

# Early career teachers' opportunities for professional learning: impacts on teaching practice, job satisfaction, motivation, and career decisions

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Marie Cameron,<sup>1\*</sup> Jennifer Garvey Berger,<sup>1</sup> Susan Lovett,<sup>2</sup> and Robyn Baker<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington, New Zealand*

<sup>2</sup> *University of Canterbury College of Education, Christchurch, New Zealand*

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## Abstract

In common with many other countries, the New Zealand Government's priorities include building an education system to equip its school leavers with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, by focusing effort on building professional knowledge and strengthening effective teaching. This presentation focuses on the ongoing opportunities that the teachers in our sample have had to become more effective teachers over time. Our "teachers of promise" form a sample of 57 primary and secondary school teachers who began teaching in 2003. The project has tracked their progress since they had gained their full teacher registration in 2005, to illuminate the reasons they stay in their schools, move schools, or leave classroom teaching, as well as the factors that encourage and sustain their commitment to develop their teaching. This presentation highlights the professional learning opportunities that teachers have been able to access, as well as their perspectives on the value and importance of these opportunities for strengthening their teaching, job satisfaction, and career development. In this paper, our focus is especially on those different career opportunities teachers need at different phases in the early part of their careers.

Primary and secondary school teachers have had rather different opportunities to build their professional knowledge, which already appear to be impacting on their teaching practices, job satisfaction, motivation, and career decisions. While most teachers have had informal opportunities to develop their teaching, they have not had the same level of opportunity to have more structured interactions with their colleagues about teaching and learning, or to observe other

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\* Corresponding author: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, PO Box 3237, Wellington 6000, New Zealand. Email: [marie.cameron@nzcer.org.nz](mailto:marie.cameron@nzcer.org.nz)

teachers and obtain formative feedback on their own teaching and student learning, particularly in secondary schools. These findings have been supported by a national survey of provisionally registered teachers (Cameron, Dingle, & Brooking, 2007). Most professional development has been aligned with Ministry of Education priorities, with primary teachers identifying ongoing and sustained school-based Ministry of Education literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology (ICT), and formative assessment contracts as having positive impacts on their understanding of content and how to assist children to learn that content. Secondary teachers have had fewer opportunities to develop pedagogical content knowledge, with workshops on assessment for national qualifications identified as their most common professional development opportunity. Teachers in schools with conditions and cultures that encouraged their learning generally reported greater satisfaction with teaching at the end of their third and fourth years of teaching and were unlikely to have changed schools. A significant minority of schools failed to offer environments that encouraged teacher learning. This led teachers to move on to other schools with more supportive environments. Other constraints to teacher learning were overinvolvement in nonteaching activities and premature promotion to administrative roles. Teachers also appeared to have limited agency in relation to decisions about participation in school-based professional development, and in taking some responsibility for addressing their particular learning needs. Few teachers reported that they engaged in professional reading, citing “lack of time” as the reason, and few had been encouraged to participate in their subject associations, with the consequence that almost half of the secondary teachers had no involvement at all by their third year of teaching.

While it is not possible to generalise far from these findings, they do suggest that a policy emphasis on supporting teacher learning is certainly timely. The characteristics of professional development that increase teachers’ knowledge and skill, and impact positively on their teaching practice and student learning are now well established (Desimone, Smith, & Philips, 2007). The next challenges are to create expectations that teachers will develop their expertise throughout their careers, provide tangible rewards for demonstration of this expertise, and strengthen schools so that they become the sorts of environments where teachers are able to grow and thrive.

## Introduction

Evidence is accumulating that even when other factors are considered, it is the quality of teaching that has the most powerful impact on whether children learn well or not (Hattie, 2003), and that improvements in teaching and learning are strongly influenced by teachers' professional development experiences (Desimone et al., 2007). This means that it is most vital for us to ask questions about how we can encourage promising people to choose teaching as careers, how to prepare them well for their careers, and how we can support them throughout their careers from student, to novice, to experienced teacher. If quality teaching leads to better student achievement, those who care about student learning will want to capitalise on novice teachers' initial passion for teaching and to nurture and enhance that passion—and skill—throughout their careers.

Our research asks these questions, most especially focusing on how “teachers of promise” settle in to their careers after the first two beginning teacher years have passed, and the ongoing opportunities they have to learn how to help their students to become better learners, or to develop their careers in other ways. We began in 2005 with a cohort of 57 teachers in their third year of teaching in primary and secondary schools in six geographical areas in New Zealand. They were teaching in a wide range of school types, including low-decile<sup>1</sup> urban schools, small rural schools, elite independent schools, and middle-decile suburban schools. These teachers were selected because they showed early promise as teachers with much to offer the profession. To be in the study, this “promise” had to be acknowledged both by teacher educators from their programmes of initial teacher education (seven different programmes in both the North and South Islands of New Zealand), and by school principals or heads of secondary school subject departments. Their colleagues described them in glowing terms, such as “an absolute cracker”, “amazing teaching presence”, “stunning”, and “outstanding”.

We wanted to find out their reasons for choosing teaching (Lovett, 2006), how well prepared they thought they were to teach, their induction experiences, and the opportunities that they had to become more effective teachers over time. The first part of this study is described in detail in Cameron, Baker, and Lovett (2006).<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we describe the connections between teachers' early career phase and the professional support they need in order to make the transition from novice teacher to experienced teacher. We believe that understanding the nuances of different needs teachers have will help give teachers the targeted support they need at key points in their teaching so that they remain in teaching and become strong and contributing members of the profession.

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<sup>1</sup> A school's decile indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socioeconomic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socioeconomic communities, whereas decile 10 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. A school's decile does not indicate the overall socioeconomic mix of the school.

<sup>2</sup> This report is downloadable from the NZCER website at:  
[http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?cPath=130\\_131&products\\_id=1763](http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?cPath=130_131&products_id=1763)

## Methods

This multi-year study has unfolded with several different kinds of data collection, all of them qualitative. Our approach is sociocognitive (Vygotsky, 1978) and socio-cultural with an emphasis on how different communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and teacher networks (Carmichael, Fox, McCormick, Procter, & Honour, 2006) influence their learning. We are interested in teachers' views of the social and organisational contexts of their work, how they are supported to develop deeper understandings and skills in helping students learn, and the impacts of policy on their work. After the rigorous selection process described above, we gathered data from the teachers themselves—their personal beliefs and values; the experiences that sustain their initial commitment to teaching as a career; and the place of teaching in their lives. Data are derived from two 50–90-minute semistructured face-to-face interviews with each teacher and a teacher survey in 2005, telephone interviews in 2006, and data from teacher workshops in 2007. All interviews were professionally transcribed in verbatim text and returned to each teacher, along with a summary of the key messages and themes from their interview for checking. Following the first interview, subsequent interviews included discussion of their previous interview. Data have been collectively analysed across the 57 summaries.

The data for the fifth year have been gathered through one-day workshops in the second school term, where the teachers engaged in a series of activities that included: mapping their career decisions to date; rating their previous and current levels of engagement in various components of their practice; and discussions about the factors that would continue to keep them engaged in their schools, or influence them to change schools or leave.

## Making a beginning

Teachers in our study generally chose teaching for all the same reasons that teachers in many countries choose teaching: they liked kids; they wanted to “make a difference” to their learning and life chances; and share their enjoyment of learning with others (Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Pell, 2007). Overall, the teachers considered that they had been prepared or well prepared to begin teaching, although a sizeable minority identified predictable areas where they felt less prepared (for example, handling a range of discipline problems, and working constructively with parents). Despite their relatively short periods of initial teacher education (19 teachers had three-year primary undergraduate teaching degrees, 34 had one-year primary or secondary graduate qualifications, and four had four-year conjoint degrees), their programmes appeared to have provided a solid foundation for starting teaching,<sup>3</sup> which may reflect the traditionally strong practice emphasis in teacher preparation in New Zealand. We remind readers of this because, while preservice teacher education is an area that deservedly gets lots of attention in educational

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<sup>3</sup> An Education Review Office report (Education Review Office, 2004) on beginning teachers judged that around 80 percent of teachers at the beginning of their second year of teaching appeared to have pedagogical knowledge and skills for promoting student engagement. Note, however, that student engagement is not evidence of student learning (Nuthall, 2007).

research and practice, it is the very tip of what teachers need to be contributing and excellent teachers over the course of their careers.

## **The induction period: figuring it out**

Once in the workforce, the contexts of individual schools had the greatest impact on how well teachers were supported in their first two years of teaching, and set the pattern for future learning. In New Zealand there is 0.2 additional funding provided to schools for each beginning teacher in their first year and 0.1 in the second year. Schools have the responsibility for planning and providing “advice and guidance” programmes, for allocating an in-school mentor to each teacher, and for recommending teachers for full registration to the Teachers Council.

Teachers described very different induction experiences during their two-year period as provisionally registered teachers. Most of the 27 primary teachers (74 percent) described systematic and supportive induction programmes that welcomed them into their schools, supported them personally and professionally, and gave them opportunities to learn from and with other teachers. Five of the primary teachers had “ad hoc” induction, where, although colleagues were very willing to assist if they were asked, they did not provide their new teachers with a systematic programme of support and guidance. Only two primary teachers considered that their induction programmes were unsupportive.

The older the age of their pupils, the less likely teachers were to be well supported when they started teaching. Eight teachers taught Years 7 and 8 children (aged 12–13), and their experiences were more variable with three teachers reporting supportive induction, three reporting ad hoc induction, and two reporting minimal or unsupportive induction.

The picture in secondary schools was even less positive. Of the 22 teachers, eight (36 percent) described supportive and systematic approaches to induction. Ten teachers (45 percent) found their induction to be minimal or unsupportive, while four teachers (18 percent) were able to access guidance if they asked for it.

While this is a small group of teachers, similar findings are evident in a recent national survey of New Zealand teachers (Cameron et al., 2007) where 20 percent of secondary teachers and 14 percent of primary teachers considered that they had been left alone to “sink or swim” in their first two years of teaching. Primary teachers were more likely than secondary teachers to have been provided with specific pedagogical guidance. For example, 72 percent of primary teachers said they were likely to receive feedback on using assessment to plan for future learning, compared with 44 percent of secondary teachers.

Teachers in both the Teachers of Promise study and the national survey who had experienced more comprehensive support during their induction period reported higher levels of satisfaction with teaching. In the national survey data, primary teachers who indicated that their mentor teacher had greatly assisted them were more likely to agree that their school was a “great place to work”, and those who disagreed were more likely to think that their tutor teacher had helped them to a limited extent or not at all.

The professional support aspects of this are crystal clear and well researched both in New Zealand and internationally. Clearly, efforts to provide new teachers with practical, emotional, and personalised support helped to set them up for a successful start to their teaching. The larger question here is about why it is that we have not been fully successful in this regard even though we know what works to support novice teachers. New Zealand has quite a clear and systematic support structure—funded by the Ministry of Education and offering benefits to both those teachers who are novices and those mentor teachers who support them. Still, though, the efforts here prove too ad hoc for something that we know can be the difference between a happy and contented third-year teacher or an educational software designer (or health or museum educator...) who was a teacher for two years and couldn't ever feel successful. Leaving teachers to fend for themselves at the beginning of their careers reinforces the isolation of teaching practice in the face of strong agreement (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; James, Black, McCormick, Pedder, & Wiliam, 2006) that teachers are more likely to learn to teach in collaborative professional contexts.

## **The third and fourth years in the classroom: consolidating and broadening**

At the end of the fourth year in the classroom teachers shared several major characteristics. They generally reported feeling much more secure about their place in their schools and more able to express their opinions to others, as well as feeling more assured about their teaching. They now had more opportunities to see and understand events and practices beyond their own classrooms. Those who had undertaken management or pastoral roles now had a greater appreciation of the complexities of these roles:

I have to say, what stands out to me the most at the moment, is how much I didn't know about the management side of the school, and how much there is going on, and it makes me even more appreciate the senior management team for being able to cope ... whereas from the other side you see it from one way only, and it's pretty much 'I can't believe these people are not doing what I want them to do, why are they not doing it?' But there's so many people involved in one simple decision, you have no idea what's going on. (Olivia, 25, secondary)

Like the teachers in the Next Generation of Teachers Project (Donaldson et al., 2007) many teachers were beginning to take on extended roles within their schools. Many had been associate teachers to teacher education students for periods up to six weeks, although none had access to any formal professional development in working with adults. Several teachers already had management experience as heads of their departments (HODs), while others were gradually assuming roles that required them to assume broader leadership roles:

Well, I'm not just in class, I'm supporting at least three teachers a lot of the time, in terms of their learning, their professional learning, as well as with their students and things that they might be having difficulty with. Obviously, with the role I'll be looking at next year, there's a lot of—contributing to teaching as a profession, giving back to—I mean, we take student teachers, so you're helping develop other people's learning, and then next year being a liaison with the school of education is a pretty big thing too. I'll be looking after teachers

under one whole half of the school, rather than just my team. (Robert, 29, intermediate, now sharing the deputy principal role with a more experienced teacher)

At this stage in their careers, teachers' need for professional support is threefold.

1. They need models of growing and learning from experienced teachers so that they have a vision of what their own future might be like.

Some fortunate teachers had access to inspirational role models in their day-to-day work in their schools, but others looked around their workplaces and saw colleagues who were so ground down by unrelenting pressures and expectations that they did not have the space to do more than cope. They observed the workloads of colleagues who had moved into management roles and a number decided that this was not where they wanted to be. Generally, they did not see these roles as satisfying their passions to "make a difference" to young lives. Consequently, there is a shortage of able teachers who want to take on these roles in their schools.

2. They need professional learning opportunities that help them move from the more basic necessities of early teaching (time and classroom management) to the more sophisticated and sustaining practices of curriculum development, critical inquiry, and reflective practice.

Overall, teachers appeared to have had insufficient opportunities to engage in the sorts of professional learning that helped them to become more reflective about the impact of their teaching on their pupils. Teachers wanted to develop their teaching, but were critical of "staff development" that "filled them up" with the knowledge that someone else had determined that they needed, whether they knew it already, whether it was relevant to their situation, or whether it aligned with their own understandings of how to teach. Teachers said that they usually forgot the content of these activities, resulting in little, if any, changes in teaching practice:

This year we had a teacher only day on...I can't even remember what it was about! It was talking about different styles of learners and that sort of stuff. I participated and got into it but it hasn't had any impact on what I've done [in the classroom]. (Degz, 35, secondary)

The professional development activities that they regarded as having the most impact combined external input, relevant knowledge and skill development, and adequate time and support to develop and reflect on their practice. Poulson and Avramidis (2003, p. 549) suggest that teachers benefit from an "interweaving of different kinds of experiences", and the teachers in our study who were positive about their professional learning had been able to engage in a number of experiences that contributed to the development of their teaching.

3. Many of them are beginning to need support and help in supporting and enhancing their relationships with adults in their lives—as they begin to teach other teachers, begin to contribute in more of a leadership way, and begin to reach out in more sophisticated ways to parents and other community members.

At this stage in their careers they are beginning to want to help other teachers. Sarah, who had left her first school because her requests for feedback on her teaching went unheeded, now had concerns for a beginning teacher in the classroom next to her who was not receiving the support

and guidance that he needed; Zoe, who had been assigned a student teacher, felt inadequately prepared for this role:

I think a little bit of training, maybe just some general things like all the things that they need to cover, like how often they should be observing you and what is expected of them, because I didn't really know what is expected...a visiting lecturer came in and said he [the student teacher] hasn't done any of his reflection or anything, and I didn't realize that was my job to check that he had done any of that. (Zoe, 25, primary)

Research on mentoring (Cameron, 2007) indicates that mentors benefit from having an appropriate “learning space” (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000) and specific mentoring skills to impact on teacher practices and pupils’ learning. It is also apparent that many teachers felt inadequate to deal with issues in relation to parents. Almost half of the teachers identified working with parents as an area of tension, and none mentioned that they had formal opportunities to learn how to work well with them.

## **The fifth year in the classroom: a plateau**

The fifth year of teaching began a new phase for the teachers in our study (70 percent) who were still teaching in New Zealand classrooms. They were more stable and steady, and had fewer concerns about many of the key issues that had troubled them throughout their initial years: their difficulties with time management, with difficult administrators, and with the overwhelming nature of schools and teaching had been mostly sorted by maturing into the profession and finding the right school environment. By their fifth year of teaching, teachers felt sufficiently comfortable and confident to make some decisions about their future career paths, and about their personal and professional investment in their work within and outside the classroom. Teachers here were on a plateau, and they were trying to figure out what to do about that. Some were content to rest on the plateau and invest more time in other parts of their lives which brought them joy (reclaiming their former interest in artistic or sporting endeavours, for example, or beginning families). Others specifically poured more time into their teaching, seeing this as a chance to consolidate what they had learnt already to become even better at their craft. More of these teachers, however, turned outside the classroom—but inside their schools—to other challenges as they took on increasing administrative and pastoral roles.

We were curious about how teachers made sense of this time in their profession: where did they see their energy going at this point? We wondered whether they thought they were more engaged in their teaching practice than they had been previously, and if they were more engaged in leading adults than they had been previously. We asked those who attended the workshop data collection days in 2007 about this. We were quite surprised with the findings: while nearly all 28 who attended said they were more engaged in leading adults in their teaching, slightly more than half believed they were less engaged in their teaching practice than they had been.

### **Investment in teaching**

The teachers in the group who rated their classroom engagement as lower than two years previously commonly identified being pulled away from their teaching to undertake other roles:



I think I have gone backwards because of the extra pressures, like taking on the HOD role, taking on all of the buying of the sports equipment, all the extra roles that you have got. I feel I have lost a wee bit of focus so you sort of go into the class and you get there and you are held up all over the show and by the time you get to the class it's like hoooh, right here we go, let's start again. So I think I have probably gone backwards a titch. In four years I think it has moved back and mainly because of those pressures from up above. (James, 31, intermediate)

It happens to all of us. You get better at your job and you get to know how it works more, then you get added responsibility. You know 'you have been here for four years now and you can do this'... But you know you start getting a bit more responsibility and more involved in the school because you have been there longer and you know what needs to be done. There is just too much other stuff that goes on that is a necessary part of school life, but it takes away from the classroom practice and that's what is making it important for me. (Lucy, 31, primary)

Some teachers felt "pushed" into management roles. Robyn, who thinks her career has moved faster than she has intended with "no time to enjoy and consolidate" sees her biggest challenge in an acting HOD role as:

I think keeping the Department together as I mentioned before because I know that this year we're going to have a lot of budget constraints and as a new HOD I don't want to be bullied, that's a strong word to use, but I don't want to be a push over. I think I am potentially viewed as somebody who will say yes to doing things readily and that's why I found myself with a big workload at times and I know that that's something I do. I don't mind helping out at all but sometimes I think, you know, it's easier to take advantage of people that are willing to help out and take on extra things. Organisation wise, I'm going to have to be super, super organised. (Robyn, 31, secondary)

Teachers also talked about the extra demands that have impacted negatively on their ability to focus on "what really matters" in teaching, and which take away time from their teaching:

And we are always addressing or prioritising that thing which is most immediate and that thing which is likely to have the negative consequence for you personally in the short term, but on the back burner we tend to put the big picture things and the thinking and reflection and improving pedagogy and the key things that really do matter because they are not what has to be in the pigeon hole by tomorrow morning. (Ruby, 28, secondary)

Many of these teachers experienced it as a surprise themselves, upon reflection, to note that they were actually less engaged with their teaching practice than they had been previously. We began to wonder together about whether this was a good thing (a sign of professional maturity) or a bad one (a sign that they might be wandering into a treading-water phase that they dislike in other, more experienced teachers).

Of course, while slightly more than half of the teachers believed they were less engaged in their practice, almost half considered that they were more invested in developing their teaching expertise than two years previously. For some of them, this was due to negative school contexts that had been changed by a change of school. Others, though, pointed straight to teacher professional learning opportunities as making the difference for them.

For example, Haden had moved from a low-decile secondary school to an independent school for boys. Throughout his earlier interviews Haden had expressed surprise that he had received very limited pedagogical support, and could not recall any actionable formal professional development, or feedback on his teaching:

Basically I haven't been appraised in four years in the sense that the observations done and the formal reports, put it this way, I have never, ever seen any paperwork on me... I registered two years ago this time of the year... You know the kind of form you have to fill in, the one with the few boxes to be picked and then stuff like that. That appeared in my pigeon hole, I filled in the bits that I had to do, I gave it to my head of faculty and she filled in the bits that she had to do, it would have gone up to the principal along with \$80 the cheque or whatever for the Teachers Council and off it went, and back came something from the Teachers Council saying you are now registered. So there must be paperwork out there that exists but I have just never seen it. (Haden, 27, secondary)

In his new school, however, he had been encouraged to participate in professional development, and he found this engagement directly related to his increased focus on his teaching.

The other teachers in the group who rated their investment in their teaching as higher than it had been two years previously were in schools that had always prioritised teacher learning, and/or they had sought out learning for themselves. Three teachers in this group had enrolled for Masters degrees, but all agreed that their studies were not relevant to their work as classroom teachers. Ruby, who had had some experience as a HOD, but had spent 18 months as a Specialist Classroom Teacher (SCT),<sup>4</sup> had found that assisting others to develop their pedagogy had made her further aware of her own practice. At the workshop she told her group that her positive shift came from helping others in their classrooms because, "you can't constantly analyse the practice of others without analysing your own". Compared with her HOD role she was finding that the SCT role was much more satisfying:

Having had a year in the HOD position in English I felt as though I had been taken out of what I enjoyed most about teaching and that was being in the classroom, and the most powerful aspect of the HOD role was supporting staff in their practice in the classroom and it never allowed the time for it because you were doing your quality assurance and your goal setting and your management and all the paperwork. So the Specialist Classroom Teacher came along and it sounded like an entire role. It provided for the aspect of the existing role that I enjoyed, the aspect of the HOD role that I really felt was most beneficial and that was being in the classroom working with teachers and students. (Ruby, 28, secondary)100

We found consistently that, by their fifth year as teachers, those who were engaged in a variety of forms of professional learning were the ones best able to maintain—or grow—their excitement and energy about their classroom teaching. Whether or not the teachers were engaged in their own practice, however, we found that almost all of them grew their excitement and energy about helping others in their classrooms.

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<sup>4</sup> The newly introduced Specialist Classroom Teacher scheme provides for well regarded secondary classroom teachers to lead other teachers to focus on improving their professional practice.

## Engagement in assisting other teachers with their teaching practice

Teachers individually rated and discussed the level of their engagement in assisting other teachers with their practice this year as compared with their practice two years ago. Only one teacher considered that he had less involvement in assisting others, and overall the shifts were greater than those in the classroom engagement scale. The group was split about the question of whether this was their choice to engage in this practice. Some, like Rose and Sarah, were ready to begin giving back to the profession:

I feel like I want to contribute. I want to be part of the school. I don't want just to do my job and go home. (Rose, 33, primary)

Sarah was well aware that new teachers require effective guidance at the beginning of their teaching careers, particularly as the support provided to her as a beginning teacher had been unsatisfactory:

It's a real issue for me, there is a beginning teacher that works in the class next to me, and he is in his second year, and I have helped him a lot this year, because his tutor teacher just hasn't done it. (Sarah, 29, primary)

Teachers who were "giving back", for the most part wanted to retain their classroom roles:

As I've said to my new principal you know, nothing will come between me and my kids. If my kids start to suffer, then that [roles outside classroom teaching] is what will go because at the end of the day, I'm a teacher, that's where my passion is first and foremost... And that's what I'm there for. I'm there for the kids. And I think it comes down to personality too. I enjoy having lots of things to do. I enjoy leading people and I enjoy teaching people what I know...and I enjoy learning from others. (Tan, 25, primary)

For many in the group, however, whether they enjoyed the work with other adults or not, and whether they felt they had picked it or had it thrust upon them, there was a common sense that they had not been given the support to translate their knowledge of teaching children into a knowledge of teaching adults. For some teachers the assumption of others that "a good teacher can teach anyone" such as acting as a supervisor to a beginning teacher without additional professional development was rather alarming:

It's been quite weird, I actually talked to the principal about it, because I have been saying 'I really don't have any idea what I have been doing, I feel like the blind leading the blind.' Like I have a bit of an idea about what I have to do like [I'd work with] a student teacher in a way...but there are more things that she [a beginning teacher] needs that are different than what a student teacher needs. (Amanda, 37, primary)

Taking on coaching roles was frequently a catalyst for the development of their own knowledge and expertise, but one clear finding for us was that as teachers take on additional roles and begin to support other adults' learning in their schools, they need new professional learning supports and school environments that foster inquiry and feedback about teaching and learning. A key part of professional development at this stage is to help these teachers expand their repertoire to include teaching and mentoring other adults.

Ruby, the Specialist Classroom Teacher, has support from within her school and from the SCT network to develop her role in ways that suit her own knowledge and beliefs, as well as inviting participation from her colleagues. She has been able to support teachers in a variety of ways, including: contributing to whole-staff development, teacher research groups, and groups of teachers with common issues; supporting groups of beginning teachers; team teaching; modelling in her own class for other teachers; and observing and providing feedback for other teachers who have invited her into their classrooms. Engagement in a wide range of focused activities makes it possible for her to help to “change the conversation” (Yorks, 2005) in ways that enable teachers to learn from their experience and produce “actionable knowledge”.

While she meets regularly with the principal, she stressed “the focus of these meetings needs to be generic and about practice and about school-wide decisions rather than individuals”.

In primary schools, some teachers have already taken leadership roles in projects such as the numeracy project, where they have had opportunities to learn to work alongside teachers to enquire into their own practice. But this is not something that they can do on their own if their schools are not organised in ways that “embody the conditions that optimise and sustain the quality of both teachers’ and pupils’ learning” (Pedder, James, & MacBeath, 2005 p. 214).

## **A story of hope**

It would be easy for us to emphasise the shortcomings in schools’ support of teacher learning in their first years in the classroom; we have found that New Zealand schools are not particularly unique in the way they deviate from what we know is clearly good practice. Instead of highlighting the shortcomings, though, we focus on one of several teachers who have been fortunate to work in schools where they have been well supported professionally. We find that several key issues make the difference between a teacher who considers herself to be well-supported and those who think the support is adequate—or less. The core professional learning issues are that:

- teachers are in contexts where adults are learning alongside their students and where learning is a key and important task for all
- schools are configured in ways that allow teachers to learn both informally and in structured ways from colleagues with expertise, and which foster collective responses to each school’s particular learning and teaching challenges
- teachers are not isolated within their schools, but have opportunities to participate in significant professional learning with teachers in other contexts
- teaching assignments are made in ways that maintain the learning goals of the teachers and stretch them
- there is some support in the inevitable change to beginning to teach and mentor adults.

Tan, at 25 years old, is an example of a teacher who appears to have been well mentored to develop both her knowledge and skill in teaching and her skills in coaching other teachers. She has taught in the same small high-decile primary school since she began teaching. The school’s population is drawn from both suburban and surrounding rural areas. Most of the students in the

school achieve above the national expectations for literacy and numeracy. The school recently received an exemplary report from the Educational Review Office (ERO),<sup>5</sup> noting the quality of principal leadership, and the strong focus on teacher professional development. The school has a recently appointed new principal, and although he has a different leadership style from her first principal, he has sustained the school's commitment to teacher learning.

At the time of her first interview she said, "I love my job, I absolutely love it." Throughout our interviews with her she has stressed that teaching provides her with great satisfaction because of the opportunities she has for professional learning:

I think that's because I'm learning more so it's not like I've come with just a set amount of knowledge...in the three years I've been teaching I've learnt so much and when you learn something new and you learn how to apply something new you're motivated, you get enthusiastic about it. (Tan, 25, primary)

Tan has been encouraged to teach at several levels in her school to broaden her understanding of teaching. In her first three years she taught the five-year-olds who had just started school. In her fourth year she taught a Year 4 class (nine-year-olds), and in 2007 she is teaching Years 5/6. This means that she has had teaching experience across almost all the levels in her school which has greatly assisted her knowledge of curriculum levels and how children learn at different stages of development.

Tan has had many opportunities to develop leadership skills, including being lead teacher for the numeracy project. This has required her to work with other teachers, and give presentations at staff meetings and a parent evening. She has been given support and encouragement to do these tasks:

[Senior teacher] would sit down with me and she'd talk me through it, you know, 'start at the beginning and then people can get on when they want to get on'. You know she used the analogy of a train journey where, 'people get on at whatever station they need to get on ... if they're only at the beginning then that's when they need to get on whereas if you start somewhere else and you've left them all the way back there then it's not quite gonna work.'

While the school has been involved in three major school-based professional development initiatives since she began teaching, they have been spread out so that teachers have not been overloaded. In 2006 the school took on no new professional development and worked on consolidating the learning it had gained from their numeracy, formative assessment, and ICT professional development projects. In discussing the numeracy project, Tan was able to describe the learning gains made by the children, and the impact on teachers' enthusiasm for teaching and on their teaching.

She is now a lead teacher for inquiry-based learning in her school, a job she shares with a colleague. This provides one and a half hours release from her teaching so that she can work with other teachers to help them to incorporate inquiry learning principles in their planning and teaching. Her principal takes over the other teachers' classes to allow Tan to meet individually

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<sup>5</sup> ERO reviews schools and early childhood services every three years and publishes national reports on current educational practice.

with them. Tan recently attended a conference to assist her to work alongside teachers. An outside facilitator also works in the school one day a week, working with teachers, conducting classroom observations, and providing ongoing support for her and the other lead teacher.

As part of a Ministry of Education literacy initiative she is released from her teaching one day a week to work with teachers in four other schools on writing and formative teaching practice. She is supported in this by a Literacy Development Officer who meets with her regularly.

She receives no extra salary for this work, describing it as "...a goodness of my heart kind of thing", and that she was "keen as a bean" to do it. She also sees it as good professional and career development:

I look at it in terms of it gets me out to four other schools where four other principals see what I'm like, and the other thing is that it gives me a leadership role.

Other studies (Donaldson et al., 2007) have found that teachers can meet resistance when they attempt to influence other teachers' practices, and Tan has addressed this by persuading them both of the usefulness of her input and the expectation that they need to change:

When you're only in there once every three or four weeks, some of them see you as the intruder, whereas I've said to them, 'well that's not the way I want it to work, I want to work with you, beside you, not above you and certainly not below you'. It's certainly been a big learning experience... I would have to say, overall the attitude is really great. You know people have to go through their stages, it's like if you tell them they have to do it, they then do it and then they realise it's not that bad anyway.

Like some other Teachers of Promise, Tan has no intention of looking for a different job because her school continues to extend her growth as a professional. She has seen first hand that teachers in other schools can be resistant to new ideas, something that she had not encountered in her school. As she says "I love teaching and I love my school. Why leave a good thing?"

## Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that, despite the different contexts in the ways schools are "managed" in New Zealand compared with other countries, teachers' experiences in professional learning are much the same as those documented elsewhere (e.g., Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). For our group of 57 teachers our study shows that:

- Teachers who were well supported in their transition from inexperienced to experienced teacher were likely to feel more successful as teachers and stay in their schools.
- There was no invariant sequence of developmental stages that new teachers passed through—their learning needs depended on personal and affective factors, the particular characteristics of their pupils, and the organisational and cultural climates of their schools. The best learning opportunities were those that addressed their unique needs.
- Teachers learnt best in accepting and open-minded school cultures where they had a variety of opportunities to learn from each other, from invited facilitators, and from their individual endeavours.

- From the fourth or fifth year of teaching, unless teachers had been challenged by changing class levels, new teaching assignments, new professional responsibilities, or changing schools, they were largely dependent on Ministry of Education initiatives for their professional learning. They were not active in their professional associations, and unless it was required as part of in-school professional development, not many teachers engaged in professional reading related to teaching. Few had attended conferences. Despite their valuing professional learning, they had found that “lack of time” had prevented them from seeking out further opportunities beyond their schools. It is concerning that a third of the secondary teachers had no contacts with their professional associations. And almost half have said that they are now less engaged in their classroom teaching.

How then can schools and the wider education system provide the structures and incentives for teachers to maintain their enthusiasm for teaching and develop their teaching expertise? The teachers in our study have made it quite clear to us that they don't think they will ever “know it all” as there will always be new curricula, expectations, and different groups of children to respond to, and that this is part of the challenge and satisfaction of the job. Most had left previous occupations that didn't have enough challenge, or that did not nourish their sense of personal meaning in their day-to-day lives. Intrator and Kunzman (2004) talk about “vocational vitality” (the degree to which a teacher is present and vital in enacting their role as a teacher), asserting that these aren't fixed qualities, but that they “ebb and flow with the challenges and flow of the teaching life” (p. 222). Are some of the teachers beginning to ebb by their fifth year, and if so what can be done about it? Intrator and Kunzman (2004) stress the need for opportunities for renewal so that teachers can explore “How should I allocate my energy in ways that are consistent with the deepest values that I have about myself as a teacher and a person?” In our Teachers of Promise workshops, almost all participants indicated that simply participating in our research project is providing renewal time for them to stand back and think about the values that are important to them as teachers; time that isn't there in the daily hustle and bustle of the school year. It is a chance for them to articulate what is most important to them, and to consider their career directions.

While there will always be times that teachers struggle because of the inherent complexity of teachers' work, without chances to stand back or reframe, they risk burn out or disillusionment leading to leaving or (worse) cynicism. Teachers are the most precious resource that we have in our education system, but too often we fail to treat them as “taonga”,<sup>6</sup> but as a means to an end. For the education system to meet its goals, we need to take on the challenge of supporting teachers to be learners throughout their careers. We need to treat them with the same care and respect we hope schools will have for children: to take them seriously as learners to create contexts for their growth, and to ensure that everyone has the chance to participate fully in the educational system. If we cannot do this for teachers, how can we expect teachers to be able to do this for children?

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<sup>6</sup> Taonga is the Māori word for a treasured thing.

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