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## **A Self-Study Exploration of Early Career Teacher Burnout and the Adaptive Strategies of Experienced Teachers**

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*Abstract: Isolation, organisational pressures, and role-related distress, can result in teachers, particularly early career teachers (ECTs), experiencing greater risk of burnout. For many ECTs, a lack of practical strategies for dealing with these conditions contributes to this. Using self-study methodology, this research unpacks why ECTs experience burnout, identifies adaptive strategies that experienced teachers use, and discusses the applicability of these practices for ECTs. Conversations between an ECT and three experienced teachers provided alternate lenses to apply reflective unpacking of adaptive strategies. The findings illustrate how the risk of burnout for ECTs is increased by challenging student behaviour, isolation, a lack of collegiality and engagement with professional networks, and being overloaded with responsibilities. The findings also suggest that being overworked is less of a contributing factor to burnout than feeling disconnected from one's school, peers, and community. Adaptive strategies for alleviating the effects of burnout were explored and recommendations for practice presented.*

### **Introduction**

As research and personal experience attest, teaching is an occupation associated with high levels of stress and professional attrition (Harmsen et al., 2018; Kelchtermans, 2017; Suh, 2015). This exodus of teachers is a longstanding issue in education in Australia, with nearly half of all teachers leaving the profession within the first five years (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Burnout is the most common cause and can be described as a state of feeling overwhelmed as a result of chronic workplace stress that has been managed unsuccessfully (World Health Organization, 2019). Different factors position teachers at greater risk of burnout, particularly early career teachers (ECTs) defined here as teachers with less than five years' experience teaching. For example, teachers may feel unsupported by their school's leadership or experience feelings of isolation, these stressors leading to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lowered self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Other factors that can contribute are organisational pressures, role-related distress, challenging student behaviours, and demanding workloads (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). However, it is a lack of practical and adaptive strategies for coping with these pressures that leave ECTs victims of the 'sink or swim' ethos that remains pervasive in teaching (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014).

Teacher burnout has serious implications, not only for the wellbeing of these professionals, but also for the learning outcomes of students. Issues arising from teacher burnout include teacher absenteeism, a lack of investment in student success and, inevitably, poorer achievement and outcomes (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff,

2013). Fears of teacher shortage in Australia have become increasingly focused on the proportion of teachers who leave the profession within a few years (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Johnson et al., 2010). As a result, research that approaches this issue by focusing on how to support teachers to *remain* in the profession, the factors that sustain them, and the strategies they use to navigate and adapt to its challenges has become increasingly prominent (Naidoo & Wagner, 2020; Mansfield et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2014). Many studies suggest that teachers who are equipped with adaptive strategies for coping with the pressures of teaching are better able to ward off burnout (Arnup & Bowles, 2016).

This research was conducted in an effort to explore the following question: How can the adaptive strategies of experienced teachers be applied to reduce burnout in ECTs? The research focused on analysing the adaptive strategies that experienced teachers apply to negotiate the stressors of isolation, role-related distress, and organisational pressures. The self-study methodology enabled the four colleagues to share, learn, and develop their own practice, as well as each other's, while also contributing to recommendations for practice that can be applied by other ECTs. This research held personal significance for the authors, who had both experienced firsthand the 'deep-end' end submersion of entering teaching.

## Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy, specifically the ideas of Shor (1992), underpin the theoretical framework of this project. Critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that is concerned with transforming relations of power and, accordingly, empowering its subjects. Shor's (1992) explorations of critical pedagogy focused on "habits of thought, which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, and personal consequences of any action, event, process, experience, or discourse" (p. 129). Traditionally, Shor's examples of critical action and pedagogy, whereby subjects are invited to question the status quo and make changes to their conditions, have been applied to students. However, as critical pedagogy focuses on the relationship between teaching and learning, we have positioned this research in an attempt to go beyond the traditional clichés and received wisdoms of teacher burnout, to understand the deeper meanings, and transform the role of ECTs in this process from being object to being active. In this way, ECTs play the role of the *student* and more experienced educators the role of the *teacher*.

In his examination of institutional settings, Shor (1992) suggested that the traditional dynamic of teacher and student must be re-examined and reconstructed. Established processes lull students into complacency, but through critical pedagogy, they can begin to envision and strive for something different for themselves (Shor, 1992, p. 5). Like Shor, we favour an evolving dynamic for ECTs, moving from object to active subjects. As is the case with many ECTs, the authors experienced the stressors of teaching in a passive way, pacified by traditional clichés (e.g. 'It gets easier'), received wisdoms (e.g. 'Try to have a good work life balance'), and the dominant myth of teaching's 'sink or swim' ethos (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014). This state of thinking Shor (1992) terms "intransitive consciousness" (p. 126), a static fatalism that rejects the possibility of change and accepts the status quo as unavoidable. ECTs are equally lulled into accepting burnout and its stressors as inevitable by such myths. This self-study represents the authors' efforts to be active and critical in their approach to teaching and learning. Through this research and like Shor's students the authors envision and strive for something different for ECTs. Shor emphasised that achieving such a goal is not easy or guaranteed, and that the role of the teacher is critical to this process. Likewise, the authors submit that mitigating burnout is not simple; in fact, many teachers do

not successfully negotiate this obstacle (Naidoo & Wagner, 2020; Harmsen et al., 2018; OECD, 2018). Experienced teachers, however, can play a vital role in assisting newcomers to the profession, providing them with practical strategies and helping to support ECTs until they can better assume responsibility for their own wellbeing.

### **Stressors Contributing to Burnout in ECTs**

While there are numerous models describing teacher burnout and why it occurs (Rajendran, Watt & Richardson, 2020; Akbaba, 2014; Brown & Roloff, 2011), certain characteristics emerge consistently. Feelings of isolation, role-related distress, and organisational pressures are common, and a lack of adaptive strategies for coping with these stressors contributes to burnout in ECTs in particular.

Isolation takes many forms in teaching. One definition of burnout by Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) describes it as, “the progressive loss of idealism, energy, purpose and concern” (p. 14). For many teachers, the decision to enter the field stems from a desire to contribute and help others (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). As a consequence, teachers who feel unsupported in achieving these ideals are more likely to suffer from burnout and leave the profession prematurely (Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Johnson et al., 2010). A teacher’s perceptions about a school’s culture and collegiality, or lack thereof, contributes to these feelings of isolation, potentially leading to a quarantine of ideals that alienates them from their peers. This mismatch between their more idealistic expectations and the realities of the classroom leads ECTs to experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and inevitably burnout (Pendergast, Garvis & Keogh, 2011; Johnson et al., 2010).

ECTs deployed to remote or rural communities are particularly at risk of experiencing feelings of isolation (Sharplin, O’Neill & Chapman, 2011). Factors that contribute to this include being removed from support structures like families and friends, experiencing “culture shock” in their transition from pre-service to in-service teaching, or else lacking support from their school’s leadership in acclimatising to their new community (Lock, 2008; Buchanan, 2006). This is further exacerbated by the fact that most pre-service teacher education programs do not adequately prepare ECTs for teaching in these contexts (Sullivan & Johnson, 2012).

Role-related distress in teaching occurs when there is a marked difference between the training and preparation a teacher has received, the environment of the school in which they find themselves teaching, and the responsibilities that they are given. ECTs face challenges such as allocations of classes with large numbers and often more challenging students, and additional duties outside of instruction, frequently more than their experienced colleagues (Killeavy, 2006). ECTs in secondary schools also face a common issue in education, teaching out of field (Killeavy, 2006). Teaching out of field is a term that refers to instruction by teachers who have not been trained in the disciplines they teach (Hobbs, 2013). This practice, which is common in secondary schools and particularly in STEM subjects, can apply pressure and lead to stress for teachers who don’t receive the necessary support to teach outside of their area(s) of specialisation (Hobbs, & Törner, 2019). Indeed, few occupations place as much pressure on newcomers to their profession as teaching (Kearney, 2014; Tait 2008). This sentiment is articulated by Halford (1998) who described teaching as “the profession that eats its young” (p. 33).

Role-related distress can also occur when the demands of a teacher’s position conflict with that individual’s power to meet those expectations. Self-efficacy can be defined as a teacher’s perception of their ability to produce successful student outcomes and learning

(Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Teachers' judgments about their self-efficacy influence their likelihood of burning out. Teachers with high self-efficacy, for example, consistently set more ambitious goals, achieve them, and persevere in stressful or difficult situations (Bowles & Arnup, 2016). On the other hand, teachers with low self-efficacy, or who experience prolonged feelings of ineffectiveness, are more likely to experience burnout and leave teaching (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Carprara et al., 2006).

Schools are often organised in ways that produce stressful conditions for teachers. Schools are often hierarchical, employ top-down approaches to decision-making, have narrow communication channels, and rarely seek teacher input or feedback (Chang, 2009; Anthony & Ord, 2008). Teachers experiencing these organisational pressures typically have limited control or agency to make changes in their classrooms. These factors contribute to feelings of stress and lowered self-efficacy (Chang, 2009; McCormack & Gore, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007).

In a study conducted by Howes and Goodman-Delahunty (2015), which included the perspectives of current and former Australian teachers on the issue of teacher attrition, issues with teaching structures appeared as the main theme. These included poor leadership and dissatisfaction with autocratic administrations, influencing 63 percent of participants' decisions to leave or consider leaving the profession (p. 25-26). This finding is consistent with other research that identifies organisational pressures and a lack of support from school administration as key stressors contributing to teacher burnout (Weldon, 2018; Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Johnson et al., 2010).

Ultimately, however, teacher burnout occurs most often when practical coping strategies are absent, following repeated and ineffectual attempts by the individual to handle stress alone (Suh, 2015; Mansfield et al., 2012). This lone struggle is a common experience for ECTs, with research showing that the protective factors that buttress ECTs' resilience are often personal (e.g. strong family support) rather than systemic (Papatrainou & Le Cornu, 2014; Mansfield, Beltman & Price, 2014). This appears due in part to the inconsistency of teacher induction in Australian schools that, despite the introduction of a national framework (AITSL, 2016), still ranges widely in quality, focus, and scope (Kearny, 2019). This raises questions about our current system's dependence on the personal resilience of ECTs and their ability to adapt to these stressors, instead of developing this capability in schools or as part of initial teacher education.

For the authors, these feelings were all too familiar. For our own edification, it was important to examine why in a profession from which we each derived great pleasure and meaning, we would regularly experience feelings of helplessness and distress. At times, these feelings forced each of us to consider whether or not we should continue teaching. Notwithstanding our difficulties, we had each been fortunate to work with experienced teachers who were able to thrive while teaching, despite its pressures. Through this research, we explored the adaptive strategies of these experienced teachers and how they can be adopted by ECTs to help alleviate the effects of burnout.

## Research Design

The research unpacked the major stressors that contribute to burnout in teachers as well as what strategies experienced teachers use to cope with these challenges through the lens of self-study. Self-study methodology is useful to develop insights into teaching and to enact reflection through practice (Russell, 2010). In line with critical pedagogy, self-study methodology attends to educational change through careful reflection and multiple perspectives (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Samaras (2011) suggested that self-study should

investigate situations where the researchers are personally involved while collaborating with others to explore the situation, with the explicit intent to improve the situation and employing a transparent and systematic research process. Finally, Samaras (2011) specified the need to disseminate this information to ensure the field moves forward.

Four participants from the same P-12 school took part in the study. Three of the participants were experienced teachers and took part in semi-structured interviews and critical friend meetings with the first author, Jarrod, an ECT in his second year of teaching who was also completing his Masters degree. The second author, Peta, was Jarrod's research supervisor. Participants were interviewed about their experiences as ECTs, what strategies they believed had contributed to their longevity and success in the profession, and what stumbling blocks they had encountered or observed in other ECTs in their time as mentors. By exploring these experiences, and refining them during the study's critical friend meetings, the research team were able to frame recommendations for practice to support ECTs. A critical friend denotes an individual who will listen to, and critique, the researchers' account of practice, as well as the thinking behind the account (Handal, 1999). The decision to make use of critical friend meetings was motivated by a desire to enhance research integrity and to better articulate, critique, and validate any interpretations arising from the research (Costa & Kallick, 1993). This method of data collection positions itself well within self-study methodology as a way to "prevent self-deception" (Lomax, 1991, p. 14) through the application of multiple lenses of multiple participants considering the practices. As part of their contributions to meetings, the critical friend group analysed the researchers' findings from preceding interviews and evaluated these interpretations as part of a member check (Creswell, 1994). The team was also encouraged to express their thinking about the findings, to clarify, summarise, or expand on any areas they felt warranted. Excerpts from a self-reflective journal kept by the first author supplemented the researchers' conclusions and critical friends were given access to this material prior to all meetings. All interviews and meetings were conducted at the teachers' school, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and remain anonymous.

## Participants

The three experienced teachers recruited as part of this research were selected because they were accomplished teachers who had not only weathered the stressors associated with teaching but had thrived in spite of them. Participants encompassed a range of administrative and teaching roles (i.e. assistant principal, STEM coordinator, VCE teacher, Lead teacher etc.) and all taught in a full-time capacity in addition to their other responsibilities at a P-12 school located in Victoria, Australia.

**Marie** had been a teacher for over a decade with publications in secondary and VCE textbooks. Marie had been the recipient of numerous teaching excellence awards, including the Lindsay Thompson Fellowship Award. The Department of Education and Training [DET] awards this honour to the teacher whose "contribution is judged to be the most outstanding contribution to Victorian school education" in the relevant year (DET 2020).

**Marcus** had been a teacher for more than three decades and had taught at all levels from 3-year-old Kindergarten to Year 12 and tertiary education. Marcus had taught in a wide variety of school contexts from metropolitan schools, regional Victoria, and remote schools in other states and territories. Marcus had participated in pathways education discussions and advocacy at a federal level and had also worked alongside several Victorian universities.

**Malala** had four decades of teaching experience and continued to innovate throughout her career presenting at local, national and international conferences. She had also received, among many awards, an Australian Award for Teaching Excellence.

**Jarrold** (first author) was an ECT in his second year of teaching. He was concurrently completing this research project as part of his Masters degree.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of four rounds of semi-structured group interviews, as well as four critical friend meetings, and entries from a self-reflective journal kept by the first author. Data collection took place over the course of eight weeks. Each group interview had a specific focus, being informed by key questions established *a priori* based on themes discovered in the review of literature on the causes of teacher burnout. Excluding these questions, however, interviews were organic in nature and flowed to allow the exploration of different themes as they arose. Queries and questions that surfaced during interviews or meetings, but which were not fully explored, were raised again in following meetings. Each interview focused on different aspects of the participants' experiences with teaching and burnout.

- In the first interview, participants were encouraged to recall specific examples from their entry into the profession and experiences as ECTs. This included: what challenges they faced, what kind of advice and guidance was offered to them as ECTs, and how they responded to the stressors they encountered.
- The second interview focused on a discussion of the literature and research related to teacher burnout, and to what extent participants felt that the factors of isolation, role-related distress, and organisational pressures had been relevant to their own experiences as ECTs. Participants were also encouraged to draw on their experiences while mentoring ECTs who had faced these challenges.
- The third interview discussed participants' views about their careers and self-efficacy, to what extent they believed they could now manage the pressures associated with teaching, and what strategies they had personally found to be the most effective in achieving this.
- The fourth interview invited participants to reflect on the findings of the previous three interviews and critical friend meetings, to refine these ideas, and to consider how their own views on burnout had or hadn't changed over the course of the meetings.

Critical friend meetings interleaved these interviews, with participants being asked to reflect on the findings from the preceding interview. These meetings were an opportunity for participants to expand on themes, clarify comments that had been made, and to critique the authors' interpretations of what had been discussed.

Excerpts from the first author's self-reflective journal supplemented these discussions and recorded the meta-narrative (or conversation) that took place throughout this self-study. Over the course of eight weeks the first author, Jarrold, used this journal to record his experiences as an ECT, writing an entry at the end of each day of teaching. Jarrold also wrote an entry following each group interview with participants, making connections between their experiences and his own. The questions, reflections, and insights contained within this journal helped ensure that the research's critical friend meetings focused on themes related to adaptive strategies for mitigating burnout and followed a natural progression.

To identify key themes from the interviews, critical friend meetings, and reflective journal, all transcripts and entries were analysed using an inductive method of coding (Thomas, 2006). Audio files from the meetings were transcribed in full and examined using open coding to identify themes from participants' responses, with a similar process being utilised for journal entries. Analysing the data involved examining each transcript / entry and assigning codes in the form of descriptive words or phrases to key ideas in the participants' comments (e.g. 'collegiality'). After coding the transcripts, the recorded codes were compared and combined with similar codes to form distinct categories. Descriptive statements were then created (e.g. 'strong collegiality is vital to mitigate feelings of isolation') to express the theme that underpinned each category and the participants' comments related to that category. The major themes are reported in the findings section.

## Findings

The findings of our study showed that there were many stressors that contributed to teacher burnout and that ECTs were particularly susceptible to these. The pressures our research's participants identified echoed those recognised in other research. However, while all participants had experienced feelings of being overwhelmed while teaching, they had developed strategies to adapt to these pressures. Four themes were identified and are presented below, with each theme containing subthemes: relationships, collegiality and networks, framing development in the long-term, and knowing the boundaries of your role.

### Relationships

A key theme that emerged were the relationships that teachers cultivate, with their students, colleagues, and communities. The idea of investing additional time and energy into building these types of connections would initially appear to run counter to alleviating the stressors and symptoms of burnout (e.g. workloads, exhaustion etc.). However, it quickly became apparent how effectively building student-teacher relationships and participating in their local communities worked to reduce stress for participants, building resilience, and internalising motivation.

#### *Relationships with Students*

Participants expressed their beliefs that developing the capability to manage challenging student behavior in a positive way, and investing in student-teacher relationships, were contributing factors to wellbeing. Marie, for example, noted how surprising it was as an ECT to discover that teaching depended on a lot more than just content knowledge, and how much of her time was taken up with managing the behavior of her students.

*I was so worried that strong content knowledge was going to be the biggest challenge but as I moved further into my first year of teaching, I realised that my relationships with students, my ability to manage a classroom, helped to reduce the stress that I took home with me. (Marie)*

Marie and Malala each felt that investing in this aspect of their practice and establishing positive classroom cultures helped to make teaching a far less emotionally taxing experience. Managing challenging student behaviour was a significant source of anxiety too for first author Jarrod, in particular because he was not confident in his ability to do so in a



positive way. Jarrod recalled a particularly disastrous lesson he had taught during his teaching placement.

*I remember I was really worried that students would walk all over me ... I was really severe, and my students were compliant, but I could tell they didn't enjoy being in my class and that was bad too. I was just as stressed by that. It wasn't a positive classroom environment. (Jarrod)*

As a result, Jarrod spent time studying pedagogical approaches and restorative practice during his pre-service training. Eventually, he found an approach that aligned with his beliefs.

*I remember wanting to hit that balance between being firm and being warm and this was the only approach I could see doing that ... when I implemented it in the classroom I lost that sick feeling in my stomach whenever I had to talk to a student about their behaviour, and I could finally focus on actually teaching. (Jarrod)*

Marcus expanded on this ancillary point. He felt that when issues of behaviour were taken care of, ECTs can better focus on the task of instruction and work to identify the different strengths and needs of their students, leading to better learning outcomes.

### ***Relationships with Community***

Collectively, participants felt more motivated to persevere while teaching because of their connections with their local communities. Interacting with students and their families through sporting clubs and community events were examples of how participants linked teaching to their lives outside of school—this reciprocal relationship helping to support and drive them in their practice. Malala felt these connections had been particularly pertinent for her journey, attributing her longevity as a teacher to this and, ultimately, her decision to remain in the profession.

*In a small community it's much easier to get to know students because you have so much more contact with them and I feel that's contributed to my longevity teaching. The community was an amazing support in my first year teaching ... it really inspired and motivated me ... the parents welcomed me and appreciated the job that I was doing, which was important because I didn't completely know at the time if I wanted to be a teacher. (Malala)*

For Marcus, his experiences as an ECT working in outer suburb schools in Melbourne changed his views about the impact he could have as an educator. Confronting issues including domestic violence and drug use, Marcus witnessed the social value of the work he did, recognising the positive influence he could have on his students' lives. Marcus felt that gaining an understanding of the different backgrounds and circumstances of his students had helped to make him more motivated to continue working with those whose behaviours were challenging.

*Seeing those things made me very motivated to support students, especially those challenging students. Knowing what I knew, knowing those families and that community, made it easier to understand those behaviours and to do my job. (Marcus)*

Marcus also noted that working closely with his community meant he witnessed the impact of his teaching more often. Seeing students he had taught later succeed in apprenticeships, university or the workforce, made Marcus feel valued, and that the work he did as a teacher was meaningful and important, "Because you do invest in the community you feel valued yourself, and that helps to eliminate some of that burnout because otherwise you sort of live in a vacuum isolated from it all" (Marcus). Given that the responsibilities of teaching so often

extend beyond mere instruction, participants felt that it was impractical to treat schools and communities as separate from one another. They also felt that while forming relationships with families in ECTs' local communities had its challenges and required additional effort, the supports and motivation that teachers acquired from these interactions were a valuable investment in their wellbeing.

### **Collegiality and Networks**

Another emergent theme related to engagement with personal and professional networks. Examples of the supports provided by these systems ranged from banks of teaching resources, connecting like-minded or specialist practitioners, opportunities for professional development, as well as formal and informal reflections with colleagues. Participants felt that collegiality and these connections helped to reduce role-related distress, as well as feelings of isolation.

#### ***Professional Networks***

Participants felt that joining professional networks was beneficial for ECTs, particularly those in smaller schools, rural and isolated contexts. These schools typically have fewer staff, and this can extend to include a deficiency of resources (Johnson et al., 2010). Professional networks function to 'fill in the gaps' for ECTs and can help link them with other like-minded practitioners. Malala observed that professional networks help to connect teachers who share a passion for a particular aspect of practice.

*Professional networks are a great way of connecting you with other teachers who share your passions. There might not be anyone in your region that wants to bring, say, online video conferencing into the classroom but through a network ... you can reach those individuals and don't feel alone. (Malala)*

Marie shared this sentiment, indicating her belief that joining a professional network was key to feeling connected to the "larger teaching body" and remaining "up to date" in ever evolving subjects like science and technology (Marie).

Both authors acknowledge that they did not engage with professional networks until much later in their careers and that this decision potentially added to the feelings of isolation they experienced as ECTs. Peta recalled a significant moment in her career while attending her first professional association conference where she experienced strong feelings of relief and excitement in finding like-minded colleagues and additional resources.

For ECTs who may not be confident about their practice, participants felt these types of networks were especially important. Marcus noted that it was very easy as a teacher to have doubts or to "second-guess" yourself, and that strong collegiality within the profession was vital to combat this thinking and prevent ECTs from becoming "fractured and disconnected" (Marcus). As members of their school's leadership team, both Marcus and Marie considered professional networks to be vital for ECTs' professional development, offering valuable skills and training that they may not acquire during their initial teaching education.

#### ***Reflection***

The exercise of debriefing with colleagues was rated highly by participants as a strategy for reducing feelings of role-related distress and being overwhelmed. Formal

reflection included practices like keeping a teaching journal, classroom observations (where a colleague is invited to observe the teacher's practice), and peer observations (where a teacher observes the practice of a colleague). Examples of informal reflection practices, such as socialising with peers outside of work, also featured in these discussions.

Reflection has long been considered a useful exercise for teachers, not only to understand how to improve practice but also to provide a sense of perspective when self-evaluating outcomes and success (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Jarrod in particular felt the insights that arose from visiting other teachers' classrooms were instrumental in alleviating doubts he had about his own practice.

*It's great to get into other people's classrooms ... sometimes you can feel as though you're the only one who struggles, either covering curriculum or with a challenging student. Seeing other people teach, reflecting, and having those conversations can really help allay the anxiety that comes with that. (Jarrod)*

Marcus expressed his feeling that, because of the demanding nature of teaching, it was the responsibility of teachers as professionals to support one another and share in each other's efforts, both at school and outside of it. Time spent socialising with colleagues outside of school was highly valued by all participants, these social events helping to establish feelings of being connected. Marcus felt this "sense of collegiality" had had a substantial impact on his wellbeing as an ECT. Malala too spoke about teaching as a "team-game", requiring colleagues to support and connect with each other at a "human level", more so than in other professions (Malala).

Participants discussed the role that leadership can play in maintaining staff wellbeing in a school. Jarrod expressed his feeling that having the support of a school's leadership, people who were happy to have a conversation with you and who were aware of the challenges you might be facing, was invaluable and had contributed profoundly to his state of mind as an ECT.

*I remember second term in my first year ... I hadn't been sleeping, I'd lost about 7kg and I was completely exhausted. [Principal] called me to his office ... he told me that I needed to slow down and to look after myself, and then he told me to take a couple of days off. To hear that from your principal, to have your leadership give you permission to take care of yourself, that meant the world to me. (Jarrod)*

Citing from their own experiences in leadership, Marcus and Marie felt strongly that administrative support played a key role in safeguarding the wellbeing of teachers. They felt that any responsible leadership team should be invested in promoting sustainable practice and reducing the risk of burnout in its staff.

### **Framing Development in the Long-term**

The mindset of an ECT featured prominently in this research's findings. Participants felt that ECTs' desire to prove themselves too quickly could lead them to fatigue prematurely and become discouraged. While participants agreed that cultivating a long-term mindset came more easily with experience, they also believed there were steps that ECTs could take to help change their approach to teaching and reduce the risk of experiencing burnout.

### *Look for Success in the Long-term*

A common thread in participants' discussions was the 'overachiever' personal narrative that many ECTs develop. Marcus emphasised how he felt achievement in teaching needed to be framed by long-term goals to prevent ECTs from becoming disillusioned by a potential lack of immediate success. Marie similarly described teaching as a test of endurance, "It's a marathon, not a sprint" (Marie). She also felt it was important for ECTs to regularly conduct "cost-benefit analyses" to mitigate exhaustion in a profession where there was "always more work to do" (Marie).

Malala observed that it can be easy as an ECT to feel discouraged, cycling through different groups of students each year, unable to immediately observe the impact of your hard work. However, she described numerous successes with students throughout her teaching that she had observed over the course of several years.

*[Student] is a great example. When she started here four years ago, she would never have been able to do all that's she's done ... Her social awareness has been a work in progress and even in the last year you can see an obvious shift in her attitude toward school. Helping to arm her with those strategies during that time and working with her has been really rewarding and it's fantastic to see her achieving great things now. (Malala)*

It can be difficult to avoid drawing on clichés when discussing teaching; that said, the authors recognise the importance of treating teaching as a journey, instead of just another career. All participants agreed that setting long-term goals and framing success in these terms was vital for ECTs' wellbeing. Doing anything less was akin to "building houses on sand" and "inviting frustration and, ultimately, burnout" (Marie).

### *Recognising your Limits*

Participants recognised that ECTs are prone to overextending in their early years, spending an unsustainable number of hours planning, and not asking for help. For the authors, this frenetic behavior stemmed from a desire to appear capable and their concerns about the perceptions of other teachers. Participants with experience mentoring ECTs expressed their feeling that this attitude pushes ECTs to unhealthy limits, causing them to sacrifice sleep, relationships, and even their health in pursuit of validation. Participants also felt this self-sacrificing desire to be seen as capable was common to many ECTs.

Participants agreed that concerns about appearing inept or ignorant often led to new, and even experienced, teachers not seeking help or advice. Citing specific examples he had encountered in his role as a mentor, Marcus described instances of ECTs not asking for assistance with challenging students, failing to report incidents of misconduct, and attempting to take on responsibilities beyond or outside of their experience and training.

Describing the practices that sustained them as teachers, participants quoted things like maintaining important relationships, setting firm rules about sleep and health, and having interests outside the profession as essential. Emphasising this notion, Malala and Marcus expressed their feelings that it was impossible to "achieve your full potential as a teacher" without maintaining a life outside of teaching.

*(Marcus): The thing about having a life that is out of balance is that you need that other life to be a good teacher. If your desire is to be the best teacher you can be then you have to be conscious of, and look after, that other part of your life which involves family who love you and holidays and pets and going to the movies and investing time in yourself. All those things are really important and*

*if you don't look after them then you're not going to achieve your maximum potential as a teacher.*

*(Malala): I agree, Marcus. You can't be a good teacher unless you invest in and look after yourself.*

Participants agreed that the energy a teacher brings into the classroom, as a result of being happy and healthy, benefits everyone, especially students.

### **Knowing the Boundaries of Your Role**

The sheer volume of work of the average teacher, and the subsequent pressure this creates, featured prominently in discussions with participants. While the feeling was that this workload could be overwhelming for a teacher at any stage of their career, participants felt this could be especially taxing for ECTs. In response, participants described knowing the boundaries of your role as a teacher, what is and isn't your responsibility, and how this is important to reduce the risk of burnout in a profession where it can be easy to take on more than you can handle.

### ***Negotiating Responsibilities***

Teaching inevitably involves duties beyond that of a full-time teaching load. Marcus and Malala described these extra responsibilities as a “non-compulsory but expected” part of working in schools. Attending school camps, before- and after-school programs, professional learning communities, coaching, tutoring, and school productions were just some of the extra duties that might be expected of the average teacher. Marie felt that schools could, at times, be overzealous in their loading of ECTs with these types of responsibilities.

*It just happens. [ECTs are] usually young, full of energy, and, most importantly, willing. Of course, a school is going to jump at giving you responsibility. Especially when no one else may want it. (Marie)*

Malala acknowledged that this could sometimes be the well-intentioned effort of a school to incorporate the background or unique skills an ECT may have (e.g. a former track-and-field athlete being made an athletics coach). Nevertheless, participants felt that an ECT's primary responsibility was to focus on their professional development in their initial years of teaching, and that self-advocacy and the responsible negotiation of these additional duties were essential for ECTs' wellbeing. Jarrod, in particular, felt this involved having regular meetings and being honest with your school's leadership (and yourself) about what responsibilities you feel capable of taking on as an ECT.

In addition to the loading of additional duties by schools, Marie described the desire that many teachers have to ‘own’ an agenda in a school, a space outside of instruction where they can demonstrate accomplishment (Marie). While participants felt this was true of most teachers in most types of schools, they felt the danger of taking on too much was particularly relevant in small and rural/remote schools.

*(Marie): There's nowhere to hide [from your responsibilities] in a small school and sometimes you take on more than you can handle. No one sets out to overextend him or herself; sometimes it's an inevitability. Often it stems from good intentions—a desire to help out and “do your part” (emphasis).*

*(Jarrod): Do you feel that's more common in, say, a rural school versus a metropolitan school?*

*(Marie): Yes, definitely.*

It was the feeling of participants that while metropolitan and urban schools typically teach more students, there were also more staff to help shoulder responsibilities. ‘Spreading yourself too thin’ was identified by participants as a key contributor to their stress as teachers and felt that this occurred more frequently with ECTs. Participants observed that ECTs’ aforementioned eagerness starting out, coupled with the desire to prove themselves, can often lead to ECTs taking on too many responsibilities and being overwhelmed. Participants agreed that being aware of this fact, and taking steps to avoid becoming overloaded, was important for ECTs’ longevity in a demanding profession.

## Discussion

The research aim was to investigate how the adaptive strategies of experienced teachers could be applied to reduce burnout in ECTs. In undertaking this research, there was concern that our lived experiences of learning to teach, and those of our participants, might produce no new insights. Our apprehensions were that, perhaps, the strategies employed by experienced teachers to negotiate burnout and its symptoms were *purely* products of that experience, inchmeal resilience that is, and would ultimately be, unattainable by ECTs until they too had ‘done their time’. This concern was derived in part from the ‘sink or swim’ ethos (Sullivan & Johnson, 2012; Johnson et al., 2010) that remains prominent in education, the underlying premise being that teachers are either ‘cut out’ for teaching, or they are not. A dominant myth that has remained pervasive in the profession for (at least) the last 50 years (Lortie, 1966). Fortunately, this was not the case. The findings of our critical friends were rich and well-flavored with practical strategies and advice. Investing in relationships and community, engaging with personal and professional networks, framing development in the long-term, and knowing the boundaries of your role were found to be crucial practices for mitigating the stressors of isolation, role-related distress, and organisational pressures.

Participants felt that these practices had contributed to their own longevity as teachers and were instrumental for reducing burnout, helping them not only to survive, but thrive. More importantly, while some of these approaches likely benefit from experience, the overwhelming consensus was that these strategies would be valuable for and could be employed by ECTs to help alleviate the effects of burnout throughout their careers.

### Combating Isolation with Collegiality and Professional Networks

Isolation takes many forms in teaching. It may stem from a difference of ideals (Pendergast, Garvis & Keogh, 2011; Johnson et al., 2010), a lack of support from other staff or school leadership (Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Lock, 2008), or be geographical, separated quite literally from familiar surroundings and contexts (Sharplin, O’Neill & Chapman, 2011).

Participants recognised that these forms of isolation were major stressors for ECTs but also felt feelings of isolation were exacerbated by ECTs’ self-sacrificing desire to prove themselves capable. ECTs’ concerns about appearing inept or ignorant can often lead them to attempt to resolve issues alone, or else not seek help or advice. Specific examples include: not asking for assistance when dealing with challenging students; failing to report incidents of misconduct; and attempting to take on responsibilities beyond or outside of their experience or training. This self-imposed, professional quarantine contributes to ECTs’ feelings of isolation, and can also contribute to role-related distress as they wrestle with challenges alone, leading to burnout.

To combat this, participants emphasised the importance of collegiality and engaging with professional networks. ECTs' colleagues can offer professional support through practices like observations and mentoring at a time when teachers may feel most uncertain about their ability to teach effectively. These practices encourage ECTs to look outside their own classroom, recognising that they are not alone in the challenges they face, and alleviating doubts they may have. Similarly, professional networks can help ECTs to feel connected to a 'larger teaching body', reducing the isolation experienced when encountering a difference of ideals in their school, and connecting them with like-minded individuals. In a less formal but no less vital capacity, these networks also help ECTs to recognise their limits and prompt them to care for themselves, helping to reduce the risk of exhaustion.

### **Mitigating Role-related Distress through Professional Development, Community and Self-advocacy**

The workload and responsibilities of a teacher are substantial but can feel especially overwhelming upon entry to the profession. This pressure is intensified when there is a marked difference between the ideals and theory of an ECTs' training and the realities of the classroom, leading to role-related distress (Pendergast, Garvis & Keogh, 2011; Johnson et al., 2010). This mismatch can cause ECTs to doubt their capacity to produce successful student outcomes, leading to a lowered sense of self-efficacy (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010). Additional challenges, such as managing student behaviour, further contribute to feelings of helplessness and emotional exhaustion (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Mansfield, Beltman & Price, 2014).

The findings of this study support research that suggests ECTs are prone to being overloaded and overextended in their early years of teaching (Mansfield, Beltman & Price, 2014; Akbaba, 2014). Participants proposed that this issue can stem from ECTs' aforementioned desire to demonstrate capability and 'do their part' in a school. Schools can be guilty of abetting this behaviour, giving ECTs additional responsibilities both in and outside of the classroom (e.g. challenging classes, attending school camps), especially when there is reluctance from other staff to take on these duties. This state of taking on too much too quickly leads ECTs to experience role-related distress, as the demands of their position conflict with their power to meet these expectations. Participants also recognised that student misbehavior could be particularly stressful for ECTs, these 'shoe-throwing' moments creating a volume of emotion in the classroom, emotion that a teacher takes home with them as stress.

To avoid taking on and trying to do too much as an ECT, participants in our study stressed the importance of framing both goal setting and achievement in the long-term. Immediate results are not always forthcoming in a context as organic as a classroom, recognising this and planning for your ongoing professional development is essential to avoid becoming discouraged. One aspect of practice that participants did recommend developing early was learning how to manage challenging student behaviour in a positive way. Investing time in developing this capability was found to make teaching a less emotionally taxing experience, reducing role-related distress, and had the ancillary benefit of freeing the teacher to focus more on instruction and outcomes. Participants in the study noted that their associations with their respective communities had helped them to internalise motivation while teaching and suggested that this might also reduce the risk of ECTs becoming disillusioned by making their impact and the social value of the work they do more visible. Self-advocacy and the ability to be able to speak honestly with school leadership about ECT capacity were also seen as vital strategies to avoid suffering fatigue and role-related distress.

### **Managing Organisational Pressures by Understanding the Boundaries of your Role**

Organisational pressures in teaching refer to conditions arising from how a school is organised that causes stress for its staff (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). These schools are often hierarchical, non-communicative, and place restrictions of teachers' agency and ability to make changes in their classrooms. These conditions can not only lead to personal turmoil and lowered self-efficacy caused by philosophical differences in beliefs about best practice (Chang, 2009; McCormack & Gore, 2008) but also role-related distress and feelings of isolation as a result of a lack of support from school leadership (Weldon, 2018; Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Johnson et al., 2010).

Participants in our study agreed that school leadership and how a school is organised plays a significant part in shaping the wellbeing of teachers, including ECTs. Regrettably, our findings were unable to produce many adaptive strategies to mitigate organisational pressures. Potentially, this is a result of these conditions being institutional in nature, caused by broader systemic issues in education and therefore less actionable at the level of the individual. Moreover, these conditions are predicated on the restriction of teachers' agency to change conditions, limiting to extent to which teachers *can* adapt to these pressures. As Shor (1992) tells us, knowledge is the power to understand reality, but not necessarily to change it; instead knowledge is power "only for those who can use it to change their conditions" (p. 6). In our interviews, participants admitted to the fact that schools in which they had experienced organisational pressures were those in which they had 'spent the least amount of time'. These findings lend weight to research which suggests that issues with organisational structures are a major contributor to school leaving and burnout (Weldon, 2018; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). Participants felt that knowing the boundaries of your role as a teacher, what is and isn't your responsibility, and having frank discussions about these boundaries with school leadership were important to manage organisational pressures, but acknowledged that this can be difficult for ECTs who hold fears about job security (Stallions, Murrill & Earp, 2012).

### **Avoiding the Siren's Call of Received Wisdoms in Teaching through use of Adaptive Strategies**

Over the past few decades our understanding of teacher burnout and its causes has become much clearer. Burnout research has traditionally had an abstract focus, numerous studies examining the *why* of burnout and those who leave the profession (Friedman, 1991; Corrie, 2000; Huston, 2001; Hastings & Bham, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Akbaba, 2014; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Suh, 2015). However, a key idea of critical pedagogy is that awareness of an issue is not enough by itself to change repressive conditions (Shor 1992).

More recent research has approached the problem of teacher attrition and burnout in a different way, focusing on those teachers who stay in the profession and how they navigate its challenges. This brings with it its own problems, however, as the received wisdoms that teachers encounter as part of their own experiences as ECTs can shape their views about what sustainable practice means. Mansfield, Beltman and Price (2014), for example, found that teachers often hold onto the narrative that conditions will improve after gaining more experience, phrases such as "weathering the storm" or being able to "ride the wave" expressed this view (p. 560). As McCann and Johannessen (2004) argue, new teachers "endure difficulties because they believe that ultimately, things will get better" (p. 141).

Teacher resilience research suggests that length of experience does not positively influence teacher resilience (Bowles & Arnup, 2016). Placing people under stress does not



automatically teach them to learn to deal with it. However, if we consider that teacher's ability to adapt to stressful conditions to be something that is *developable* (Pearce & Morrison, 2011) then equipping ECTs with adaptive strategies is likely to reduce attrition and go some way to *sustaining*, not just retaining, ECTs. This approach encompasses a social ecological view of teachers' capacity to adapt to the conditions that cause burnout, considering both the personal resources that ECTs draw upon, as well as the professional resources they gain as they learn and develop strategies to cope with these pressures. The dynamic process whereby these resources overlap allows ECTs to escape the intransitive consciousness that is inscribed by teaching's received wisdoms, to reject the status quo of teacher burnout as unavoidable, and move from being object to active subjects who are able to take responsibility for their own wellbeing and professional development (Shor 1992).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations for Practice**

The task of preparing ECTs for the challenges of the profession is a responsibility shared by all stakeholders in education, from initial teacher educators to graduates themselves. Our research and its findings provide strong evidence to support the role that experienced teachers can play in this process, not only as exemplars for how to adapt to and negotiate the causes of burnout with grace, but also as colleagues, mentors, and as part of formal and informal networks. A key focus of this research was to go beyond the dominant myths, clichés, and received wisdoms, that permeate ECTs' entry into the profession and investigate adaptive and practical strategies that could be adopted by this cohort. The following recommendations for practice and examples (Table 1), refined in the study's final critical friend meeting and divided by theme, represent the results of this research.

Theme	Strategy	Example(s)
Relationships	Develop teacher-student relationships by interacting with students and their families outside of school and the classroom.	Participate regularly in community events, sport and family activities hosted by the school. Communicate with parents and families of students regularly to share news of positive outcomes and behaviours. Establish protocols in your classroom that center around respectful conduct and restorative practice.
	Develop teacher-teacher relationships by engaging in both formal and informal collaboration.	Invite colleagues to observe your classes, debrief, and reflect with you on your practice. Reciprocally, ask to observe colleagues' classes. Seek aid or assistance early when feeling overwhelmed or ill-equipped to handle a situation. This person or persons need not be your appointed mentor. Participate regularly in social events with colleagues outside of teaching. These gatherings can also be used as opportunities for informal reflection.
	Develop teacher-leader relationships by learning to self-advocate.	Request regular meetings with a member of the school's leadership as part of your formal induction to the school. This can be in addition to or as part of your meetings with a mentor. These meetings should be used to seek advice and discuss any concerns you have.
Community	Become part of your local community to internalise motivation and better observe the impact of your teaching.	Be informed about issues that affect your school and families in your local community. Volunteer for community projects and events. Self-educate about your students, their circumstances, and background. For instance, if a significant proportion of your students are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander dedicate time to learn about their culture and communities.
Professional networks	Become part of subject and domain specific professional networks and engage with them early and often.	Access classroom resources through organisations that offer them, particularly those that have materials targeted at teachers who are new to the profession. Remain up-to-date about the latest trends and developments in education and subject specific professional networks. Be aware of professional development opportunities relevant to your professional needs and interests. Become connected to like-minded individuals who share a passion for a particular area of practice and who you can collaborate with. This is particularly relevant for teachers in smaller, rural and remote schools.
Professional development	Develop your capability to manage challenging student behaviours in a positive way.	As part of your induction, familiarise yourself with your school's approach to behaviour management (before beginning teaching, if possible). If your school doesn't have a school-wide approach to behaviour management, research different frameworks and ask other teachers about their methods (before beginning teaching, if possible).

		Ask teachers who are observing your classes to pay particular attention to this aspect of your practice and discuss their findings with you as part of a formal debrief.
	Engage regularly in reflective practices, both individually and with colleagues.	Keep a teaching journal in which you document your progress. Use this material to zero in on key issues when reflecting or debriefing with colleagues, mentors, and school leadership. This need not be a physical journal, audio or video entries can also be utilised. Schedule dedicated time for debriefing and reflection, following classroom and peer observations. Avoid privileging the latter in absence of the former.
	Observe the classes of other early career teachers and experienced teachers in equal measure.	Record similarities between your own progress and those of other early career teachers. The intent here is not to compare successes, but to recognise and share in each other's development. Use your own professional development goals as a frame when observing the practice of experienced teachers. Focus on identifying effective strategies and use these as the focal point of discussions when debriefing.
	Frame development in the long-term.	Set professional goals with broader overall terms, which measure success over the course of 12 months or more. Short-term goals can (and should) also be developed but should be predicated on the idea that they only represent potential paths toward your ongoing development as a teacher. Focus on improving only a few aspects of your practice at any given time. Concentrate your efforts on consolidating strategies and approaches which prove to be effective before moving on to or attempting new ones.
Professional practice	Understand the boundaries of your role and your personal limits.	Familiarise yourself with your contract and induction materials. Request information from your state or territory's education union about what can be legally be expected of you and your rights as an employee. At regular intervals, but particularly during times when you are experiencing feelings of stress, catalogue your current activities, duties, and responsibilities. Evaluate which are necessary, important, and urgent, and which are inessential. If you are experiencing this state ongoing, discuss with school leadership about the possibility of reducing your teaching load or duties. Set hard limits on time spent planning, other work, leisure and rest. Ask a colleague, friend or family member to check-in with you regularly and keep you accountable.

**Table 1. Recommendations for Practice**

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