote the interests of early career teachers to ensure that future generations of teachers are able to successfully fulfil their ambitions to be quality professionals who can nurture our young people in uncertain times.

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