

A national snapshot of early-career secondary school music teachers: Engagement, obstacles and support

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Abstract

Early-career teachers are referred to in the literature as being in their first few years of teaching experience (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017; Dabback, 2018). This research aims to identify current issues that affect the aspirations of early-career secondary school music teachers, including what motivates and engages them in their work and what impedes their progress in the profession.

This paper reports findings from a national survey that is part of a larger qualitative study. The survey was sent to over 500 secondary school music teachers across the states and territories of Australia. The survey, containing a mixture of Likert-type and open-ended questions, covered areas such as motivation, stress, value, challenge, professional development, work/life balance and career goals. Of the 263 responses, 59 were from early-career secondary school music teachers across Australia.

This research revealed that, while enjoyment of teaching was a strong motivator, teachers' sense of belonging to the school culture was enhanced by having their subject valued and being professionally acknowledged. Early-career secondary school music teachers are having some success finding worthwhile and skill-enhancing professional development, but accessibility and meeting career need are overriding issues. The research also indicates that these teachers are encountering an inconsistent approach to the implementation of the Australian Arts Curriculum across the states and territories. Early-career secondary school music teachers also struggle with work/life balance. Despite these difficulties, these teachers have a positive outlook and future goals for their careers as music educators.

This paper provides suggestions for professional development for this career stage and gives insight into the work/life balance and career forecast for these music teachers. It informs school leaders in their support and valuing of these teachers and their subject.

Keywords: Early-career secondary music teachers, motivation, professional development, work/life balance.

Background and context

Music teachers in their first few years in the profession can find difficulty navigating the complexities of teaching, finding their place in the school community, juggling workload and feeling positive about their career future. This research gives insight into issues that influence early-career secondary school music teacher motivation, belonging, professional development, implementation of new curriculum, work/life balance and future career goals. This paper will focus on the themes of professional development, work/life balance and future career goals. The

expanded work will be published in a final thesis and larger publications.

The support of early-career secondary school music teachers is important as identity and feelings of competence are established as music educators in these years. Professional development and work/life balance are key platforms in this process and can have an effect on future career goals.

Literature review

There is a large body of research that investigates the factors that affect the career longevity of early-career secondary school music teachers (Dabback,

2018; Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017; Joseph, 2011; Roness, 2011). Support such as professional development, the approach to workload (work/life balance) and the building of resilience are key to long term career prospects.

The importance of professional development (PD) in increasing teacher skill and feelings of competency is evident in the literature. Wilde (2010) framed professional development into five principles - that PD is based on foundation, knowledge, expertise and skills; is engaging; has a continual process that offers opportunity and follow up practice; provides feedback and results in a measure of change in the skill and knowledge of teachers. Fama (2016) and Conway (2008) found interaction with other teacher colleagues was the strongest form of PD, while Davidson and Dwyer (2014), in an Australian study of early-career music teachers, found that professional dialogue and the importance of networking was needed to avoid isolation. Little (1993) found that lack of teacher involvement in choosing PD could hinder professional growth.

Ballantyne (2007) highlighted the impact of the contradiction between teacher expectation of school life and the reality of teaching (praxis shock), isolation and high workloads in the lives of early-career music teachers and suggested professional development and mentoring as strategies to address these issues. In later research by Ballantyne and Zhukov (2017), through interviews with 14 early-career music teachers, difficulties were encountered in their first year (isolation, heavy workload) but mentoring, professional development and the ability to be resilient was key to their 'flourishing identities' as music teachers.

Research on teacher motivation can encompass self-determination theory (Fernet, Trepanier, Austin & Levesque- Cote, 2016) and adaptive and maladaptive motivation (Collie & Martin, 2017). Fernet et al., (2016), in a Canadian study of 589 French-Canadian teachers in their first 3 years, explored the two motivation platforms of self-determination theory: autonomous motivation (achieving task for pleasure/satisfaction) and

controlled motivation (completing tasks through internal or external pressures). They found that occupational commitment grew stronger for those that maintained autonomous motivation, but over the first three years of teaching, this motivation tended to subside. Work overload also resulted in low quality motivation.

Collie and Martin (2017) explored adaptive (self-efficacy, valuing and master orientation) and maladaptive (anxiety, uncertain control, performance avoidance) motivation in teachers. Through a survey of 518 Australian teacher participants across 18 schools, they constructed five teacher profiles: success approach, success seeking, amotivation, failure fearing/self-protecting and failure accepting. These were linked with well-being outcomes including work enjoyment, workplace buoyancy and work disengagement. The research found less healthy motivational profiles for male teachers, and only 40% of respondents were either success approach or success seeking. The researchers suggest the need for a person-centred approach to motivation.

Arnup and Bowles (2016) conducted a survey of 160 Australian early-career (first 10 years) primary and secondary teachers that found lower resilience and poor job satisfaction were factors for leaving, with 32% of respondents indicating they intended to leave. The research suggests that early-career teachers need strategies to develop resilience, collegial support and mentoring.

This research aims to capture a snapshot of Australian early-career secondary school music teacher experience of professional development, workload and future career plans. It seeks to investigate the factors at work in each state and territory to enable education authorities, professional networks and associations and schools to better support these music educators in the future.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study, incorporating a survey (n=263) of secondary school music teachers. The survey invitation was sent out to

500+ secondary school music teachers nationally through the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) membership by email and Facebook page. The survey was also referred to by participants through other music teacher forums on Facebook and in newsletters.

The survey was emailed in June 2018 and posted a number of times through social media, with responses finalised by October 2018. The survey contained 45 questions and covered areas relating to career length, age, gender, qualifications, school type and location, levels taught, motivation, value, job satisfaction, work challenges, professional development, the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* and future career goals.

The survey questions were framed by the themes in the literature review. Likert-type items and open-ended questions were included. Open-ended questions explored areas of work that enable motivation, the perception of important aspects of teacher work, the factors that create stress and the coping strategies developed, accessibility and future needs of professional learning and any issues surrounding the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts*.

The survey responses were coded allowing grounded theory principles to emerge. The principles of grounded theory (Creswell, 2014) were used where “the researcher derives a general, abstract theory...grounded in the views of the participants” (p. 14). Open coding was employed, conceptualising and labelling the themes that emerged (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In the second (axial) stage of coding, links were created which then allowed for the third stage - selective coding and the identification of the core themes in the data (Cohen et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These themes were examined and compared to the themes discussed in the literature review, allowing new themes from the data to be included.

Findings

From the 263 responses, 59 early-career secondary school music teachers completed the survey.

There were 34 from New South Wales, nine from Western Australia, seven from Queensland, four from Victoria, two from South Australia, two from Tasmania and one from the Northern Territory. There was no early-career music teacher response from the ACT.

Responses came from metropolitan areas of capital cities (64%), regional areas (32%) and remote locations (3.3%). Government school music teachers provided the largest teacher response (63%), followed by Independent schools (25%) Catholic/Systemic schools (10%) and other school types (2%).

A number of themes have emerged from the national survey – enjoyment of teaching, the importance of belonging, the scope and accessibility of professional development, the impact of the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts*, the struggle for work/life balance and career goals. This paper will focus on early-career secondary school music teacher professional development, work/life balance and future career goals.

The scope and accessibility of professional development

The importance of professional development in the working lives of early-career music teachers is featured in the literature (Wilde, 2010; Conway, 2008; Fama, 2016; Davidson & Dwyer, 2014; Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017). The majority of the early-career secondary school music teachers surveyed were keen to develop their skills through professional development. Courses completed during 2018 across the country included The Australian Band and Orchestra Director's Association (ABODA) conducting courses, Kodaly certificates and Orff levels, curriculum courses and beginning teacher conferences, coding, introduction to special education, and International Baccalaureate (IB) workshops. Many were positive about the implementation of their learning to their teaching:

I've been able to use strategies in the classroom and have been successfully able to get all of my

classes singing. A particularly difficult task at a public boys' school. (EC53)

In response to question 35, on accessibility to PD, 34 responded with 15 stating PD was easily accessible and 19 saying it was not. The reasons for these difficulties included distance (Tasmania, NSW, Qld), expense (NT, Qld, WA, NSW), availability (Qld, WA), city only delivery (Vic) and not tailoring to participant need (NSW). Professional isolation can become an issue when PD is difficult to access. This isolation can be compounded by schools that may only have one music teacher (Davidson & Dwyer, 2014)

Question 36 sought information about the future PD interests of the early-career music teachers surveyed. Table 1 is a summary and includes the state of each respondent:

As discussed in the research of Fama (2016), early-career secondary school music teachers valued collaboration with other music teachers and gained much from it:

The exposure to other music teachers and their lesson content was amazing. (EC16)

One to one conversation with other practitioners and lectures about their practice has helped me develop my practice. (EC42)

The provision, accessibility and scope of professional development is vital for the development of early-career music teachers. While off site professional development was named in this study, the on-going support provided by collaboration through professional networks, colleagues and mentoring should not be underestimated.

Work/Life Balance

Balancing workload and maintaining a healthy lifestyle was found to be a difficulty for early-career secondary music teachers. Research by Matthews and Koner (2017), through a survey of 7,463 K-12 music educators in the United States, found that 23.5% of teachers indicated working conditions/work load/time commitment was the least favourite part of their job.

Of the 32 responses to Question 41, 'Do you maintain a healthy work/life balance?' 12 respondents said Yes (38%) and 20 (62%) said No. This correlated to the survey responses of secondary school music teachers across all career stages that revealed 76 respondents (44%) maintained a healthy work/life balance and 101 (59%) did not.

This early-career music teacher offered these suggestions for maintaining balance:

Working long hours at school, in order to not take work home, is a key part of my work/life balance. I use home time to relax, not work. (EC7, Vic)

A philosophical approach, regarding the strength of the subject, was important to this teacher:

Music is life. School teaching is not. Simply put, I ignore bureaucracy and paperwork unless necessary. Music teachers truly have it better than most other faculties. (EC43, NSW)

For many early-career secondary school music teachers, issues such as long hours, events and rehearsals have a major impact on balance in their lives. These factors were found across the country:

I think it's very easy to have a teaching week fluctuate between 40-60 hours. When this happens, I don't have time for myself eg. preparing meals, exercise, seeing friends and family, etc. There are too many events that impact a normal week - and it's these interruptions that have a cascading effect on all the work that I do. (EC8, NSW)

The work load is too much. Too many ensembles and events! I love my job but it's not sustainable. (EC17, WA)

This early-career music teacher emphasised the stress that comes from not having regular work: I don't have enough work. I'm always anxious about finding work for the next day, week, month and year. (EC41, WA)

From the survey results, the early-career secondary school music teachers had a mixed response to the work/life balance with some accepting that the demands of the job were to be expected, some considering it too much, while others put clear boundaries between work and home. The survey strongly suggests these teachers

Table 1 – Future professional development needs.

Future Professional Development Needs	State
Composition program development, VCE marking, program outline details.	Victoria
Master of Education this year, finishing the Secondary Kodaly Certificate, and 2 levels left for the Orff Course. I am also part of a research team at my school	New South Wales
Master of Educational Psychology	New South Wales
Managing workloads/assessment	Western Australia
Knowledge on how to light a show	Tasmania
Orff levels	Victoria (2)
Kodaly levels (2)	Victoria, Western Australia
Music and technology	Queensland
Jazz history	Western Australia
Teaching and aural skills	Western Australia
Composing with digital programs and aps	Tasmania
Engaging disengaged students in music	Western Australia
Special Education	Northern Territory
Classroom management	New South Wales (4)
Ensemble conducting and choir directing (7)	Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales (2), Western Australia
Develop my knowledge in music and also in Executive positions in schools to be able to hold a leadership role	New South Wales
Increasing engagement in a music classroom	New South Wales
New senior syllabus PD. Music teachers should be able to seek instrumental lessons on additional instruments as part of PD.	Queensland
Stage and sound management	New South Wales
Certificate course (Music Industry) support for course structure, assessment and delivery option Middle school, non-classical, classroom instruction and ideas	Western Australia
Indigenous Music Composition. Technology in Music	New South Wales
I take it week to week	New South Wales
Anything	Western Australia
Lesson and assessment ideas, programming	New South Wales (2)
Stage 5 elective music	New South Wales
Music pedagogy	Queensland

carry a heavy workload. In addition, this career stage often has music teachers seeking permanent work and this is also a common factor for stress.

Future career goals

There was a positive response to Question 42 'Would you choose to become a secondary school music teacher again?'. Of the 32 responses, 27 said Yes and five said No. Of more concern, was the response to Question 43 'How likely is it that you will be a secondary school music teacher in five years?'; ten were 'Very likely' (31%), five were 'Likely' (16%), two were 'Slightly Likely' (6.2%), 12 'Unsure' (37.5%) and one Not Likely (3.1%). Only 53% were positive about their commitment to the profession for the next five years, while 43% were undecided or not continuing

One early-career teacher stated her reasons for not continuing:

Pressure of having to meet all the demands of the job from education authority, administration, line manager, parents and students. Student behaviour and sense of entitlement is very challenging to manage. (EC19, WA).

A large proportion of early-career secondary school music teachers surveyed were uncertain about their future in the profession in the next five years, yet most were happy with their career choice.

Conclusions and implications

This research has found that, despite a number of challenges, early-career secondary school music teachers actively seek professional development to improve their skills, have a realistic view of their work/life balance, are positive about their initial career choice but are not all clear on their future career goals.

The forecasting of suggested ideas for professional development, catering to teacher skill development and interest, indicates a healthy response from the surveyed early-career secondary school music teachers. Professional associations and education authorities should cater to these

teacher needs in their planning for PD in each state and territory. In addition, collegial and networking support is important for this career stage to avoid isolation. Encouraging links with experienced music educators and mentoring within the school community is a vital way to enhance belonging and developing confidence for these early practitioners.

Work/life balance is a difficulty for teachers across all career stages. It can have the detrimental effect on music teachers remaining in the profession. Setting clear boundaries for work and home life and developing resilience in responding to workload is vital for the working health of all teachers. It is particularly important for early-career teachers who have the extra demands of establishing themselves in the profession, dealing with classroom management, curriculum challenges and constant administrative deadlines.

With added support strategies and expanding avenues for professional development, (including mentoring and collaboration with music teacher colleagues) the future outlook for all early-career secondary school music teachers can improve. The number who were 'unsure' of their future as music teachers could be easily decreased with intentional support. This research challenges schools and education authorities to enable stronger support for those beginning in the teaching profession.

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