

Training and Retaining Teachers: Preparation for the Workforce

My response to the review is in relation to PART B, specifically, how can we train and support early educators for the demands of modern-day classrooms.

I received my Diploma of Education in 2009 and have been teaching in high schools ever since. I am now in curriculum leadership and have been involved in presenting professional development workshops and conferences to teachers at a range of career-stages on a range of topics. I have had multiple preservice teachers over this period of time, in several different schools, including one this year. I've even been nominated for a mentor-teacher award. I have taught in country and metro, in private and public schools. I tell you this so that you can understand that what I'm going to discuss in the following pages is not a whim or a context-specific issue. It is endemic.

Stress is slowly killing our workforce through a thousand tiny cuts. Teachers, especially those who are early-career, are leaving the profession or simply going into "survival-mode" and doing the bare minimum to get through because of the demands of our vocation. We are throwing generations of teachers to the sharks with an incomplete arsenal of how to steer clear of treacherous waters and avoid the path that leads to burnout.

This year I engaged in a professional development course offered to leaders in the department on managing emotional demands (offered in part through the company Emotus). This process was nothing less than transformative. Here was a course that not only finally acknowledged the emotional work we do as educators, it had a range of practical activities and advice to assist educators in managing these demands to ensure better teacher-wellbeing. Teaching our teachers how to look after themselves is crucial in several key areas. We've all heard the expression that "you can't pour from an empty cup" but no one actually teaches us how to FILL our cups. We talk about "self-care" and "self-compassion" with very little understanding of the neuroscience that underpins these ideas. We KNOW that fulfilled teachers are better educators. When we aren't stressed, we are more able to be creative, empathetic and innovative. We have studies that show that high levels of stress lead to amygdala hijack, making creativity and executive decision-making literally impossible. And yet I don't know a single teacher who would say that they experience low amounts of stress.

Now I know that we can't eliminate stress from our jobs; a large part of why we're stressed is that we care so deeply for our students and we want them to be successful. We can't remove the stressors of our work, because without them, there would be no one left to teach. What we CAN do is to teach our teachers how to MANAGE their stress. This would not only lead to lower turnover, less stress leave/ workcover, higher rates of employee satisfaction and a more productive workforce; it would also lead to better student outcomes. An increase of stress of 20% DECREASES empathy by 75%. How can we look after the best interests of our students if we're in a constant state of being stretched too thin?

Chronic low-level stress is also linked to a range of physical health conditions and slower rates of healing, impacting the amount of sick-leave taken and diagnosis of chronic health conditions such as IBS. We have the science to back this up. Not only that, but the Department of Education acknowledges this and is even taking proactive steps to keep their highest-paid employees at work through free health checks to principals and preschool directors. Offering this training on managing emotional demands to all leaders for free is another part of how they are trying to protect their workforce, and yet this is something that

is still left out of teacher education. We know that good teachers have good relationships with their students but in a day and age when 1/3 of the world has anxiety, we need to train our teachers more about development psychology and mental illness so that we can support our students through what is arguably the most trying time of their lives.

More and more educators are understanding the impact that trauma can have on learning, and while this is important work, there is no acknowledgement that teachers will experience trauma in their day-to-day professional capacity. And there is no training in how to cope with this. Nothing in any training I have done to date has prepared me to deal with a student of mine attempting suicide (which has not only happened several times in my career, it has happened at the school I was teaching at). Nothing prepared me for a student of mine having a reaction to pills in the girls bathroom. Nothing prepared me for how to talk someone through an anxiety attack. Nothing prepared me for the experience of having a student tell me they'd self-harmed because of a class discussion we had. But these are the realities of my life as a teacher. Not preparing our teachers for this reality is not only a disservice to them as professionals, it is negligent to their wellbeing as people.

Teaching teachers how to teach the curriculum is only half the job. We talk about the hidden curriculum but we don't really teach our teachers how to do it. Our students deserve to have teachers who have their full attention. Who are able to be present and creative and innovative and empathetic. And we can teach these things. They are not something that you are simply born with or not. We can teach our teachers how to manage their stress, how to manage the emotional demands of the students they teach and themselves, because we need our teachers to look after themselves so that they can go out there tomorrow and do it all again.