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New teachers' responses to COVID-19 in Scotland: doing surprisingly well?

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Abstract

The recent special issue of JET showed narratives of schools shifting to emergency online teaching centred on coping strategies and struggling with online tools. Even where the sense of emergency helped to overcome long-standing resistance to pedagogical change, as in Leacock and Warrican (2020), the emphasis remained on “coping” and the exposing of unmet need for teachers to be able to adapt from traditional classroom pedagogies. The sense of being unprepared was echoed in the sense of “struggling” in Ontario (Van Nuland et al. 2020) and teachers in Brazil where “83.4%, feel little or not prepared at all to teach remotely” (Prata- Linhares et al. 2020, 3). In contrast, one response to a hastily-added question in our annual survey of early career teachers showed a much more positive response which we feel merits further investigation using qualitative methods.

Keywords: new teachers; early career teachers; COVID-19; Scotland; efficacy; TALIS

The study

Now in its third year of data collection, the Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQiITE, see www.mquite.scot) project follows a broad remit to gather data relevant to teacher education in Scotland, generating data where it does not already exist, to guide future data use in ways that reflect the nuances of Scottish ITE while allowing for relevant international comparisons. The annual survey tracks 2018 and 2019 graduates through their early careers. It includes questions from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD 2018), addressing the gap that the OECD's 'United Kingdom' sample did not include any teachers in Scotland during its 2018 cycle. Specifically, we include two batteries of questions on continuing professional development (CPD) needs and self-efficacy ratings. To self-efficacy, we added "to what extent can you respond to new initiatives or changes (e.g., emergency remote teaching)?" for the March 2020 data capture. Based on the results described below, our study has secured funding from the British Educational Research Association's COVID-19 Small Grants initiative to add qualitative insight into how new teachers responded to teaching in a pandemic through running four online focus groups. Initial focus group prompts draw upon Valcke's (2013) description of teachers as assuming broader roles within society and their local communities and Nickel and Lowe's (Nickel and Lowe 2010, 599) argument that "the ability to adjust to change, especially rapid change, which is important to engaging with an uncertain future" is a key measure of initial teacher education (ITE) effectiveness. This is intended to aid interpretation of the numerical data, addressing broader questions of how well ITE prepared these teachers for the unexpected and what ITE might wish to adapt to anticipate future crises.

Findings and implications

Reliability of the self-efficacy scale was $\alpha=.918$ with a response rate of 46% ($n=204$) in the longitudinal sample of 2018 and 2019 graduates a further 84 participants added from a general call sent to around 4000 recent Teaching Council registrants. The striking finding that prompted the desire for more qualitative data generation was that new teachers reported a higher mean score for responding to emergency remote teaching than they did for any other area of self-efficacy. On a 4-point scale, where 1 is "not at all" and 4 is "a lot", emergency remote teaching scored a mean of 3.4, with only 7.4% of respondents giving a negative rating. The difference was even more marked for teachers in their induction (first) year of teaching, at 3.6. This compares favourably against the mean of the full self-efficacy scale of 3.1 as well as items that might relate to teaching in a pandemic such as supporting student learning through the use of ICT (3.2), adopting inclusive pedagogy (3.2), varying instructional strategies (3.1), or providing pastoral support (3.0). Correlations between these

items were also found to be weak ($\tau < .25$, $p < .05$), albeit statistically significant, indicating that responding to emergency remote teaching was not analogous to using technology.

There remain unresolved issues in interpreting TALIS' self-efficacy scales in both the OECD and MQUTE datasets: for instance, efficacy scales do not correlate as might be expected with ratings of CPD need and differ little based on years of experience. Therefore, a 'higher numbers is better' interpretation is not necessarily appropriate. Nevertheless, in contrast to the narratives of coping and struggling in JET's special issue, the voice of new teachers from Scotland suggests that new teachers managed their immediate response to COVID-19 surprisingly well, regarded the change as distinct from the ability to use technology, and may indicate sufficient teacher reflexivity that specific changes to ITE for future emergency planning may not be necessary. As the study develops into its qualitative phase, attention shifts to more in-depth exploration of teachers' responses and implications for ITE and the early stages of learning teaching.

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