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Five years in: a case study of an Australian early-career secondary school music teacher

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Abstract

Early-career secondary school music teachers navigate many challenges as they settle into the profession. These include consolidating their knowledge of subject content, gaining classroom confidence and honing skills in classroom management. In addition, their sense of belonging can be enhanced by working at collegial relationships within their faculty, across the school and feeling a part of the wider school community. These factors can elicit a ‘make or break’ response for continuing in the profession.

This paper reports on a case study of an Australian early-career secondary school music teacher, in her fifth year in the profession. The case study, as a part of a larger study, sequenced quantitative and qualitative research methods, allowing insight into the music teacher’s working life and enabled the researcher to understand factors that impact daily practice. Themes explored in the study include motivation, perception of value, stress and the difficulties of securing permanent employment. The music teacher presented a positive approach to her work through her development of resilience and shared her future goals and dreams.

This research offers suggestions on how schools and education authorities can best support early-career secondary school music teachers to enable them to become resilient, confident and valued practitioners for the future.

Keywords: early-career music teachers; value; motivation; stress; employment

Background and context

The case study in this paper explored the factors that impact the working life of an early-career secondary school music teacher. Early-career teachers are defined as those within their first few years of teaching (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017) and, for the purpose of this research, will be framed up to the end of five years.

The music teacher in this case study, in her fifth year, had worked in several school settings in Australia and internationally, including primary schools in London and secondary schools across metropolitan Sydney, New South Wales (NSW). The teacher gained a permanent position in a government school in southern Sydney in 2017. The interview was held in August 2018.

Literature review

There is much research into factors that affect early-career secondary school music teachers as they begin in the profession. While some early-career secondary school music teachers transition into teaching smoothly, securing permanent employment, others find the challenges of teaching and gaining employment quite stressful (Hulme & Menter, 2014).

Research by Ballantyne (2007), gathered through the interviews of 1 early-career Australian music teachers, found heavy workloads, professional isolation and involvement in many facets of

the job (including extracurricular ensembles) contributed to teacher stress. These factors could also be linked to 'praxis shock' (the contradiction of expectation of teaching and the reality of teaching). Professional development and mentoring were suggested to support music teachers as they settle into the profession. Shaw (2018) suggested the tailoring of professional development to the school context (e.g., urban setting), creating 'communities of practice', mentoring and building partnerships between universities and schools to alleviate praxis shock.

Research on teacher motivation often focuses on self-determination theory. Fernet et al. (2016), in a Canadian study of 589 French-Canadian teachers in their first three years, explored the two motivation platforms of self-determination theory: autonomous motivation (achieving task for pleasure/satisfaction) and controlled motivation (completing tasks through internal or external pressures). They found that occupational commitment grew stronger for those that maintained autonomous motivation, but over the first three years of teaching, this motivation tended to subside. Work overload also resulted in low-quality motivation.

A person-centred approach to motivation was explored in the research of Collie and Martin (2017). Adaptive (self-efficacy, valuing and master orientation) and maladaptive (anxiety, uncertain control and performance avoidance) motivational profiles were constructed through the analysis of results of a survey of 519 Australian teacher participants across 18 schools. Five teacher profiles were constructed: success approach, success-seeking, amotivation, failure fearing/self-protecting and failure accepting. These were linked with well-being outcomes including work enjoyment, workplace buoyancy and work disengagement.

Arnup and Bowles (2016) conducted a survey of 160 Australian early-career (first 10 years) primary and secondary teachers that found lower resilience and poor job satisfaction were factors for leaving, with 32% of respondents indicating they intended to leave. The research suggests that early-career teachers need strategies to develop resilience, collegial support and mentoring. 'Schools that are supportive and highly collaborative are most successful in retaining beginning teachers' (Arnup & Bowles, 2016, p. 240).

Through a survey of K-12 music teachers in central and western New York ($n = 576$), Hanson (2015) found that intrapreneuring (internal entrepreneurship that seeks growth through creating and pursuing a vision and forming a new venture within a large organisation) reduced teacher demotivation and attrition. Strategies for music educators included new ensemble models, interdisciplinary projects and collaborations with individuals/organisations outside of school to enhance job fulfilment. The findings recommend that early-career educators stay in the same position, communicate their plans to colleagues, supervisors and parents, and seek a mentor for guidance. In addition, Conway and Hibbard (2018) in their investigation of the micropolitical landscapes of schools suggest that music teachers need to be purposeful in fostering communication and rapport with all stakeholders (staff, parents and students) to achieve programme success.

Research on teacher stress, burnout and strain can be found in the literature (Doss, 2016; Grund et al., 2016; McKinley, 2016). The need to set common goals and values with staff is suggested in the research of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) as a way to avoid stress in the workplace. Through their study of stressors in the schools of 1145 Norwegian teachers, they explored four factors: discipline problems, time pressure, low student motivation and value dissonance (teacher goals that do not match school goals and values). Reducing workload and time pressure for teachers was also suggested as a way forward. In an Australian study of 122 Queensland high school music teachers, Kelly (1999) explored stress resulting from the demands of curricular and extracurricular activities, and administration, increasing the workload of music teachers. She warns against the possible loss of music educators from the profession due to resultant burnout.

Early-career music teachers can also have their feelings of competence, confidence and belonging enhanced through receiving positive feedback about their work. Joseph (2011), through utilising narrative reflection in a study of an Australian early-career music teacher, found that receiving positive comments from parents and colleagues was the most rewarding part of a

teacher's work. 'Such encouraging words have influenced her decision to continue teaching as well as it makes her feel that she has been doing a good job since she started' (p. 83). In addition, mentoring and networking are suggested as further ways to sustain early-career teachers. The importance of role support (through affirmation, collaboration and professional development) is also the focus of the research of Gray (2011).

This research aims to explore the influences that impact early-career secondary school music teachers in their work and find ways to support them to continue in the profession.

The research questions for the larger study were as follows:

1. What factors enable secondary music teachers to remain motivated in their workplace?
2. What are the negative factors that affect secondary music teachers in each stage of their career?
3. How can secondary music teachers be better equipped and supported in their school environments?

Methodology

This paper reports on part of a larger study that explored the factors influencing the working lives of secondary school music teachers across Australia. The larger study, incorporating a survey and interviews, utilised Bandura's model of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997) as the theoretical framework. The research was exploratory, employing quantitative and qualitative research design principles, incorporating a survey and subsequent interviews of Australian secondary school music teachers. This paper will report on one interview with an early-career secondary school music teacher from Sydney, NSW.

The survey was distributed nationally by email through the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) membership from June 2018, and through the ASME Facebook page, and referred on to other music teacher forums and newsletters. From the 269 responses of secondary school music teachers who completed the survey nationally, 59 were from early-career teachers. Of these, 34 were from NSW, nine from Western Australia, seven from Queensland, four from Victoria, two from South Australia, two from Tasmania and one from the Northern Territory. There was no early-career secondary school music teacher response from the Australian Capital Territory.

The survey participants included 67% from metropolitan areas of capital cities, 30% from regional areas and 3% from remote locations. Teachers from government schools comprised 49% of the respondents, with 34% from independent schools, 9% from Catholic/systemic schools and 8% from other school types. The survey contained 45 questions and covered areas relating to career length, age, gender, qualifications, school type and location, levels taught, motivation, value, job satisfaction, work challenges, professional development, the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* and future career goals.

Respondents to the survey could also elect to be interviewed. This allowed a selection strategy of maximum variation (Given & Saumure, 2008). The researcher used purposive sampling to select music teachers for interview, to enable a cross section from as many states and territories of Australia as possible. The researcher also sought a mixture of male and female respondents, location (metropolitan, regional and remote), and school type (government, independent, systemic/Catholic and other). Eleven early-career secondary school music teachers were selected from NSW, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. The interviews explored, in more depth, areas such as teacher motivation, stress, curriculum implementation, professional development, career goals and areas of challenge.

The female early-career secondary school music teacher selected, interviewed and reported on in this paper, worked at a government school in southern metropolitan Sydney, NSW. The

interview was held in August 2018 at the teacher's school and was of 40 minutes duration. Audio and video recordings captured the interview, with field notes taken. The researcher transcribed the interview, and the teacher was sent the completed transcript for review.

The data were coded allowing grounded theory principles to emerge (Creswell, 2014). Open coding was utilised, conceptualising and labelling the themes that emerged (Cohen et al., 2007). In the second (axial) stage of coding, links were created which then allowed for the third stage of selective coding and the identification of the core themes in the data (Cohen et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The themes were examined and compared to the themes discussed in the literature review, allowing new themes from the data to emerge.

Findings

Four themes were identified in this case study giving insight into the developing professional identity of an Australian early-career secondary school music teacher. These were motivation, value, stress and securing employment.

Motivation

The prime motivating factor for this early-career music teacher, which aligned with many participants from the wider study, was her connection with her students. The connection through music as a subject is highlighted as a key factor in the characteristics of inspiring music teacher practice (Robinson, 2018) where deeper connection can be achieved in music lessons through multiple opportunities for student engagement. These opportunities can foster and enhance teacher–student relationships. In addition, the extension of this connection occurred through her work in extracurricular activities such as bands, choirs and musicals:

You develop a relationship with the students in the extracurricular environments that really differs from the classroom environment and that sort of connection with your students really helps in terms of making sure that classroom practice and your reputation within the school is really lifted. The kids don't really trust you as much until they have seen you as a person in a different setting to inside the four brick walls really.

Providing specific moments of empowerment, where students gain a sense of achievement or mastery of skill, is another characteristic of inspiring music teacher practice (Robinson, 2018). For this music teacher, a sense of empowerment affected her own self-efficacy as she realised her role enabling student initiative and skill development:

Having them [the students] in charge of their prop or seeing them do little rehearsals and learning their choreography together and asking to film it so they could make sure that it was of the highest standard; seeing them take that sort of initiative makes you feel empowered. Some teachers find it really hard because they see that their role is gone. I certainly don't because it means that they will want to come back and do it.

A goal for this early-career music teacher was ensuring the relevance of music as a subject for her students. The place of creative arts subjects (including Music) in the curriculum is threatened in Australia and also in England, where the core subjects of English, Maths and Science are being prioritised (Bath et al., 2020) and also in Ireland where the focus is on the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Gubbins, 2021). Within Australian schools, the development of skills for standardised testing in literacy and numeracy and initiatives in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) are also impacting the position of the Arts. This music teacher felt, as a

classroom practitioner, that providing a rich music education must be at the forefront of her planning and delivery:

A challenge for any teacher, not necessarily music teachers, is convincing people of our relevance when we are in such a highly dense information era. Kids can look up any fact, so to speak. They can look up how to make music in so many different ways, the history of a composer, and so in that sense, old methods of teaching where ‘it’s my way or the highway, this is the course content’ might not have the same levels of relevance going into the future but quality music teaching practice has not been about restating facts, it has been about instilling a lot of music. The challenge is to remain relevant.

The early-career secondary school music teacher interviewed presented a passionate approach to her work, highlighting student connection, the importance of opportunities for empowerment and realising her own role in advocating for the subject.

Value

Early-career secondary school music teachers are establishing their professional identities in the first few years of the profession. Day and Gu (2007) describe the professional life phase of this case study (4–7 years) as ‘developing their professional identity’ (p. 435). The importance of valuing a teacher’s work and creating a sense of belonging to their school community is paramount to future career longevity. Gray (2011) highlighted the importance of role support as a factor in a music teacher’s sense of belonging.

The early-career music teacher shared her perception of how she is valued:

It depends on the day whether you feel valued. Some days you feel totally supported within your school environment. The last couple of weeks – not so.

It was clear when she felt her work was valued, but the instances of not feeling valued had wider implications. Attendance of other teachers at musical events from those in the wider school community was a clear indicator of support which increased the sense of her work being valued:

The majority of the time, yes, I do [feel valued] and the reason I know that is because they tell me I am doing a good job or there is stuff in the newsletter that reinforces the work that we are doing. If there are instances where, on the noticeboard our stuff is not being publicised, I know that is a frustration that is shared in our faculty and we discuss that. We know [our work] is valued because people turn up – having that support within the wider community and that takes time.

Day and Gu (2010) also reinforce that this support may have ‘a more influential and significant effect on [teacher]commitment and self-efficacy’ (p. 83). Feeling a part of the school community and having developed collegial support has increased this music teacher’s sense of value to the school:

Maybe feeling more valued is a fact of being in the one spot and knowing that I can reliably go back to a certain number of people to discuss things if I am not. Being older has a lot to do with it too, bringing better mental health strategies to make sure that if something is not going quite right, that I can go to those networks and ask for that support.

Resilience can play a central role in the longevity and effectiveness of a teacher, and this is developed, according to the research of Shyman (2020) through reflective practice. Self-reflection was an effective tool for this teacher when she doubted her ability, and this has helped develop her resilience:

It takes time and the times when it doesn't work, and you don't feel valued and you go 'Is this a reflection of my work?' 'Is this a reflection on something that I have done to a kid?', 'Am I doing the best job that I possibly can? All that doubting talk comes in to play. If something doesn't go the way you want to in a meeting, you are like 'Oh well is this the place for me to be?'. When it is going well, it's going well – when it doesn't, not so much. I am able to move through this more now than previously – certainly two years ago I wouldn't have been able to do that.

The music teacher had experienced numerous situations where she had assessed her sense of value in the workplace. These assessments have been shaped by varied workplaces and collegial support. Her growing confidence and resilience in these formative years have been enabled through self-reflection.

Stress

While the teacher presented a positive approach to her work and felt valued in her school, an ongoing area of stress was administration (report writing and paperwork). Administrative stress created from time pressure and increased workload (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017) was also revealed across the survey responses and in the interviews of music teachers from all career categories. Across the 11 interviews of early-career music teachers in the larger study, three highlighted reporting and four indicated musical performances were significant stressors. For the music teacher in this case study, a particular point of stress was the coinciding of reporting periods with major musical performances such as showcase nights or broader performance events, for example, the Schools Spectacular (an NSW state-wide performance opportunity for students in government schools):

You feel like you are spending every working hour on schoolwork and you go home, and you write reports. If you haven't taken meticulous notes as you would have wanted to, or you have, and you have to write a couple of extra sentences for each child. It is particularly stressful because on top of a Creative and Performing Arts showcase, you are taking students off site to Schools Spectacular. Our reporting period for Year 7, 8 and 10 reports are all during the performance week of Schools Spectacular.

The doubling of disseminating information on student achievement through parent-teacher interviews and report writing was also shared as an area of increased work and stress for this teacher:

Why am I expected to do it for a parent/teacher interview to then have it on a report? Why am I doing that responsibility twice? It is double the administration for one set of outcomes. If the parent wanted a written record, they can have it, but I am going to say the exact same thing so maybe we should just make it parent/teacher interviews and the people who want to be engaged in that process are engaged in that process. I can have a meaningful connection with that parent about that child or their ward. Asking us to do that twice is certainly a bit of a frustration, particularly as music and art teachers and language teachers are often the ones that teach an entire year group.

Paperwork in the form of permission notes for excursions and written accounts of behavioural incidences added to teacher time constraints:

Paperwork for the sake of paperwork, behaviour management and follow through of that behaviour management to be consistent, permission notes, any sort of administrative task can be a real frustration and hindrance.

A career low point for this music teacher was disclosed when the overwhelming demands and stresses collided with increased workload and responsibility:

When you are giving as much as you possibly can, extra musical opportunities that you know will enrich their life for the better and you are also stressed because of duty of care, because of reporting and you have emails that are coming through from school about school responsibilities that you are supposed to manage even if you are off-site for that many days. You want everything to be perfect for those students and you want their experience to be so full and rich. You can't deliver perfect, rich, full experiences every single day, but you certainly want to and when you can't, and it's for elements within your control then it is certainly worse, and when it is out of your control, you are stuffed either way.

Administration is a common stressor for all teachers, but when combined with the demands of preparing student performances for school and public events can be an overwhelming and taxing feature of a music teacher's work. This early-career secondary school music teacher was aware of her stressors and was actively reflecting on her reactions and devising future coping strategies.

Securing employment

A significant factor in the working lives of early-career secondary school music teachers is the ability to secure permanent employment. The casualisation of the work force and the lack of permanent positions has had a major impact on how teachers establish themselves in the profession. This is also an added stress for music teachers in this career stage. In a comparative study of Scottish early-career teachers by Hulme and Menter (2014), they found the teachers unprepared 'for an increasingly competitive and contracting national and regional labour market' (p. 677). Hanson (2015) also highlighted that 'intrapreneuring' strengthened self-efficacy through personal vision and long-term commitment to the workplace.

The music teacher in this study had worked in her first five years in three different primary schools overseas, as a casual in multiple high schools across Sydney providing up to a term's work and then in her first permanent position 18 months before the interview. The security of being in the one school enhanced her practice:

Being in the one spot for more than one year helped a lot because you are not learning the content that you are teaching day to day, you are not spreading yourself as thin or you can spend more time refining practice rather than 'blurting out'.

The broad experience gained in a variety of school settings before securing her permanent position was seen as facilitating a positive outcome building skill, self-efficacy, resilience and commitment:

The schools [overseas] gave me experience in conducting a whole lot of ensembles – choirs, recorder ensembles, ukulele ensembles, samba clubs and lots of production in the primary school environment – masses for liturgy, Year 6 or Year 3 production or Year 5 production. In terms of [Sydney school name], a musical was part of the expected role as vocal director and dramatic director in terms of the drama side of things and dialogue and these things were really useful in getting my position here. They wanted someone here who could run after school programmes, ensembles, committed to whole school aspects of life.

For this teacher, experience in teaching senior classes (Higher School Certificate NSW Matriculation level) was a desirable factor for employment, as was the flexibility of skills required when meeting the needs of students from different socio-economic backgrounds across metropolitan Sydney:

Teaching HSC was useful in getting a permanent position. You need to be a jack of all trades because you are not only teaching classroom which is a specific skill set in relation to metalanguage of say the six concepts or writing essays for musicology but then you are also expected in some schools to be their private teacher and refine performance programs for the HSC. The responsibilities were quite dependent on not only the school that I was in and the course that was being delivered but also the area that I was teaching in. The expectation in a northern beaches school to be a private tutor for preparation for the Year 11 and 12 courses was not expected, whereas in south-western Sydney or southern Sydney, where the socio-economic area might be lower, or the first- and second generation families might not be able to afford that, the responsibility falls onto us as music teachers.

The early-career secondary school music teacher in this study was pleased to have gained a permanent position but could reflect positively on the importance of her skill development from working in several schools across various educational systems and countries.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study of a developing early-career music educator who has achieved a broad range of experiences in her formative years as a practitioner. The case study has also shown several ways support can be provided for early-career music secondary school music teachers in the foundational years of the profession.

For early-career teachers, the importance of fostering collegial relationships (Arnup & Bowles, 2016) and feeling valued within a faculty and across the wider school community is instrumental in building self-efficacy and belonging. This was true for the teacher in this study. In addition, self-reflection directly enhanced her resilience, with the understanding that there are sometimes difficult things to deal with and process, along with moments of great joy and achievement at work.

Building communities of practice (Bernard et al., 2018; Blair, 2008; Shaw, 2018; Takahashi, 2011), where novice teachers can feel supported and nurtured through collaborative growth and engagement with experienced colleagues, can be enhanced through the addition of mentoring by music teachers in later career stages (veteran and super veteran music teachers) (Robinson, 2020). Mentoring is beneficial for teachers beginning in the profession, with the added advantage of the reciprocal arrangement where early-career and experienced teachers share skills and resources, with the potential to develop organic and dynamic working relationships. Ballantyne and Zhukov (2017) found that early-career music teacher identities can flourish if their jobs utilise their talent and are guided by clear expectations through mentoring.

In addition, the early-career music teacher in this study found that finally securing permanent employment enhanced her sense of belonging through feeling valued by those in leadership. It is difficult for beginning teachers to secure permanent employment without senior school teaching experience (NSW Higher School Certificate Matriculation level). The implementation of team teaching and mentoring from experienced music teachers to those in temporary or supply positions enables upskilling for those seeking permanent positions.

Administration (including meeting deadlines, report writing, paperwork and the evidence needed for accreditation) is a common issue for teacher workload and a key stressor in the workplace for all teachers. In the larger study (Robinson, 2022), 42% of all surveyed secondary school music teachers ($n = 187$) reported that administration was a major cause of stress. Early-career teachers, while developing their professional identities in these formative years (Day & Gu, 2007), are also juggling the ever-increasing demands of administration that experienced teachers often find difficult and stressful. School leadership needs to be cognisant of these demands, especially during reporting periods, and provide additional support and time for early-career teachers. In Australia, while mandated relief for beginning teachers is provided for all permanent

and temporary teachers to facilitate mentoring, collaborative support and professional learning, this provision is not always uniformly provided across all school systems. The strategy acknowledges the crucial support early-career teachers need, but the application of this provision needs to be prioritised and streamlined to ensure it is being utilised.

Early-career secondary school music teachers should proactively investigate the support provided by professional associations. An example in Australia is the ASME State Chapters, which provide avenues for networking (especially for those who might be working in regional or remote communities). They also facilitate professional development courses and provide links to other music associations such as the Australian Band and Orchestra Director's Association (ABODA) or the Australian National Choral Association (ANCA). These networking avenues can enable opportunities for early-career teachers to share and reinforce what they are doing well and to explore what could be developed in their own school programmes.

With 35% of early-career music teachers in the larger survey ($n = 39$) stating they were *unsure* if they would still be in the profession in five years, this was a positive and encouraging case study of an Australian early-career secondary school music teacher who was passionate about her work, pleased to finally have a permanent position, cognisant of workplace stressors and confident about continuing in the profession beyond five years.

To conclude, she shared her hope for her future career path:

Choral directing hopefully within the Department [of Education], and classroom. When music is in the forefront, rather than ticking boxes, that would be the dream and still being a professional musician and trying to do that as much as I possibly can.

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Jenny Robinson has had a long and rewarding career as a secondary school music teacher in several Department of Education schools across New South Wales, Australia. Since 2011, she has also been working as a lecturer in Music Method at the University of NSW (UNSW). Her recently completed PhD explored factors influencing the working lives of Australian secondary school music teachers. In 2023, she was appointed to a part-time lecturers’ position at UNSW, as the Curriculum and Pedagogy Coordinator for the School of Education. She is passionate about music education and sustaining secondary school music teachers throughout their careers.