



Teachers' Perceptions of Career: Crises, Development and Successes.

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Abstract

This qualitative study arises from interviews of twenty secondary school teachers. The teachers came from four different secondary schools in metropolitan Perth and were each interviewed once a term over two school years. The age, subjects taught and teaching experiences of this groups of teachers was diverse and without bias towards gender or school.

In these interviews the teachers spontaneously addressed their concerns about professional career development. The teachers focused on initial career progress, their career crises and storms as well as the impediments they perceived toward real professional development. For many of these teachers their reflections covered a career coming to a close after a long classroom teaching vocation.

Introduction

The career of classroom teachers often results in increased administrative duties. Many teachers are promoted out of the classroom and become less focused on their primary domain of skill as they become educational managers. At the same time there is an increased awareness that good teachers need to be in the classroom and the best teachers could be encouraged to teach more rather than to administer.

This qualitative study focuses on secondary teachers who are recommended by their school principals to be excellent teachers. They are classroom teachers who engage with students in classrooms and who are committed to teaching well. These are teachers who have, from a variety and mixture of reasons, chosen classroom teaching rather than administration. Their perceptions of their own career and their teaching related stresses are the focus of this paper.

Interviews

The study was planned as an interview study of experienced, practising secondary teachers. The intent was to speak to teachers in as natural a setting as possible (Kvale 1996) and hence all interviews were conducted within their schools, usually in a small interview room or unused classroom in their spare, non-teaching periods during a normal working day (Woods 1996). A semi-structured interview schedule (Berg 2001) was employed in each interview. Teachers did not receive advance copies of the interview schedule although as the interview times were arranged on the telephone the general topic of the planned interview was communicated. Transcripts of interviews were not participant checked or validated. Several participants have expressed continued interest in the progress of the research project and its analysis and so copies of published articles are made available to participants in acknowledgment and thanks for their involvement.

Quotations are offered as indicative of the expressed thoughts and expressions of the teachers. It is not claimed that the quotations represent a majority opinion nor that they 'speak for' all the teachers. Each quotation is a part of the voice of the teacher and offered as support for the construction of meaning which is the responsibility of the author.

The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study on the nature of teaching excellence. While some studies associate high performing teachers with higher education

and accessing professional development (Adams and Dial 1995, Brighouse 1995), other authors point to financial considerations (Brewer 1996), motivation (Luce 1998) and social aspects (Place 1997) of career development (McCarthy 2000). Yet empirical, quantitative attempts to assess the importance of these factors often disappoint (Zigarelli 1996). The qualitative approach of Reven, Cartwright and Munday (1997) for preservice secondary teachers has been extended to investigate the teaching career development of secondary teachers.

Sample

The 19 teachers were selected by invitation. The principals of four Catholic secondary schools were asked to nominate teachers they considered to be excellent. The question "What do you mean by excellent?" was answered that they knew who their excellent teachers were from a variety of sources: teachers' peers; students; parents; their own professional observations and insights, and that it might be expected that a secondary school of 600 to 900 students could have between two and six excellent teachers. Classroom teachers rather than middle managers were to be preferred, but there was no criteria for selection in terms of the subject area, age or experience of the teacher. This approach was designed to circumvent the problems of an external evaluation of what is good teaching or who are good teachers (Wragg, Haynes, Wragg and Chamberlin, 2000, pp.5-15).

When principals identified teachers, each teacher was approached individually. Usually in the staff room, each teacher was informed of the principal's nomination and briefed on the intent and scope of the research project. They were invited to consider accepting an offer to participate which would be confirmed in a follow up phone call rather than give an immediate response. In all cases teachers accepted the invitation to participate in this research. The referred approval (Vallance, 2001) of the school principals contributed in a significant manner to the successful generation of an informative sample for this research project.

The nineteen teachers who were selected and agreed to participate represent the diversity among secondary teachers. There were nine women and ten men, teaching for as long as 39 years or as briefly as 5 years (Table 1). This gender distribution is slightly biased towards males. While there are more women than men teaching in these schools, the difference is not considered to be of concern.

Table 1 Gender and Age Distribution of the Sample of Teachers

Gender	Teaching < 10 Years	11 < Teaching < 20 Years	Teaching => 21 Years
Male	0	5	5
Female	5	1	3

Of these nineteen teachers, there were three teachers of mathematics, six of science, three of English, four of geography and humanities, one ESL and one history teacher (Table 2). Clearly, there are more science teachers than might be expected from a random sample. But this sample is a purposive sample (Cohen and Manion 1994, pp.89-90), selected to be maximally informative of a particular group, excellent teachers. The science teachers were

nominated from three of the four schools, so there is no sense of 'favouritism' or bias in the principals' nominations of excellent teachers.

Table 2 Main Teaching Subjects of the Sample Teachers

Main Subject	N Teachers
History	1
Science	6
Maths	3
Social Studies	2
Geography, Commerce	2
English	3
ESL	1

The ESL teacher (Table 2) worked within a language support unit for newly arrived students from non-English speaking backgrounds and, at the time of the data collection, was not involved in regular classes although had been teaching some regular classes in the school before the sample and was open to the possibility of doing so again.

An earlier article describes the manner in which the texts were analysed and the extent to which 'truth value' is understood within the texts (Vallance, 2000).

Method – longitudinal

Each teacher was interviewed over a two year period, 1999 – 2000. The interviews were organised to occur each school term. This sample decision was made in order to access a sense of the rhythm of teachers professional lives in terms of the flow of work and energy as it occurs in different school terms and at the beginning, middle and end of particular terms. Each teacher was interviewed a minimum of four times.

The interviews were audio recorded with the explicit permission of participants. This permission was requested, and granted, at each interview. The cassette tapes were professionally transcribed to give a literal transcript of the conversations both as hard copy and disk files. The transcripts were input to QSR NVivo™ and subsequent analysis was preformed within NVivo (Bazeley and Richards 2000).

This article does not report the findings of a particular set of questions asked of the teachers. Rather, the series of interviews were read to determine teachers' constructions and understandings of their careers, with particular reference to the matter of stress. Thus, the particular question that inspired this article arose during other analyses. Iterative readings of the interviews suggested that the question "**What are these teachers saying about their career development and stress?**" with particular reference to how stress impacts on their career aspirations arose during analysis and was not a particular focus of an interview

schedule. An earlier version of this article had planned a more ambitious range of teacher career-related views but the large amount of teacher's conversations made the project too unmanageable for this method of discussion. Hence, a more modest approach is attempted herein. To help the reader appreciate the teacher's voice each quotation is identified by the teachers pseudonym and the interview number from which the quote is taken eg (Scott #3) identifies a passage taken from the third interview with the teacher recorded as Scott.

Findings

The findings are grouped under two broad themes. These themes are:

- Career of the Teacher;
- Different styles or perceptions of stress

Career of the teacher

Some of these teachers had diverse paths to teaching. One had worked on a fishing boat for some years prior to his teacher training, another working a variety of jobs, and others had gone from school to teacher training. Many expressed views that teaching has 'become' their profession. There is a sense of 'finding' teaching as a happy outcome.

I know that when I was a kid, all those years ago, there weren't many career choices for girls - it was really teaching or nursing. I've never wanted to change from teaching even though it can be so frustrating and very time consuming.
(Alice #1)

Most teachers picked up a line of conversation similar to 'it can be so frustrating and very time consuming'. This led many to reflect on their teaching career, as far as it has been to date. Many teachers expressed views about peaking or plateauing, of diminished progress and satisfaction. It is worth noting that this sample of teachers did not include those in major promotion positions, ie they are classroom teachers.

You peak in your career somewhere and then you go down the slippery slope. I was thinking only the other day about how your career goes. I just think that perhaps you do get to a point where you start to plateau out a little bit, for various reasons - whether it be burnout, or sometimes the drive goes a little bit. At the moment, I am at the point where almost you reconsider where you're at. I think everyone would. It's a healthy thing to reconsider where you're at.
(Brady #4)

Brady starts to explore some reasons for this plateau of effort and enthusiasm, but he casts it in a positive light of self reflection that at least has the potential to re-centre one's energies. Others express some taste of sadness and disappointment, a sense of having missed out, or chosen to miss, what might be considered normal rewards of successful teaching. These teachers are not those who might be termed failing teachers (Wragg et al, 2000) but those recommended by their school principals as excellent teachers. Boetius, who some years ago left teaching for stress related health reasons and returned within two years, is committed to the classroom but still expresses the sense of 'missing out' on both monetary and esteem rewards of promotion out of the classroom which is his area of skill.

Normal progression for a teacher is to be, by my age of 52, in a fairly high administrative position where you're not in the classroom, you're

administering. That is a contradiction in terms. If you're any sort of a teacher you should still be in the classroom because a lot of good teachers don't necessarily make good administrators. I really don't know Roger. There's no incentive worth that 47 cents marginal tax. There's no incentive, yet, worth it to stay in the classroom. Why do I stay in the classroom? Because I've been there and I know what I can do and I know what I can't do and I know what I won't do. So I stay in the classroom where I'm still relatively competent and I still do a reasonable job. (Boetius #2)

Some people are motivated and lifted by a promotion, and some find their metier in administration so that the classroom becomes less an important part of their day. Others are motivated by challenges encountered in their professional classroom work: new curricula, students with special needs or circumstances or just a sense of readiness for the challenge that comes with secure establishment and consolidation of teaching skills.

That is one example of what I see - people are motivated for career promotion. I think what gets people out of a plateau also is a sense of autonomy or an opportunity to take on new projects which has some sort of interest to them and they carry that, or go with that, for a while. That takes them to a new level, I think. How they get involved with that or why they do is a personal thing. You see teachers all of a sudden decide that they want to do some PD course; they become very good at it and then they want to develop that within the school in some way. It might be a First Steps program, or a language program, or some literacy program that they've become quite au fait with. That certainly happened for myself, when I went through the teacher leadership program.
(Brady #4)

David expresses a clear model of teacher career development as a professional teacher. Early establishment is followed by consolidation, usually across several changes of context, either schools or significant demands to re-focus and re-form one's teaching approach.

I'd established my classroom routine and also changed to another school, a bigger high school, then you do plateau, definitely, I would suggest. There are less challenges and also, as time goes by, you remain in the same school, so consequently you're better known; there is less management in the classroom to be applied; the challenge is diminished to some extent there. You continue to try to be creative in the classroom but certainly it's a time of regrouping, to some extent, and waiting for the next challenge to come along. Then again in mathematics, I would suggest as a starting out teacher when I was at my third government school, after about five years there I got put in charge of the upper school mathematics so that was itself a challenge. Once again you have to remodel what you're doing and put emphases in different directions. Then things such as another curriculum change comes in. The Achievement Certificate is out but the unit curriculum is in. You change again. There is a new methodology so you change your perception or you change your procedures. (David #4)

David explicitly develops the model of a plateau of skill and enthusiasm. He continues in the same passage to develop a model of why this plateau occurred for him. He further indicated the range of possible developments of this plateau: further improvement to meet a new challenge; re-direction to something out of teaching; or a professional decline into a rut or mechanical delivery that is less than what could be one's best teaching.

As time goes by it is a series of climbing the mountain, hitting the plateau, climbing the mountain again, etc. I think it is easy to some extent not to respond to challenge if you've been a long time in one place. I think time destroys the idea of a challenge to some extent and if you're not aware of it, that's the way you will go. But if you are aware of it, you can minimise that effect. In other words, it might well be that in terms of what I'm doing now, the kids are less of a challenge in terms of some of the subjects I deal with but in some respects also the standard of client that we're receiving these days has changed. That in itself becomes a challenge. You have to change with the times. It's no longer a class full of very strong, academic kids or strong academic kids, it's a class full of kids who are a lot broader in their range of abilities and you have to respond in that way. So there are different ways of teaching and that different classroom organisation etc. So there's no time for sitting still, really. Of course we have the national guidelines coming out and we're going to be hit with challenges there. That in itself is going to have a bit effect in my subject area because there are a lot of us who perceive that -- why are we doing this? Why can't we still base some of our assessment at least on a test and a number? Tests and numbers are not the flavour of the month. That in itself is going to be a fairly testing time for all of us so you respond to it. There is a variety of responses, of course, because at this time in my career I can say, "Well, you can forget about it, that will be the end of it. I will go and start a bit of writing and maybe do some texts and do some relief teaching and that will be the end of it." But I haven't thought seriously enough about it in that attitude. As time goes by you certainly do plateau but I think you have to be aware that you have to be aware of your position at all times - where you're at. You have to be debriefing constantly to make sure that you're managing to give the best. If you are plateauing to a large extent, then if there is no change, then you can't possibly be giving your best. After a while it turns into coming into a lecture situation. With some of the more able kids of course you could get away with that and the more able kids will respond using their own means rather than you as the director of their means. That can possibly happen. At this stage it's very similar to that, I would say. You have your slopes and plateaus and I think very often it's curriculum change which determines the way you change. (David #4)

David seems to place curriculum change at the centre of the motivation to professional change. Invited to explore that idea further, David expresses the centrality of a chosen approach, that professional career development is the choice of the teacher. This conscious reflection is a sort of professional vigilance to prevent a gradual decline into a 'lethargy' that might gradually erode one's teaching.

With this plateau idea, I think you do plateau to some extent. You are still changing but the change is not a witting thing. You don't do it wittingly, you just change gradually with the times. If you stop and look back and say, "Hey, what was I doing five years ago?" then it's significantly different. But you haven't sat down and made a conscious effort of, "Hey, I've got to create something different." That's why I think you plateau to some extent, but then there might be other changes in your life. There might be a career opportunity where you're doing something different so you have less time to put into your preparation for the classroom or whatever. That is when the challenges come again and you do have to change. Whether or not you cut corners, apply different strategies or do whatever, because you haven't got the time or energy or whatever to devote to the classroom - there are other areas you have to devote these things to. It's almost like being shaken out of your

lethargy, I think. You're not lethargic but it's perhaps a good way of putting it.
(David #4)

A model of teacher career development is offered in Figure 1. Specifically, Figure 1 attempts to model the concepts of career progression expressed by David above. This diagram is a composite of a number of authors (Adams and Dial 1994, Brighthouse 1995, Brewer 1996, Reven, Cartwright and Munday 1997, Luce 1998, Slusarski 1999) and the expressions of a number of teachers in this study. Figure 1 has been developed during this study.

This diagram was presented to some of the participants as the ideas about career development began to emerge. So while a number of people explicitly approved of the general model, it did not fit everyone.

So when you talk to me about why I'm doing what I'm doing, if I didn't have children I'd be doing a lot of other things. For me that's very significant - that I have chosen to limit my professional development deliberately. I have chosen to limit that career path deliberately. If I only had one child, I would have gone a lot further but with three I can't - there's no way. I'm too conscious of their rights and their needs and there has to be enough of me left. (Emma #1)

Louis approves of the model (Fig. 1) and reflects that the move or challenge for him was a matter of focus, to refocus his attention from what he was doing to a focus on the people he was working with and for: the change of focus from content to students, from what was to be taught to who was to be learning.

What happened in my own teaching career is I got over that first bad stage of 10 years. I suppose the next period was really becoming immersed in my own curriculum area and saying, "This is an important area. What can we do to change that?" That was that stage. Then I had another break and then I suppose another shift was to say, "Okay, this seems to be working." I'm not advocating by any stretch that every year you start afresh and chuck everything out just because -- stuff that works well you hang onto and treasure but you have to always say, "Is this really doing what we want to do?" I suppose the next stage in my teaching was to realise that there are much more critical, transcendent things that are of far more significance than my curriculum area. That's really getting down to the basics of kids. That's where I suppose I shifted into my interest in middle school, which allowed me to sort of see kids not as potential recipients of social education but more in terms of helping them get on with who they were as people, which is a far broader canvas. That was another shift along the way, but again it was always driven by: Is this the best way to be doing things? How can we do things differently, more effectively - which is my driving passion in life. (Louis #2)

Scott has taught all his career in the one school. Scott reflects that he has experienced these periodic challenges to move out of his comfort zone and to improve.

I've had these changes in my 19 years here and they all seem to be positive changes. I don't think I've gone stale. I think I'm sort of still being changed. Whereas I felt stale after seven or eight years, with everything that's been

going on in the last -- I'm still here. Another 10 years down the track, I'm still here doing virtually the same thing but trying to do it better and doing it in a different way and with a different feel because my self-worth is better, my self-image is much better because people ask for advice and you have a positive self-image and you feel worthwhile. (Scott #1)

So Figure 1 is not normative. People differ in their expectations and in investment in their teaching careers (Emma) and to the extent that establishment might come later (Louis) rather than sooner. Like Scott, some find stimulus and on going challenge in a school where sufficient changes occur to present novel and motivating contexts for self improvement.

During this analysis my interest turned to the teachers' conversations about stress. It is not difficult to get teachers to talk about stress and it is well recognised that educators tend to suffer stress (Edworthy 2000). Yet many authorities seem to treat stress as uni-dimensional. While sources of stress might be varied, many authors refer to stress coping mechanisms or styles as though there is only one form of stress (Kyriacou 1986, pp.193-199, Rogers 1996). Yet these teachers seemed to speak of different forms of stress, not just in terms of the source of the stress but also in terms of their control over its effects and its severity. The following section attempts to unwrap the ways that these practised teachers speak about their experiences of stress.

Different styles or perceptions of stress

It is not unusual to notice that teachers may suffer stress. Tuettemann and Punch (1990) report strong stress levels among Australian secondary teachers as do other international studies (Borg 1990, Schonfeld 1990, Borg and Riding 1991). Stress can be experienced from the beginning of one's teaching career (Schonfeld 2001) or throughout one's professional life (Kyriacou 2001). Teacher burnout, a loss of interest, enthusiasm and eventual dis-engagement has been associated with long term stress (Stern and Cox 1993, Abel and Sewell 1999, Harden 1999, Hamann 2000). A variety of sources of stress have been identified, ranging from the low trusting nature of western society (Troman 2000), the organisational nature of schools (McCormick and Solman 1992), school characteristics (Green-Reese and Johnson 1991), and teacher personality indicators (Lunenburg and Cadavid 1992). While several authors propose stress management techniques for teachers (Bradshaw 1991, Bowser 2000, Rowe 2000) few studies report speaking to teachers about stress. Indeed, the cited articles above are mainly quantitative in methodology. While one does not disregard the stress inventory (Byrne 1993) as a valuable method, this paper reports the direct, unprompted conversations of committed and professionally well regarded teachers concerning their own experience of stress in the workplace.

Teacher Talk about Stress

There are a number of ways in which teachers in this sample spoke about stress. Their conversations and insights will be discussed in the sections below. The teachers' insights are grouped under five categories. These categories are:

- Stress as personality style
- Stress as schools are organised
- Stress of working with adolescents
- Stress and personal challenge
- Combating stress

It is not claimed that these five ways are the schema for these conversations. The five categories do seem to offer an inclusive approach that allows the flavour of the teachers' conversations to be appreciated.

Stress as personality style

There are some people, teachers feel, who are better suited to teaching in secondary schools by virtue of their temperament or approach to life. While Alice might sound blasé, her emphasis was on a 'self-reflective' approach that allowed her to negotiate what was worth getting concerned about and what was OK to let go.

When I see other people - say for instance my friend Michael, who always seems to be having crises and always seems to be ... He always seems to be having these incredibly difficult decisions to make about whether he's going to do this, that or whatever and all this sort of thing. I don't ever seem to have those decisions and crises in my life. ... Maybe that is self-reflective in a way. Maybe I have reflected on it and said, "I don't want it." I don't want that sort of thing, I just want to go along doing what I feel comfortable doing which is teaching.. (Alice #4)

Shirley expresses a very common sentiment that if one's temperament is inclined towards perfectionism then teaching will be a source of considerable anxiety. Shirley makes the point from her own history that this approach of 'doing what one can' can be learned. This learning is part of Shirley's acceptance of her limitations and development of skilled teaching because she has a better honed sense of concern about the important matters rather than perfecting every aspect of the teaching day.

I feel that in this job it's impossible to get everything right all the time; it's impossible to do everything on time all the time. There are times, if I sit down and look at what I do and the list of things I think I could improve on, I'm never going to be able to improve all of them to a point where I'm content. So there are days when I'll sit down and say, "This job sucks; there's no way I'm ever going to be able to do all this stuff. Why am I bothering?" Yes, it takes an awful lot of energy and worry and stress. But that time when I sit down and look at that and worry about it is much less now than it used to be when I was a younger teacher because I've accepted the fact that that list of things that I don't necessarily do well or things I want to work on is always going to be there. I just have to accept that I can't do them perfectly. (Shirley #1)

This point of temperament suitability is explicitly addressed by Boetius.

When I see other people - say for instance my friend Michael, who always seems to be having crises and always seems to be ... He always seems to be having these incredibly difficult decisions to make about whether he's going to do this, that or whatever and all this sort of thing. I don't ever seem to have those decisions and crises in my life. ... Maybe that is self-reflective in a way. Maybe I have reflected on it and said, "I don't want it." I don't want that sort of thing, I just want to go along doing what I feel comfortable doing which is teaching.. (Alice #4)

There is a sense of life-cycle expressed by Boetius. Younger teachers, eager to 'prove themselves' – and this may be often 'prove to themselves' – have an energetic approach that is stage appropriate, yet that same approach will not be sustainable by most as they themselves mature into middle age. Either one must concede that teaching is only for the

young, and this author makes no such suggestion, or there must be other ways to be effective as a teacher.

That's the nature of teaching. So the sooner you come to grips with that I think the more relaxed you can be. There are a lot of stressed-out teachers, freaked-out teachers, burnt-out teachers, because they're just going all the time and they don't realise that hey, you can't do everything. Some teachers even give up and then it's like, "You can't do it all, so why bother?" You see that. (Brady #1)

Brady expresses the challenge of the teacher who is moving out of youth. "If I cannot keep going as I once did, should I give up?" Such a response is one way in which teachers exist the career path (cf Fig. 1). So while there is something about temperament in this approach there is also a measure of realistic assessment of personal abilities. Furthermore, a more healthy approach can be learned.

Stress as schools are organised

A strong theme expressed by teachers is that stress arises from the way that schools are organised. Schools are busy places. There are many diverse activities being organised and many demands on teachers' time, expertise and attention.

I never cease to be amazed at this school with how much goes on - and that can be a plus and a minus - in that there is so much going on that it wears people out. They're burnt out so they get stressed with it all. At the same time, when you look at things it's quite an exciting place to work. There are incredible things going on with people going into the community and getting work experience; there are kids doing outdoor education in every kind of sport here; there are people going out on drama excursions and peer support groups; there are parents coming in to help with people; there is the multicultural aspect. There is just an overwhelming, it seems to me, number of different things going on. In a way it's quite an exciting place to be because of that and I think we've done very well as a school. On the other hand, some of those things that you hear constant complaints from teachers that the students are out of classroom or they just can't get a focus on what's meant to happen and they haven't got enough time to teach what they've got to do. (Sarah #3)

Sarah works in a school with a high multicultural mix. There the demands are of socialisation as well as the activities of activities both within and outside the classroom. Scott has a way of dealing with the stress – he runs after class. Yet he feels the needs to keep a rein on classroom duties by devoting after class hours to marking – and most teachers spend many hours at home marking!

... it's a mongrel job. It's very stressful. Not that the stress gets to me because I can just go and run and do other things to relax but it is a stressful situation where I spend a lot of my own time and energy doing schoolwork (Scott #1)

Sarah notes that stress can affect the very teachers who care most. Hence, stress might not necessarily be connected to disaffection but more to an overload of duties which the person values and cares about.

I mean, the caring is that you do the job properly and to do the job properly really takes huge amounts of energy and people get tired. I think it is stress. I can't think that there's anything more stressful than trying to control and teach a class that doesn't want to learn - or that you haven't got on side, you know. There's nothing more demoralising, I should think, that to stand up and try and get your message across to somebody that doesn't want to know. (Sarah #2)

As Shirley reports, this stress is endemic to the teaching profession. Schools and classes are organisations more persistent than the energy of individual teachers, the demands for attention exceed the capacity of any person to continually respond, and on top of that there are pressure times of the year.

There's a plateau, there has to be, as far as I can see, because those things never go away. Kids fighting amongst themselves, the stressful times of year when you have to do exams and reports in a few days and stay up late every night.
(Shirley #4)

Much of the stress teachers have talked about seems to be external to their students. Yet the students also present challenges.

Stress of working with adolescents

Much of the material quoted above has relevance here (Sarah #2, Shirley #4). Adolescents present their own problems particular to their age and peer groups.

There is great reward in working with kids. There is great heartbreak too, and there is great stress in the confrontations you have with them. So there is a mixture of responses there. There is the stress, the arguments with kids. This kid is giving you a hard time, talks in class, comes late, doesn't do what you want. That is very stressful. (Chris #1)

While there are clear implications of temperament in Chris' statement, there is also a sense of struggle. When the teacher is dealing with 25 individuals there will be few times when one or other of the students is not testing the boundaries. Boetius sees that part of the problem is the closeness with which the teacher identifies with his/her class. While one's energy levels are declining over the teaching term, there is a sense of being less resilient to the upsets that come along.

(stress starts) about the seventh week of a 10 week term. Because you're basically running out. The kids are running out or running down. Quite often there's a crisis that's distracting you. Crises in schools are storms in teacups but they're intense in the goldfish bowl. The outer world couldn't give two hoots, but in the goldfish bowl they're quite intense and they do get up your nose significantly. (Boetius #4)

Boetius raises an issue that many teachers express in different ways: that those who are not teachers do not understand the pressures they work under. While most occupations could claim the same, teachers are peculiarly in the public eye in terms of the ubiquity of their service - so many adults have children in school or carry memories of their own schooling; the readiness with which the press challenges the teaching profession, and the easy political 'points' to be gained by speaking on education.

Stress as Personal Challenge

David has a strong view that part of the stress of teaching that he experiences is generated from within. He feels that the constant demand to be at one's best – and this is a predominantly internally created expectation, keeps him at the edge of his competence.

Are you a good practitioner? Then you've got to work out how you're going to get it across. That is the stressful part of teaching. How do I get it across? How do I get them interested - as you well know. That's why you've got to think about what you did and where you're coming from. If a lesson is no good -- There is a variety of reasons why lessons are no good. It's like today. Today's lessons with year 10 was bloody awful and there's one reason for it. It is that we are going through quite a traumatic stage in this college and these kids are not happy clients. So rather than me going with the bit input etc and because they're fresh and it's period one of the day -- no, no. So I have to think about that but even then it was not very good. They didn't want to receive today and there was nothing really that I could do to turn them around. (David #2)

Part of David's conversation resonates with a very common theme of this sample of teachers. This group, selected by their school principals, are frequently self-critical. While they understand that the classroom is less than a perfect learning environment and they acknowledge the students' shortcomings at some times, these teachers maintain the aspect "I must do better". David knows that there were matters beyond his control, but he tried another tack and the lesson still did not meet to his expectations, and his response is immediately self-reflective "So I have to think about that...".

As an excellent teacher are you going to look at those problems and say, "How do I handle it? Become a better teacher for the kids and for you to grow personally and (or) just say, "well, I'll just do what I can and be a mediocre teacher"? A mediocre teacher would go in and shout and scream - "Shut up! Sit down!" and just teach. (Lyn #4)

Lyn explicitly states the challenge that classroom problems generate for teachers. Lyn's perspective is that teachers seeking to become better (excellent) must extend themselves to meet challenges. Furthermore, Lyn casts the challenge in a personal manner. For Lyn, this sense of improvement is clearly about identity, personal and professional, although she is likely to not distinguish between those two aspects of identity.

And I think there are real problems with the teaching profession in that regard - people who don't give their all. But those people have been -- what's the word? They have been discouraged by a profession and by schools which don't really respect them. I get the same money for being fabulous as I do for being pathetic. Therein lies the basic problem - why? Why work harder? (Emma #3)

Emma picks up this focus on high standards in another manner. She sees teachers who have given up, burned out and ceased to care. Part of the blame for this comes to schools themselves who fail to care for their teachers. Emma is one of the few teachers, in this sample, who mentioned financial aspects of teaching as eroding their commitment.

Combating the stress

This last section deals with the teachers' conversations and suggestions about dealing with stress. There are two main aspects of these suggestions. The first relates to early career and teacher development. The second aspect relates to later career stress and career culmination.

Peter reflects on early career support for young teachers. He sees merit in the much talked about mentor system where an experienced teacher 'accompanies' a younger teacher in the first few years of their career.

I'd strongly like to see a buddy type system which probably in some schools do work, where an experienced teacher is working -- it might be if the teacher is in the same department working alongside somebody and every month, perhaps, to talk about how they're going and build up a rapport with that teacher so that they can talk over their stresses - whether they're having management problems with a particular class. (Peter #2)

Felicity gives a very discursive account of teacher support that covers both early career and interventions at times of crisis or difficulty. She develops this overview with the thought that teachers are prone to not ask for help and that formative professional development has not become part of the teaching culture, as it has in nursing or other caring professions.

When they first start, I think there should be a buddy system where they are mentored by somebody in their faculty and looked after. Staff reviews of course is a formal way of addressing their progression and I think there should be counselling services, either by the chaplain or through professional psychs, to be available to help staff during periods of trauma or in their own personal life or through school life and to help them develop perhaps when they've got a problem with management or discipline, anger control or something like that or stress and don't know how to relax - those facilities need to be there to help them progress. But I also believe as a professional it has to be intrinsic. You need to be able to and want to examine yourself and see where you need to develop and then ask for it. There's not a lot of asking for it at schools. A lot of PDs are provided and given but teachers individually need to go and say, "I need this for me as well" and schools need to be receptive to that. And highlighting weaknesses shouldn't be seen as negative. If I go and say, "I need help with this class" then it's me actually being professional to say, "Yes, I have a few weaknesses, help me to develop" (Felicity #2)

Chris has a different perspective. As an older teacher he sees challenges ahead to maintain his energy and enthusiasm for a career he loves and enjoys while acknowledging that his needs are different from many younger teachers. He would like to see a more flexible approach from school to encourage senior teachers to be involved at levels they can manage and would like the option of part time teaching to accommodate these needs.

I am thinking about the future. I'm 53 and I realise that full-time teaching is stressing me out a bit but teaching is a good thing to be in. So I'm now trying to engineer, "How can I go part-time in this profession?" I reckon that will extend my teaching life. If I keep going full-time, I'll get pissed off and get out of it, but if I can go part-time, one, it will provide me with an income; two, it will keep the mind ticking over. If I have expertise, I can keep using it - and, three, I won't go around the twist. (Chris #4)

Discussion

The conversations of these teachers affirms the sense that a teaching career is a choice. Not only does a teacher choose to embark on teaching, teachers actively choose to remain teachers and pro-actively choose to improve as teachers. Increased professional teaching skills are constructed as outcomes of a personal approach to one's teaching.

It is clear that teachers contend with events beyond their control. What is within the realm of personal choice is one's response to these events. Thus, some teachers make career decisions that are influenced by life style choices. These might be desires for part time work based on family concerns or the teacher's own sense of limits and energy towards the end of a career. Despite these variations, Figure 1 has been validated by this sample of teachers as a useful way of describing possible career trajectories, especially for those teachers who choose to remain concentrated on the classroom.

Teachers' conversations about stress were also examined. At first this juxtaposition of career path and stress seems uneasy. Yet it was in this manner that teachers spoke:- they connect conversation about career with stress. This connection is itself interesting. What is more interesting is that the teachers described stress in four distinct ways.

Stress is firstly a product of one's personal style. While no teacher made reference to Type A personality (Spector and O'Connell 1994) there are clear tacit theories that certain people are predisposed to stress, or possibly more accurately, predisposed to exhibit stress. Thus some teachers talk about personal style being more or less suited to teaching. While this might merely be a matter of individual difference, there are articulations in the four ways of speaking about stress in terms of mentoring young teachers.

The second way of speaking about stress pointed to the way that secondary schools are organised. Schools are busy places where many competing people and needs bid for the time and energy of all staff. While teachers did not question this construction of schools as busy places, they did comment that this busy-ness had costs for teachers. It would seem that one approach to this concern might ask school administrations to work towards providing places of respite and calm in the school day for the teachers.

The third conversation about stress related to the adolescents of secondary schools. No teacher made comments as criticisms of adolescents' nature, indeed there was acceptance that this is the way adolescents are in themselves. It was clear that older teachers find that it is increasingly onerous to 'keep up with' the age group.

The fourth mode of conversation made the teacher's response the subject. While stress might erode one's energy, this is something that most if not all teachers face. The difference is how this stress is encountered. The excellent teacher is posited as one who maintains a stance of continual self-improvement. It is the teacher who keeps trying to make the next lesson better, who takes unsatisfactory lessons as a motivation to do better next time, who reflects on how their improvement can help students learn better who is described as the excellent teacher.

Teachers who give up the struggle for improvement are spoken about as discouraged or mediocre. It is these teachers who are seen as attracting the more negative judgements from outside the profession and who lower the esteem in which teaching is held.

Lastly, teachers spoke about ways of combating stress. The conversation had a sense of the theoretical about it – there were no teachers who spoke about their experiences of particular approaches of stress management. It is clear that stress management ideas and

approaches have yet to make a significant impact, at least in the schools which this sample represents. While mentor schemes and within-career professional development were mentioned, the discussion was about needs rather than experiences of these approaches and resources.

The conversations about stress were not 'creative'. While it could be argued that any group selected as teachers excellent must have found some ways of dealing with stress, some members of this group had suffered severe stress even to the point of leaving teaching for a time before returning to the profession. There seemed to be little new or indeed practical, in terms of the lived daily experience of teachers' lives, in their talk about dealing with stress. What was striking was that talk about dealing with stress was always person focused. By this is meant that there was not a sense of blame, but a perspective to helping the person deal with the problem she/he was experiencing. In this sense the mentor was seen as important because the mentor is a person to whom one can turn and from whom one can seek advice.

There is a further point about stress management that was made by these teachers. It is claimed that teachers need to develop a different perspective to stress. Instead of accepting stress or trying to cope with it when it happens, teachers need to have a more open stance to accepting help and even asking for help. It seems that the professional ethos of identifying personal needs and requesting support to address those needs has yet to impact teachers generally, at least to the perception of this sample of teachers.

Several teachers spoke about part time teaching duties as a way of combating their stress. While it may be that many a school administrator who spends less time in the classroom uses this diversity of tasks to alleviate stress, the full time teacher does not get that respite. Might there be an argument that the more open organisation of schools that allows part time teaching as a career decision will both permit older teachers to contribute their skills in an valuable fashion and offer other options to the stressed teacher without the implied shadow of failure.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper are confined to the sample employed. Secondary high school principals in four Catholic schools nominated those staff whom they described as excellent teachers. These teachers were invited to join and did participate in a longitudinal qualitative study over two years.

This paper has explored the unprompted conversations of teachers concerning their career paths. While many teachers see their development as teachers as a 'bit of a rocky road' with peaks and troughs, this sample of teachers deemed that they themselves were active in their professional development. Excellence in teaching is constructed as a personal decision, a choice to overcome difficulties that are within themselves and from outside in the school environment.

While there are multiple sources of stress in a teacher's career, there are also positive approaches to this stress. Few teachers claimed to not suffer stress, although several recounted means they employed to combat stress. Hence, some teachers claimed to have stress under some control or management. All teachers acknowledged that stress was a significant part of their workplace experience. By default it seems that there are few institutional mechanisms to address workplace stress in secondary schools, at least in those schools represented in this sample.

This study suggests some approaches to stress, at least among secondary teachers. Firstly, stress might be constructed as a multi-dimensional experience of which there is some emerging evidence. Secondly, the significance of the source of the perceived stress might factor into the potency and effect of the stress. Thirdly, the personal approach of the teacher may be a large factor in the extent they report stress and its effects. It may well be that the personal supports and personal approach of a person may be as important in experiencing stress in various ways as are factors like personality, hierarchical position and external factors of the environment. Lastly, if one accepts that most teachers experience stressors, it may be more productive to investigate the ways some teachers experience stress and others seem to cope better to avoid stress' more deleterious effects. This would presume that stress be modelled in a factorial fashion rather than as a uni-dimensional construct.

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