

Australian first-year teachers need support when transitioning to work during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The Covid-19 pandemic has considerably disrupted teacher education. In Australian, the placement days required to meet the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards were reduced for the 2020 final-year graduate teachers. Simultaneously, the Covid-19 disruptions posed significant challenges for first-year teachers. This study investigated how the Covid-19 pandemic shaped three first-year teachers' needs for support in transitioning into teaching in Australian schools. Data for the study were generated through semi-structured Zoom interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed a tension between the unpredictability of the classroom realities and insufficient practical skills. The situated learning experiences were disrupted to varying degrees, affecting the development of close relationships and reducing the possibility of frequent interactions and productive conversations with other community members. First-year teachers need support handling workloads, managing students' behaviour and differentiating instructional strategies for students with special needs. The findings of this study emphasis the urgent need to embed a comprehensive school support structure to facilitate first-year teachers in their transition to the teaching workforce.

Keywords: first-year teachers, the Covid-19 pandemic, need for support, transition into teaching, Australian schools

INTRODUCTION

During 2020, greater Melbourne endured a four-month lockdown, causing complex disruptions to work, education, study and everyday life. The 2020 cohort of Victoria's (Australia) teaching graduates received fewer placement days than required to meet the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2020), which reduced teachers' hands-on experience necessary for building confidence and job-readiness (Australian Government Department of Education and Teaching, 2014). The fewer placement days also minimised students' exposure to day-to-day activities within schools and limited interactions with school communities, both necessary for promoting new teachers' professional development (The Victorian Government, 2020). In short, the careers of the 2020 newly graduated teachers may have been severely influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic because they encountered interruptions in their last year of learning and assessments and graduated during a global recession period.

A body of literature suggests that even before the pandemic, beginner teachers' transitions from pre-service teacher to first teaching position encounter 'reality shocks' (see, e.g., Bulfin & Mathews, 2003; Flores & Day, 2006; George et al., Teng 2017). Beginner teachers feel overwhelmed as they attempt to transfer theory into the classroom practice because of the discrepancies between an expected ideal and the classroom reality (Bulfin & Mathews, 2003; George et al., 2018). Significant challenges beginner teachers faced include managing students' behaviour, creating differentiated instructions for the diverse needs of students, coping with workload, adapting to the constantly changing educational landscape and communicating with parents (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; George et al., 2018; Gordon, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Schunk et al., 2018).

The consequence of the disruptions caused by Covid-19 to beginner teachers' learning and practice accords them with fewer experiences in the classroom and indicates they may need extra support as they start their first teaching job (Flores & Day, 2006; George et al., 2018; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Teng, 2017). Indeed, a recent survey conducted in Australia and New Zealand revealed that Covid-19 exacerbated beginner teachers' struggles (Flack et al., 2020). Although a body of research has emerged that discussed the immediate impact of the Covid-19 disruption on teachers' experiences during the 2020 school year, little is known concerning implications for first-year teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Robinson et al., 2022). However, we know little about the first-year teachers' explicit needs for support in the Covid-19 context.

This study examined how the Covid-19 pandemic shaped first-year teachers' transition to work. We investigated the challenges three first-year teachers faced upon entry into the teaching profession after the 2020 Covid-19 school year. The research question was:

- 1) In what ways has the Covid-19 disruption shaped first-year teachers' need for support in their transition into Australian schools?

The above section provided the background, context and research question. The following sections will examine relevant literature on the topic of this study and then discuss the methodological approach. The finding section includes results and is followed by an analysis and interpretation of the results. The findings and analysis sections are structured according to a hierarchy of the importance of themes emerging from the study. This paper concludes with a summary of the research and suggests further topics for research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As already noted, even before the pandemic, beginner teachers' transition into their first teaching position usually encounters a 'reality shock' (Bulfin & Mathews, 2003; Flores & Day, 2006; George et al., 2018; Teng, 2017). They feel overwhelmed by the task of transferring theory into classroom practice because of discrepancies between the expected ideal and classroom reality (Bulfin & Mathews, 2003; George et al., 2018). The significant challenges beginner teachers face include managing student behaviour, differentiating instructions for the diverse needs of

students, coping with workload and communicating with parents. (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; George et al., 2018; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Schunk et al., 2018).

Bowles and Arnup (2016) and Phillips and Cain (2020) found that dealing with excessive workload was a key challenge for beginner teachers in their first year of teaching, which can contribute to teachers' burnout. Kidd, Brown and Fitzallen (2015) found beginner teachers' high workload was related to three issues: insufficient preparation and planning time, a significant amount of administrative work and an imbalance between work and personal life. These issues resonate with preliminary findings from a recent survey conducted in the Covid-19 context carried out with teacher in NSW public schools. The study findings also highlighted the significant pandemic-induced amplification in the demands and intensity of teachers' work due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which increased the complexity of administrative tasks and lesson preparation time.

In addition to dealing with the demands of administration, beginner teachers need support to learn how to manage students' negative behaviours, which can lead to beginner teachers' emotional exhaustion (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Hudson, 2012; Nichols, 2017; Stacey, 2019, Teng, 2017). Beginner teachers experienced difficulties dealing with students who did not respond to behavioural expectations and managing students who did not fit into the standard classroom plan (Hudson, 2012). In 2020, Miller and Harris (2020) conducted a study in 51 NSW schools and compared the results with those collected from 62 public schools the year before. The authors found that the pandemic has further exacerbated teachers' level of fatigue because of the need to manage a heightened level of stress among students' stress and anxiety due to the lack of social interaction during the lockdown and cancelled extracurricular activities. Changed schooling resulting from the pandemic impacted students' social-emotional health resulting in increased aggressive and threatening behaviours, which heightened teachers' emotional distress (Miller & Harris, 2020).

Creating differentiated instructions to meet the learning needs of a diverse mix of students also poses significant challenges for beginner teachers in meeting diverse students' needs (Berry, 2010; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; MacGlaughlin & Martens, 2014). Berry (2020) and Hudson (2012) noted that beginner teachers are especially challenged when providing appropriate learning opportunities for students with disabilities. There are various types of disabilities, some of which are not dealt with in either university subjects or placement experiences (Hudson, 2012). Leacock and Warrican (2020) proposed that the Covid-19 disruptions have demonstrated that teachers must be prepared to accommodate diverse students' needs under different conditions. Flack et al (2020) surveyed 2,373 Australian teachers and 1,183 New Zealand teachers and found that 80% of teachers believed students would need additional support once they returned to the physical classroom. This finding suggests that first-year teachers could face even more severe instructional challenges in their first classroom teaching experiences because they need to identify instructional strategies for providing relevant interventions and support for their students. This study examines how first-year teachers dealt with the challenge of providing instruction to students after the Covid-19 disruption.

METHODOLOGY

Participant recruitment

Covid-19 on-site restrictions limited participant selection. Recruitment of participants was, therefore, limited to professional networks. As a result, three female participants who had just finished their teaching degrees and were employed in Term 1, 2021, were selected. All were aged below 30 and employed in Australian government schools. After a short introduction to their research project, participants agreed to participate. They were then emailed an Explanatory Statements and Consent Form to explain the study details further. Both forms stated that participants were free to participate and entitled to withdraw at any time. Before the data generation phase began, the researcher had applied for and gained ethics approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) to ensure that the participation in this research was safe, confidential, and voluntary.

Study Design

A qualitative case study methodology was employed in this research, which enabled us to examine the first-year teachers' needs for support through a detailed contextual analysis of events and relationships. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting around 40 minutes each and conducted on Zoom. The time of the interview was agreed upon a few days before and at the participants' convenience. The interviews were video recorded to allow multiple playbacks during the data analysis. In addition to the verbal data, notes were taken by the researcher on non-verbal cues, such as participants' body language, facial expressions and reactions, for supplementing and clarifying data to provide insight into participants' feelings about their experiences in the data analysis process (Polkinghorne, 2005). The interviews were transcribed the day after to see the emerging patterns, and the data were organised before the final analysis.

Data Organisation and data analysis

Research data was categorised. Excel was used to manage and display the data, and a table was created with one row for each participant and one column for each interview question. This facilitated the next data analysis stage, enabling the researchers to see patterns and differences with less time and error.

Reflective thematic analysis was adopted for data analysis, which involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the data set (Braun et al., 2016). In this approach to analysis, the researcher's subjectivity is embraced and integrated into the analysis process, involving researchers' experiences and pre-existing knowledge (Campbell et al., 2021). These aspects bring valuable insights into qualitative data. Moreover, reflexive thematic analysis is independent of theory and epistemology, providing a flexible application of the analytic approach (Campbell et al., 2021). This allows us to determine the focus of the work rather than being bound to a specific theoretical framework.

Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that thematic analysis typically focuses on one level or the other. In our use of reflexive analysis, we found it helpful to adopt semantic and latent analyses while conducting applied qualitative health research. The semantic approach was applied first to capture the surface and explicit meaning (Liamputtong, 2019). Then, the latent approach looked beyond the data to examine the underlying ideas, broader assumptions, and conceptualisations to shape and articulate the content of the semantic data (Braun & Clark, 2019). The main themes emerging from the data analyses were: uncertainty and unpredictability of the classroom realities, insufficient situated learning experiences, handling the workload, managing students' behaviours and differentiating instruction for students with special needs. These themes became the basis of data discussion and presentation to imply the broader meanings within the social community (Patton, 1990).

Trustworthiness

Member checking is known as participant validation, a technique to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016). This study incorporated it to gain trust and maintain validity (Bassey, 1999). Hence, the researcher provided a copy of transcripts and preliminary analysis to the interviewees to verify the interpretation and add to and clarify the meaning of what was said in the interviews. The identified inaccuracies and misinterpretations were corrected before the final stage of the analysis. Accordingly, the general concerns of trustworthiness and validity in the case study have been addressed, and the student researcher's biases have been minimised.

FINDINGS

Increased intensity and uncertainty of classroom realities

Participants noted that their level of panic and anxiety was exacerbated due to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the classroom realities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants highlighted that chaos was everywhere in the nature of work; they constantly needed to act quickly on last-minute changes, such as going back to online teaching for the lockdown in early 2021. As noted by one participant, 'The work pace has increased because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Chaos is everywhere. Expectation of teachers has been doubled, because everything has to be prepared and prepared early. We are always expected to meet everything, meet all the needs that students have in the place.'

Mary revealed the extra struggles she had as a consequence of the lack of support from her school community:

There is no place that I can get advice because everybody is so busy, so messed up with their lives because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Everybody is trying to balance work and home life. I am 100% not prepared to teach the way I am expected to teach.

The Covid-19 pandemic posted significant chaos in teacher education and the education system. As a result, the first-year teachers' transition to work became more challenging.

Insufficient situated learning experiences

Other than the fact that that first-year teachers did not have much teaching experience to draw on, one participant had insufficient situated learning experience with limited interactions and dialogic relationships, which took Mary longer to adapt to the changes in new classroom situations:

The real impact for me comes from the fact that I don't get to discuss with my senior colleagues what the first teaching job is going to be. So, I do not have a realistic understanding of how a classroom is expected to look like. I really believe no matter how much I read and try to get in line with the content I am reading from the articles, the real-setting and the conversation are different than just reading from an article. I can hear a lot of things, but past experience from people will help me more than reading an article written by an unknown researcher.

In Mary's school community, the situated learning opportunities were inadequate to meet the demands made of her. Mary perceived that she lacked input from her school community, such as having proper mentoring and professional conversations with veteran teachers. Mary's school community did not support her engagement in relationships, activities, social context and active participation in a community of practice. Indeed, the situated learning process, which depends on engagement in actions and interactions with others (Wenger, 1999), was disrupted by the responses to Covid-19. As further elaborated by Mary:

For the professional development sessions that we should have and the talk we should get to hear, all of that should happen in the real time scenarios in classrooms, happening with people who had experiences in their past. We need to have physical seminars, not online Zoom seminars. They should be in one room where you physically hear somebody's talk. Not when you have your video turned off and you sleep on your bed and listen. But now I am not equipped with anything. How much can I learn and prepare myself! Someone has to teach me, that is not what I got into the profession for, to learn everything by myself. I need to be taught, to be told, to be witnessing it. And that's when I can implement what I have learned, and all I have been taught.

However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Mary's school communities did not have the time and energy to support first-year teachers, which intensified their stress while teaching. Mary despaired, 'I don't have anything with me that I can look back on or refer to when there is an issue in my classroom. I need to get my thoughts going. I need to think about what I do in a scenario like this, which will take more time, more panic and anxiety.'

Mary's comments demonstrated that a strengthened community of practice is critical for practical and emotional support when facing modern and complex problems. This highlights the importance of school leaders putting collaborative social learning opportunities at the forefront, especially in this global challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Increasing demands and expectations from the teaching job

All participants indicated that the most significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was their need for support in managing the intensified workload in their first teaching job. First, due to the instability of the pandemic, first-year teachers were required to do extra preparation for classroom and online teaching. Planning for online teaching added to first-year teachers' burdens as they had to find suitable materials and incorporate new strategies for planning online material to have everything ready if they needed to switch between online and onsite teaching quickly. Amanda reported that 'Finding online resources is very different because you don't have materials you would have in the classroom, and it is a completely new way of planning'. Amanda further elaborated:

We needed to do quite a lot of extra work, like creating videos. We created a blog and all these other kinds of things. We also had to plan for online teaching for the whole year, just in case we need to go back online.

Second, first-year teachers struggled more to achieve work-life balance because of the need to fulfil teaching commitments while trying to meet the increasing expectations of various school stakeholders. They had emails pouring into their inboxes and phones ringing with parents wanting help. Amanda outlined her experience:

Students sometimes say something, and the teacher sometimes misses it. Long lines of emails coming up to us. I have a phone call coming at me. Parents said that I didn't listen to their child while their child had a very good point and claimed that their child hadn't been given enough attention.

According to study participants, the expectations from parents added to their anxiety, with the doubts and concerns of parents intensifying first-year teachers' workloads. As exemplified by another participant, 'Parents think we are doing nothing in the class at all, and they said they can teach their children and why have I been teaching this for so long'.

Supporting students' social-emotional well-being

Another reported challenge was managing students' behaviour. Participants emphasised that after the Covid-19 disruption in early 2021, the complexity of classroom situations contributed to their exhaustion. Notably, the Covid-19 pandemic negatively influenced students' social-emotional health, such as stress and anxiety. Sarah commented, 'Students in my class are disturbed by the Covid-19 pandemic. There are fears, and they don't know how to regulate their behaviours in classes'.

Moreover, students missed the experience of being in a controlled physical classroom environment in 2020, leading to increased unexpected behaviour in 2021. This was especially obvious in the higher grades, which required significant attention from the first-year teachers. Sarah said: 'I am tired of keeping telling off my students for different things. They talk loud, bang doors, and last year's online relaxed learning made them unconcerned about others'.

Similarly, Amanda, in Prep, stated that the lack of social development also contributed to behavioural problems among Foundation year students. She explained that her students had not had many 'social opportunities because they didn't go to kindergarten last year'. Consequently, there has been quite a lot of fighting in her class, and she had to do a lot of work on resilience. She described a most challenging situation when dealing with a student with autism.

This student lost her mom when she was a bit younger, and then because of the pandemic she couldn't go to kindergarten, so she had a very hard time. She is very disruptive in my class as she just does what she wants such as rolling around on the floor. She argues and fights with her peers, doesn't follow my instructions, and runs away from class.

Teaching and interacting with students with special needs

Participants expressed concerns about creating differentiated instruction for students with special needs. Specifically, participants were concerned about understanding the students with special needs in the context of teaching. They commented that their university education had been focused on general theory and had not prepared them with sufficient practical skills to deal with individual cases. Hence, participants had to do additional research to understand students with special needs case by case. Mary highlighted her struggles, 'No matter how much I read articles to do with students with special needs, the real setting and the situation are just different'. Moreover, the curtailed placement due to the Covid-19 event also seemed to have led to her limited experience in handling the practical issues, as exemplified in Mary's response:

Once, I took over another teacher's class. I was given a lesson plan with a section outlined that a student with autism will work on a different task rather than do the formal assessment. So, I announced in front of all students that this student should be doing another task. I did not know I should handle it in a better manner to get close to the child to differentiate instructions just between me and her to show my understanding and respect towards her situation.

It is clear that Mary needed support to consolidate the links between the theory and practice. Such teachers need immediate training and professional conversations with the school community to build practical skills and expertise in special needs education.

Amanda also noted it was difficult to find the most suitable strategy to accommodate the needs of her student with autism. She further highlighted that the sudden lockdowns in 2021 contributed to unsettling experiences and distortions in the usual daily routine of the student. This complicated Amanda's attempts to give him tasks and help him achieve his learning goal and plan. She said:

The Covid-19 pandemic has made Michael's school experience this year very different. So, he had a few meltdowns, and another lockdown is coming. He has a short attention span, and his emotion changes quite a lot. He easily gets grumpy and disrupted. It takes him a long time to achieve a small learning goal, as he needs many play breaks. I try to use different strategies, such as setting an alarm in his transition from playing to doing the task. But it does not work well for him and even when he finally starts to do the task, he can go off the task very quickly.

Amanda's experience demonstrated that the Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted students with special needs. Their normal routine had been disturbed by the sudden changes between online and onsite learning. These students might find it harder to adapt to such changes, resulting in fluctuations in mood and unpredictable behaviour in class. In addition, first-year teachers did not have a clear account of these students' experiences at home in remote learning. Further, the individual cases of students with special needs can be more intricate after the Covid-19 disruption. For first-year teachers, this increased the complexity of choosing the most effective instructional strategies for the student.

To conclude, only a few studies have investigated beginner teachers' teaching experiences during the unprecedented time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research shows that the 2021 cohort of first-year teachers struggled more in handling workload-related issues and stress, supporting students' social-emotional well-being and teaching students with special needs. This is because of their lack of classroom time during pre-service teacher training. The following section discusses these findings in comparison with emergent themes from the literature. The section also explains the meaning of the research findings and their implications.

DISCUSSION

The need for socially situated learning

The findings support those of Flack et al. (2020), indicating that the Covid-19 disruption of 2020 and early 2021 added complexities to first-year teachers' nature of work and intensified their need for support. The findings imply the need for communities of practice to help first-year teachers gain the required knowledge and skills in sociocultural practice. Wenger (1999) proposed that active engagement with the social milieu and environment are important factors in situated learning. However, Mary's opportunities for authentic activities in situated learning were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. As illustrated by Mary, she did not have a chance to discuss with her senior colleagues what the first teaching job would be and, no matter how much self-research she carried out, the actual settings were different. During the global pandemic, Mary's case failed to reflect that learning occurs in the interplay between social competence and personal experience (Kapucu, 2012). In other words, there should be a dynamic, two-way relationship between senior and novice teachers.

Wenger (1999) proposed that knowledge is constructed in the social context, and practice makes meaning through interacting with the external environment. Mary had not been allowed to engage fully in professional learning sessions. Specifically, Mary only had Zoom seminars, which, in her opinion, were insufficient for effective community interactions. She stressed the need for physical seminars in the actual classroom context. Mary also despaired that, even though she learned and prepared herself for the first teaching job, she still needed 'to be taught, to be told, and to be witnessing it'. Hence, it is important to note that Mary needed and still needs a situated relational practice with close relationships, frequent interactions and productive conversations with other community members.

Handling work stress and meeting demands from the teaching job

This study's results align with those of previous studies (Bowles & Arnup, 2016; Philips & Cain, 2020), which indicated that a heavy workload is a central challenge to first-year teachers and contributes to teachers' burnout. Because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the Covid-19 pandemic, all study participants noted they needed to prepare for hybrid teaching. However, planning for online teaching added stress because of the need to incorporate new planning strategies. Moreover, teachers also had to deal with heightened levels of parents' expectations. For instance, Amanda reported that parents kept sending emails and making frequent calls, concerned that their children did not receive sufficient attention from teachers. These results resonated with findings from the study by Wilson et al. (2020). It can, therefore, be inferred that first-year teachers need support to manage their workload and consequently alleviate their anxiety levels.

Confronting the increasing complexity of classroom conditions

This research identified that first-year teachers needed the most support in applying practical skills to teach students with special needs. Kim and Asbury (2020) argued that the disrupted learning and practising caused by the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in new teachers having fewer practical experiences in the classroom. Thus, they may need extra support when they start their first teaching job. This study found that the shorter placement duration encountered by study participants resulted in fewer experiences in the classroom to interact with students with special needs or to work with accomplished teachers to develop practical skills. Amanda's experience demonstrated her challenge in finding the most suitable strategy to teach a student with autism.

This finding supports the work of Flack et al. (2020), which indicates that first-year teachers may face more severe challenges in differentiating instructional strategies for a more targeted intervention. Furthermore, the finding reveals a tension between the increasing complexity of the classroom situations and the insufficient skills and expertise of first-year teachers in providing differentiated instruction for students with special needs.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to teacher education. As a result, first-year teachers may have experienced difficulties immersing themselves in situated relational practices involving close relationships, frequent interactions and productive conversations with other community members. The findings of this study revealed that the pandemic added complexity and intensity to first-year teachers' teaching practice. Dealing with the workload was first-year teachers' main need for support, amplifying their burden and level of anxiety. After the Covid-19 disruption among first-year teachers' final year of study and placement, they struggled to consolidate the relationship between theory and practice when confronted by the increasing complexity of classroom conditions. Study participants had to cope with practical challenges because the Covid-19 disruptions exacerbated their students' negative behavioural issues. Also, first-year teachers had difficulties providing differentiated instruction for students with special needs, who were especially impacted by the pandemic.

The study results highlight the urgent need for policymakers to enact relevant policies to provide additional and targeted training and support for first-year teachers after the Covid-19 disruptions. In addition, the study findings imply that schools should prioritise mental health support for first-year teachers dealing with school demands.

Further research should incorporate the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as senior teachers and school principals, to better understand first-year teachers' need for support within the new context of the global pandemic. Further research could also collect data from other states, such as New South Wales and Queensland, to gain more insight into best practices for better managing support for first-year students. In sum, great efforts are needed to develop a comprehensive support structure for first-year teachers transitioning to the teaching workforce.

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