

# Start Well: A research project supporting resilience and wellbeing in early career teachers

Brief for professionals

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# Overview

There is a perception that early career teachers are at increased risk of leaving the profession prior to retirement (known as attrition). Possible factors influencing attrition seem to be multiple and interrelated.

One key factor of concern is the wellbeing of early career teachers.

Early career teachers commonly draw on their family, friends, colleagues, mentors, and peers for formal and informal support to help them in navigating their successful transition into the profession.

Social and professional feelings of belonging, connectedness, support and acceptance are potential contributors to early career teacher resilience and coping, adding to overall wellbeing.

Therefore, support systems that target relationships, skills and strengths are thought to be helpful to early career teachers in managing both professional and personal wellbeing.

# Research methodology

The Start Well study was carried out using a three phase model comprised of a literature review, quantitative data collection phase (online survey of early career teachers in NSW; n = 453) and a qualitative data collection phase (targeted interviews with education sector leaders; n = 5).

Logistic regression was used to determine what factors affected a teacher's plan to stay in teaching long-term or leave. These three phases informed the development of recommendations for action to support early career teachers' wellbeing and resilience, with the potential to impact indirectly upon their retention.



## Research aim

To further the understanding of key risk and protective factors for early career teacher wellbeing and resilience in NSW, Australia.



# Key findings

## Demographic factors

- Approximately three quarters of the sample were under 35 and in a relationship.
- Eight out of every 10 respondents were female.
- There were no demographic factors that predicted an early career teacher's plans for attrition in this study including gender or qualification.

## Workplace factors

- Most respondents identified as a classroom teacher in a government school (>90%).
- Approximately equal numbers of early career teachers were in full-time, permanent and contract or temporary work; however the majority would prefer permanent and full-time work.
- One in four had relocated for work, with just over half living in a metro location.
- Similar numbers of primary teachers and secondary teachers responded to the survey; primary teachers were more likely to plan to stay in teaching long-term.
- Approximately 70% of respondents said they had been provided induction and/or mentoring, yet this did not have an impact on their responses regarding planned attrition.

## How can early career teachers be supported?

- 99% of teachers said that peers play an important role in supporting other early career teachers.
- Three quarters of respondents had previously given guidance to other teachers and agreed that this was important to them.
- Most respondents noted there were other early career teachers at their school and they had teacher friends.
- Strategies such as providing advice, feedback and practical strategies are preferred by early career teachers.

## Risk factors

- As experience level increases over the first five years for teachers, the risk for planned attrition is slightly higher, indicating that the first years of employment are critical.
- Time pressure and workload were significant themes throughout the survey. Most teachers did not feel they had enough time for collaboration or planning, preparation and assessment with the latter being associated with planned attrition, as was perceived workload.
- Early career teachers who reported not having a good work-life balance were 60% less likely to plan for staying in teaching long-term.
- Over half of the surveyed sample had previously considered leaving teaching and this was associated with a significant risk for planned attrition.
- Levels of social support were important for predicting responses regarding planned attrition.



## Protective factors

- Peer support, both in the form of having university friends and peer colleagues, was a protective factor against planned attrition.
- Openness to use of support services on a phone or tablet, as well as regular use of a mobile phone were protective factors for planned attrition.



### What do leaders in education think is needed to support early career teachers?

- Collaboration (especially at key times during the school year, e.g. report writing).
- Internal opportunities within schools including regular feedback from leadership.
- Mentoring and team teaching opportunities.
- Targeted support for non-permanent teachers.
- Funding for professional development.

## Recommendations

**Support for early career teachers should include aspects of modifiable and protective factors, such as peer support.**

Peer support should be actively included to promote professional relationship development, information sharing and help-seeking among teachers. The benefits of peer support are likely to be reciprocal.

**Supportive interventions should include capabilities to interact, engage and shape the individual experience of the teacher within the program.**

Interventions may be delivered via an interactive online medium, which has the potential of reaching teachers in broad locations and circumstances. Designing ways to customise interventions to the individual, their experience level, needs and specific circumstances may help ensure uptake.

**Mentor seeking strategies should be incorporated into a support program providing information and pathways to empower early career teachers to find, approach and engage with an appropriate mentor.**

Mentoring and induction as support are important to early career teachers and should be available and promoted to all. Mentoring or induction programs should compliment existing programs while addressing gaps. Providing time for mentoring and considering mentor and mentee compatibility are critical aspects for success.

**A focus on information around collaboration, including practical strategies, efficient ways of working with other teachers, key communication strategies and problem-solving is needed.**

The importance of collaboration has been emphasised in all three phases of this study. Improved awareness and encouragement of collaboration among teachers and schools, as well as using current systems, could increase the frequency and effectiveness of collaboration, particularly at key times of the year.

**Any intervention designed to promote resilience and wellbeing must be sympathetic to workload and be time efficient in nature. Interventions should be incorporated into existing procedures.**

Early career teachers perceive workload and time pressures to be significant stressors. Interventions should be built into existing processes or minimise additional work.

**Providing early career teachers, leaders, mentors and other teachers with streamlined, simple information about the realities and expectations of teaching may help reduce stress.**

Deliver information within the education system to manage expectations upon and from early career teachers. Examining current systems to ensure involvement of all parties could improve levels of understanding and support.

**A strengths-based approach should be used to develop the skills and abilities of early career teachers and should underpin all interventions. This includes help-seeking and self-help strategies for looking after their mental health.**



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