From attrition to retention: a narrative inquiry of why beginning teachers leave and then rejoin the profession

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The issue of beginning teachers leaving the profession in the first few years of their career represents a global problem, and while discrepancies exist over precise numbers, there is consensus that the attrition rate of new teachers is high. This paper reports on a narrative inquiry into two beginning teachers who left the profession after just 1 year of practice, only to return 2 years later. By examining this continuum from attrition to retention through the lens of the two teachers’ narrative accounts it is possible to gain some insights into how new teachers’ personal and professional landscapes intertwine. Findings reveal that these beginning teachers’ experiences of their school contexts combined with their personal stories in the first year of practice shaped their professional identity culminating in them leaving and then rejoining the teaching fold. Insights gleaned may have significant implications for beginning teachers, school leaders, teacher education institutions, and policy makers.

Keywords: beginning teachers; identity; narrative inquiry; teacher attrition; teacher retention

Introduction

The starting point for this paper was a reunion of former student teachers on a double degree programme at a Hong Kong university. Around the dinner table were nine beginning teachers who had all graduated from university 4 years previously; seven were into their fourth year of full-time teaching, and two were about to return to the teaching profession after resigning from their posts 2 years before. A context for inquiry emerged because while these young professionals were all graduates from the same teacher-training programme, they had clearly experienced different “stories” as their short professional lives unfolded. Of particular interest to me were the two who had chosen to rejoin the teaching profession after 2 years. The focus of this paper is on why those two teachers, Carmen and Alice (pseudonyms), decided to return to the teaching profession, which informs our knowledge base on teacher attrition as well as teacher retention.

Having left the profession 2 years earlier, Carmen and Alice both became rather impersonal statistics of teacher attrition in Hong Kong, but their stories and experiences did not end at that point. Adopting a narrative inquiry methodology where the study of these teachers’ decisions is part of their story, or “…first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479), this study aims at examining the factors which explain Carmen and Alice’s decision to return to full-time teaching. Through a narrative inquiry approach, their experiences are illuminated through an
exploration of issues concerning personal, temporality, and place. By returning to the professional fold, an examination of these teachers’ “stories to live by” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4) further develops the idea of narrative inquiry being a continuum. It also highlights the powerful, yet complex and intertwined personal and professional landscapes that form the backdrop to those teachers’ lives and the shaping of their identities (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

The issue of teacher attrition and particularly early career attrition has been well documented globally (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Hong, 2012; Ingersoll, 2001; Schaefer, 2013; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011), as has the expectations of new teachers (see Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007), and the resilience of teachers at different stages of their career (Gu & Day, 2007). Closely linked, of course, is the issue of how to retain good teachers in the profession (see Borman & Dowling, 2008). Still, there remains a paucity of research on why teachers leave, but then return to the profession, thus completing the full circle from attrition to retention. To examine this phenomenon, this study is guided by two research questions: (1) what made the two teachers leave the profession so soon, and (2) what were the reasons behind their decisions to return to the classroom. I attempt to answer these questions by using a systematic examination of self-told narratives to uncover the motives, values, and experiences that formed part of the two teachers’ personal and professional landscapes as they lived the stories of their initial years in the teaching profession.

Literature review

While the literature on attrition points to wide discrepancies in the numbers of beginning teachers who leave the profession within 5 years, attrition patterns tend to suggest that attrition is at its highest among young teachers. Ingersoll and Smith (2004), Hong (2010, 2012), and Schaefer (2013) have all examined this phenomenon and propose a figure of between 5% and 50%, adding weight to the negative image of the teaching profession being a “revolving door” (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006, p. 5). Unfortunately, precise figures are unavailable in the context of this study, Hong Kong, but anecdotal evidence from informal surveys of graduates from university teacher-training programmes suggests a figure of around 30–40%. Whatever the exact figure, the departure of qualified young teachers from the educational landscape is bound to bring about huge economic costs to educational authorities with suggestions that more than US$2 billion in the United States alone is spent on replacing teachers who leave the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Futernick, 2007). Experiences from a teacher’s initial years in the profession must carry implications for long-term job satisfaction and commitment to teaching, so understanding the reasons for teacher attrition is of vital importance, as are the reasons why some teachers then choose to return to the profession. This, then, brings the twin phenomena of attrition and retention into focus.

A beginning teacher’s development from “student of teaching” to “teacher of students” is challenging (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, p. 683). Moir (1999) describes how teachers in their first year go through phases of eager anticipation, to shock at the reality of the situation, to a survival period that ends in disillusionment, self-doubt and reflection. Craig (1999) notes that all schools are characterised by their own histories and traditions which exist long before they recruit a new teacher meaning that novice teachers must immediately adapt to the established contexts. Pressure comes very quickly as the days of being student-teachers with a support system that included school mentor, university mentor, a reduced teaching load and minimal marking or lesson preparation is suddenly...
replaced by a heavy and complicated workload as soon as a beginning teacher commences full-time employment. Multiple factors have been cited to explain the factors which may influence attrition: stress (Kyriacou, 1989) which can lead to frustration, anger, and anxiety; increased teaching loads along with increased administrative workloads (marking, classroom duties, report writing, submission of marks to school computer systems, etc.); pedagogical and curriculum changes being implemented at school and community levels; greater accountability to school principals as well as parents; the increasing challenge of diversity in the classroom, greater technological demands on teachers, and the constant need for professional development and academic upgrading outside of school hours (Gritz & Theobald, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Neave, 1992). This extensive body of work can also be applied to Hong Kong as well. Teaching loads in Hong Kong can be very high for new teachers with a typical teacher’s timetable consisting of around 27–32 forty-minute lessons per week. Stress and additional workload related to pedagogical and curriculum change are arguably even more acute with Hong Kong recently undergoing a significant and comprehensive curriculum change at secondary school and tertiary level leading to the implementation of a 4-year University curriculum following a 6-year secondary school one.

Drilling down to provide a concrete understanding of the nature of teacher attrition is fraught with difficulties because of definitional and methodological problems (Macdonald, 1999). In this study, the beginning teachers who left and rejoined the teaching profession might be labelled differently. For example, they may be leavers, stayers, movers, or shifters, as Freedman and Appleman (2009) have stated. Did they really leave the profession 2 years before, or have they become “stayers” as a result of moving or shifting to new posts since then? From a methodological perspective, much of the research on teachers leaving the profession has consisted of primarily quantitative data, which has been criticised for its emphasis on the collection of statistics at pre-specified points in time and its lack of rich qualitative detail to account for teachers’ movements within the profession. Willett and Singer (1991), for example, have promoted event history analysis with the inclusion of more longitudinal data, while others argue for more in-depth qualitative case studies as ways of accounting for the complexities of teachers’ lives and careers (see Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011). Clandinin (2000) suggests that theoreticians and policy makers alone cannot address issues surrounding early-career teachers. Instead, we should pay attention to what new teachers have experienced in professional practice. The study reported on in this paper chooses to follow the latter approach by uncovering the layers of the two teachers’ lives through narrative inquiry to explore and articulate the factors that make young teachers leave and then rejoin their profession with a view to contributing to our knowledge base on teacher attrition.

Schaefer (2013) suggests there are two main ways to conceptualise the complex phenomenon of teacher attrition. One is to examine the problem by turning the lens on the individual teacher, or the person. Here, factors such as age, gender, educational background, etc., can be seen as mediating factors. The second approach is to examine the organisational contexts in which beginning teachers work, or by placing focus on the context. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009) note that when examining the identity of teachers there is a need to address the personal practical knowledge of each teacher and the landscapes, past and present, on which they live and work. In other words, teachers’ knowledge is deeply intertwined with identity, or their “stories to live by.” When these different personal and professional stories collide, how do they shape the identity of a beginning teacher? Schaefer (2013) poses the question about whether these teachers’ stories, or identities, have been shaped to ensure they stay in the profession, or whether
they have been shaped to facilitate their departure from teaching. Using this frame of identity shaping to examine attrition, it is also possible to look at whether beginning teachers receive sufficient support at an administrative level (Flores & Day, 2006), from colleagues in the form of supportive induction programmes (Rippon & Martin, 2006), school mentorship programmes (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010), remuneration issues (Chapman, 1994), and issues surrounding student behaviour in the classroom (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, it goes further than these concepts because it also makes visible the complex personal stories that underpin a young teacher’s decision to join, stay, or leave the teaching profession; such stories are never part of the statistical data on teacher attrition but may offer important ideas to schools and policy makers on how to sustain the careers of beginning teachers.

Methodological perspective

A qualitative methodology was chosen to explore the beginning teachers’ experiences and a narrative inquiry paradigm was adopted to map the two beginning teachers’ lived stories of leaving the teaching profession after just 1 year and then rejoining it 2 years later. Through narrative inquiry experience is studied through the exploration of personal/social, temporality, and place. These dimensions connect, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) show, to John Dewey’s criteria of continuity (temporality), interaction (sociality), and to situation (place). Reinforcing this point about the interconnected dimensions, the same authors state, “People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context” (2000, p. 2). When using narrative inquiry as a methodology we are “…adopting a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479) and this study presents narrative accounts provided over the course of 1 year as the two teachers created professional knowledge through inquiry. These stories represent the thread that helped them articulate and understand their experiences.

Participants and context of study

Carmen and Alice were both 23 years old when they graduated from a 4-year double degree programme (Bachelor of Arts and Education) at a university in Hong Kong. They majored in Linguistics (English Language) and Education, and both started full-time teaching in September 2009 in schools of comparable academic ability at a time of considerable change on the Hong Kong educational landscape. The New Senior Secondary (NSS) Curriculum was also implemented in 2009 and stands as a key element of Hong Kong’s post-colonial education reforms. The NSS incorporates changes to the structure and content of the senior secondary curriculum (grade 10–12) with the move from a 4- to a 3-year programme. A notable shift for teachers to cope with was that instead of undergoing high-stakes examinations at years 11 and 13 as per the previous British-influenced system, their students were now involved in only one public examination at grade 12 via the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (see Carless & Harfitt, 2013). This backdrop added further pressure on secondary school teachers, already having to cope with falling student numbers as a result of demographic changes, closing schools, and intensified performativity in education (see Choi, 2005; Choi & Tang, 2009).

In Hong Kong, local secondary schools are categorised according to a banding system, with band 1 schools seen as having the strongest academic levels and band 3 being the
lowest academic level. Both Carmen and Alice initially secured teaching posts in band 2 schools, regarded as middle to above average in terms of academic ability. These schools were Chinese medium of instruction (CMI) schools, meaning that all subjects other than English were taught through Chinese, the students’ mother tongue.

Data collection
An in-depth, semi-structured approach was taken to collate three separate sources of field text. The first source comprised multiple interviews with Carmen and Alice to hear their oral histories from the past. During the interviews (interviews lasted between 30 and 85 minutes), the two teachers described their lived experiences of their first year of teaching starting with the stories of the experiences that made them leave teaching 2 years previously, their thoughts and activities in the year away from the classroom, and their reasons for choosing to return to teaching. Engaging with the two teachers’ narratives, it became clear that I was entering into the “midst of stories” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47) and that stories from the professional landscape crossed into their personal and social worlds, too. The second source of data comprised monthly journal reflections by the teachers as they recommenced their teaching careers in 2012. Journals represent powerful tools for examining practical knowledge, particularly where competing professional, personal, and practical demands make it hard for teachers to decide on the most appropriate direction; in this study, they afforded the opportunity for teachers to reflect on and learn from their beliefs, values, instructional practices, and professional environments (Rushton, 2004). These journal reflections were further explored during summary conversations allowing the teachers and myself as researcher to make more connections across the rich narratives being presented; the transcriptions from these summary conversations with Carmen and Alice ensured another layer of inquiry and constitute the third and final research text for analysis.

Data analysis
Data analysis and interpretation occurred over several stages commencing with the move from field texts to research texts. Having collated all the information shared by the two teachers I used it to construct research texts. Narrative inquiry is relational inquiry, so I asked Carmen and Alice to review these texts, and both were invited to make additions, amendments, and clarifications. Both teachers subsequently confirmed the story threads as being accurate representations of their practice and knowledge. I further analysed the teachers’ stories by reading all the interview transcripts (n = 24) and the monthly journals (n = 24); through this careful analysis of the transcripts and reflections I was able to develop a number of key themes, or categories. The limited space in this paper prohibits full discussion of all the themes identified, so I choose to focus on salient themes consistent across the narratives of the two beginning teachers. Three key themes emerged from the research texts will be presented in the next section of this paper: (1) the imagined life of a teacher, (2) the teacher’s personal landscape, (3) facilitating factors in the decision to stay or leave (personal and professional). Two perspectives mentioned earlier provide the overarching framework for the reliving of the teachers’ stories: the professional knowledge landscape (which acts as a metaphor for the teachers’ respective school contexts), and the personal landscapes of each teacher. By doing this it was possible to see how interconnected the two landscapes are. Both teachers shared very similar stories even though they worked in different schools, so to provide insights into these stories and
the ways that they were experienced by the two beginner teachers I have selected excerpts from the teachers’ narratives to illustrate the story threads common to both Carmen and Alice.

My role and ethical considerations
As this study adopted a narrative inquiry paradigm that acknowledges the participatory role played by researchers, there was a collaborative relationship between the two beginning teachers and myself (Noddings, 1986). Establishing a rapport with the participants that was based on fidelity (Riessman, 2008) and which would ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data was relatively easy because we had known each another from when they commenced their teacher-training course at university. As stated, co-composing and validating the field texts with the two teacher participants ensured respondent validity. Ethical approval for this study was granted at institutional level and both participants gave informed consent.

Findings
In the following section, I will share excerpts from Carmen and Alice’s narratives, which constitute the threads tying the two teachers’ experiences together: the imagined life of a teacher, the teacher’s personal landscape, and facilitating factors in the decision to stay or leave (personal and professional). By examining the stories that they lived by, it is possible to see how their professional and personal landscapes overlapped, “bumped” and transformed over a period of time, leading to new stories and experiences. I start with Carmen’s story and then move on to Alice’s.

Carmen’s story:
Thread 1: The imagined life of a teacher
“It just wasn’t the same as I expected”

I started teaching with the best intentions. I really thought I was ready after 4 years of teacher education... but I wasn’t. The reality hit me badly. It just wasn’t the same as I expected... I couldn’t breathe or find time to think. The first few months were terrible. Like a storm... I didn’t have an answer because I couldn’t pause. On my first day I had 6 classes. I was told that it would be a difference (to her teaching practicum at University), but I wanted support and I didn’t get any. That was the worst part, not the teaching. I was on my own all the time. They (the school management) expected me to be like an experienced class teacher and I wasn’t. I felt I couldn’t ask colleagues but when I did seek help, colleagues told me, “We all had to learn once, you know, so do what you think is right.” Ridiculous! I thought I would look weak... it’s not good to show weakness, especially at the start... I missed the times when I had a mentor (during TP student teachers were all assigned a FT mentor) and could ask my University tutor for advice.

Carmen’s anticipated life as a teacher built on a successful navigation of her teacher training and teaching practicum at university was very different to the “reality” of her first professional landscape. In her story, she made frequent references to “always feeling alone” and how she suffered from a “sense of helplessness” for most of her first year. The ideal world that she had developed through 4 years of teacher training was in conflict with her lived story of feeling isolated, professionally. These preconceived ideas about how she
would see herself as a teacher working with like-minded and supportive colleagues were starkly different to the reality of her school environment. These feelings and experiences did not change throughout her first year as a full-time English teacher.

Thread 2: The personal landscape

“A failure”

I thought it would get easier...that it was part of the process of moving from student teacher to teacher. My school principal spoke to me in November and said that every new teacher felt the same way and that I shouldn’t worry. But it didn’t get easier. I didn’t know if my teaching was satisfactory. I was always worried about administrative deadlines and work. I was so frustrated. I think...the culture of the school...it was too individual and I had been trained to work with peers (at university). I decided in March (6 months after starting) that I couldn’t carry on. It was not what I expected.

Carmen revealed that this was the only time the Principal had spoken with her in the entire academic year and that even when she submitted her written resignation, he did not seek her out to learn more about her decision. She also revealed that life at home was affected by her frustration at school, with her parents calling her “a failure” for giving up on a career after so much specialised training. Carmen said that label hurt the most, but that her parents could not possibly understand what she was feeling. Carmen left this school in July 2010 and took up a job working in a publishing company where she described herself as “happy, but never really attached to the company or the job.”

Thread 3: Facilitating factors in the decision to stay or leave (personal and professional)

“I missed my students...”

Although Carmen had left teaching, her storyline was still developing as a result of her gatherings with former university classmates who were still teaching in local schools:

I met friends who were teaching and they complained about marking, work hours, their students – everything (laughs). I know that seems strange, but I really missed what they had in their work. They couldn’t understand why my school was so different because they had mentors and had been given time to grow into their work. While I had been asked to be a class-teacher in my first year, they had all started as deputy class teachers...so it was like an apprentice-novice system. I started to think why they had got lucky and I hadn’t. I missed my students...they were never the reason for leaving teaching and I guess I still feel guilty about leaving my classes. If not for the students I would have left my school even faster (laughs).

Carmen waited until the start of 2012 and then applied for teaching positions, paying careful attention at interviews to ask about mentoring schemes in the school and expectations placed on new teachers. She was offered a teaching position in a co-educational, band 2 school and started work in September 2012. In interviews and in her first journal entry, she was positive about her experiences and started to develop a renewed identity as a teacher:

I couldn’t believe the difference (between schools). At my new school I now have a guardian angel – like a mentor, but less formal – and she sits next to me and gives me advice for the first year. I feel that I am part of a team now – It feels as if I’m welcome here.
Carmen was also pleased with the mentoring mechanism that existed in the new school; teachers were invited to form year-groups to co-plan and then co-teach lessons which she described as “empowering,” especially when she was invited to chair and lead some of the planning sessions. Carmen’s story also included some insights into the culture of the school that was based on open communication aimed at professional development:

The management here are very clear in what they want, but they encourage us (teachers) to try new approaches in the classroom. Nothing is right or wrong – I feel that they believe in the teachers and so it’s good. We are sometimes asked to share our teaching ideas in staff meetings and to talk about classroom problems openly...knowing that other, older teachers have the same problems as me was surprising, but comforting.

As Carmen reached the end of her first year at this new school, she wrote in her journal that she was now “more like the teacher I thought I would be when I left university...I’m so relieved I didn’t give up on teaching.”

Alice’s story

Thread 1: The imagined life of a teacher
“How could they expect a fresh graduate like me to do that?”

My first year of teaching was a nightmare. Two days before the start of term I was told that I would be on the discipline committee...this meant I was responsible for all administration for the discipline committee in grade 9 and for organising workshops and development sessions for teachers and students. I had no experience in this area and had to learn everything very fast...including all the school rules before the first meeting with teachers and parents. Discipline was an important issue for the school, so I couldn’t say no when the Principal told me. I came back to university the first weekend of the school term to get some reference books on student behaviour. I was completely out of my depth. How could they expect a fresh graduate like me to do that?

Alice recounted that this additional administrative role became her sole focus throughout the year. She regretted “not being able to concentrate on her lesson planning” and feeling underprepared in “almost every class I taught.” She spoke with a senior teacher at the school to ask how she might withdraw from her role as discipline coordinator but was met with a surprised look and a reminder that “all teachers must be responsible for other duties and give service to the school.”

Thread 2: The personal landscape
“I just wanted to escape, really”

Alice started to feel anxious, resulting in health problems, and an extended leave of absence from the school:

I got sick as the term went on. I was so nervous and stressed... then got ill. I took some sick leave but every time I went back to school I felt the same. Looking back, I was completely unprepared but so worried about my contract with the school. If I complained, it would look bad in front of my colleagues. But the discipline work took all my energy and enthusiasm. I started to hate my job and myself.
Alice’s story overlaps with Carmen’s in that she was given little or no support at the school level for her administrative role as discipline teacher for grade 9 students. Alice revealed that she thought her first year of teaching would be about “developing as a teacher” but, instead, it became a year preoccupied with a duty she had no experience or expertise in. Alice’s first year of teaching ended in July 2010, and she was quick to “escape” the profession:

I had no choice. I had to leave, or my health would have deteriorated. Even if the school had given me new responsibilities (away from discipline) I knew I’d lost the respect of the school management. I was told that every teacher should know how to put out fires . . . and cope with difficult situations, but that’s not why I wanted to teach. I don’t think I did teach that year . . . I don’t look back on it with any satisfaction. It wasn’t the students’ fault. I just wanted to escape, really.

After resigning from her first school, Alice decided to take some time to consider her options. She noted in her interviews that she felt “in shock” for most of the summer following her departure:

I was in a state of shock for a few months. I’d trained to be an English teacher and suddenly I wasn’t teaching anymore. I considered a job (at the airport) but decided to take some time to refresh myself and study some short courses . . . things like that.

Thread 3: Facilitating factors in the decision to stay or leave (personal and professional).

“The school wanted me . . . because I was a good English teacher”

One of those courses involved a handful of in-service teachers, and a classmate on the course alerted Alice to a temporary teaching post at a school close to her home. At first, she hesitated, recalling the bad experience of her first year’s full-time teaching experience, but then decided to submit an application and attend an interview. She recounted the interview with the school management team:

I was asked why I’d left the previous school – that was the first question they asked me. I had to be honest . . . I didn’t think I was ready for such an important post given my lack of training at that point. The Principal interviewing me agreed . . . then asked about my strengths and what I could contribute . . . I told them about my work with drama groups in Hong Kong and in UK where I’d taken a study tour during my university days. The interview panel didn’t seem very interested, (laughs) but they asked me to take over a departing teacher’s English classes for the remaining months of the school year (approximately two months).

Alice successfully completed her 2 months of supply teaching and was surprised to learn that the temporary teaching post was going to become a permanent one. She was then invited to submit an application. This time, Alice was told that if she was willing to accept the post she would also be asked to lead a group of teachers’ professional development in a new curriculum initiative that involved drama and language arts. Alice commented on this in her first journal reflection after starting at the new school in September 2012:

In meetings over summer I was told that the classes I took up for two months valued my English teaching. The school wanted me to take the permanent post because I was a good English teacher and that was my main duty. But the Principal told me he wanted to see me develop a course on drama in the English department. Previously, they had no one who could
teach drama...with drama becoming part of the new English Language curriculum he saw potential in me and asked me to lead colleagues on the new course. I feel a bit nervous, but I’ll try.

Alice accepted this position and continued to teach English but also found herself enjoying her new role as a drama coordinator. As she reached the end of her first full year at this new school, she summed up her feelings, thus: “It feels good to be a teacher now and to have my strengths recognised by the school. I’m developing as a teacher and I know I can improve further.”

Discussion
The small number of teachers in this study notwithstanding, this paper has attempted to make visible the complex and often intertwined reasons that make beginning teachers “leavers” or “stayers” in the professional landscape of teaching. By hearing the “stories” of Carmen and Alice as they underwent the full circle from teacher training to joining the profession, to leaving it, and then rejoining it again, it has been possible to see how their stories to live by have incorporated teacher knowledge and teacher context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). There is also a crossover here, perhaps, with the literature on teacher resilience, with Gu and Day (2007) stating that the interaction between teachers’ professional and personal identities along with the personal scenarios they experienced in the workplace contributes strongly to their resilience as a teacher and, indeed, their effectiveness professionally. Evidence from their separate narratives and stories points to some key observations which might inform our knowledge base on teacher attrition, teacher retention and how these crucial issues for the profession can be better understood.

First, through this narrative inquiry, the complex overlap of story threads highlighting Carmen and Alice’s personal and professional landscapes becomes apparent. The personal landscape was a vital part of how they saw themselves in the classroom. While Carmen managed to maintain her commitment to teaching, stating that a lack of support from her school and “not the teaching” was the reason for her frustration in the first school, she was still viewed as a “failure” at home because of her perceived weakness at school and for her decision to leave teaching. Alice, too, became ill as she grew increasingly worried about her inability to cope with the demands of being a discipline teacher in her first year, but spoke about how she wanted to spend more time on lesson planning. Carmen and Alice talked about their social network of friends who were mostly teachers, and Carmen reflected on missing classroom life upon hearing other stories from her teacher friends.

Findings from this study of teachers’ lives marry with those proposed by Schaefer (2013) who noted that contextual factors, and support mechanisms in particular, are key to understanding why beginning teachers leave the profession. Both teachers faced similar challenges on the professional landscape, for example. While Carmen considered herself to be an outsider in the staffroom because of the lack of support given by the school, Alice felt the urge to leave because she could not see herself as a discipline manager at that time. Here, it is possible to see the “shock” that new beginning teachers often face (Moir, 1999) and also how the imagined lives of the two teachers based on their ideal vision of teaching formed over years of training was in stark contrast to their “real” and lived stories of the first year. Carmen and Alice had looked forward to working in collaboration with new colleagues, learning aspects of their new job from more experienced mentors and receiving feedback on their performance from senior staff and colleagues. In reality, both teachers found themselves in environments that appeared to promote individuality over
collaboration. Such environments have been cited as sources of concern for beginning teachers like Carmen and Alice (Flores & Day, 2006), as has a lack of support from school management (Ingersoll, 1999). Carmen and Alice pointed to the lack of support on the professional landscape as the primary reason for their leaving the profession, and did not cite salary issues or student behaviour as contributing factors, which have been well documented in other studies on attrition (Macdonald, 1999).

Despite these tensions, Carmen and Alice never lost the belief that they could be effective teachers and following reflection on their experiences from the professional context they each shaped those stories in order to find a more conducive workplace. Carmen sought a school context where she was given a degree of apprenticeship and more space to grow professionally, while Alice found herself in a school which recognised her competency in drama following her admission that she was out of her depth in discipline owing to a perceived lack of expertise in that area. Even though their imagined stories of becoming a teacher were very different, they held true to those stories.

The stories of how Carmen and Alice returned to teaching and how they adapted more successfully to their new professional landscape are also relevant to our understanding of how we might retain these young teachers and develop them as professionals. Both teachers took on new positions of responsibility in their second schools; Alice became a curriculum leader in drama while Carmen worked closely with her mentor before taking on class teacher duties. Arguably, the workload and degree of responsibility was no different to that experienced in their first schools, but any stress or tension connected to these experiences was nullified by the schools’ willingness to manage these responsibilities through mentorship programmes and support systems. A body of research on teacher attrition shows that while teacher dissatisfaction is impossible to negate completely, teachers can be retained and motivated through administrative support and a sense of professional community in the school. Le Maistre and Paré (2010) argue that mentoring from experienced teachers helps to reduce the many and varied problems of initial practice, and this must surely have implications for school managers and policy makers because such schemes offer a low-cost, high-impact, and school-based alternative to the very costly and time-consuming matter of teacher attrition. These two teachers returned to the classroom, but what about those early career teachers who have chosen not to return? Perhaps, if school leaders and policy makers can anticipate these types of challenges and seek to manage them through collaborative professional development measures (see Johnson, 2009) which recognise the essential interrelationship between participation and context to promote teacher learning.

Crucially, the case reported in this paper was not one of two young teachers trying out teaching as a profession like someone might try on a shirt in a shop only to walk away when it did not fit. Both teachers ultimately negotiated their identities into “stayers” and not “leavers,” largely because of the relationships they enjoyed with their pupils as well as their fundamental belief in the value of teaching. Both teachers talked positively about their students and how student problems were not part of their reason for leaving their respective schools. Indeed, the relationship between the teachers and their students can be seen as “sustaining moments” (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011), which helped to shape their subsequent return to the professional fold. Carmen and Alice seemed to hold a motivation to serve their students, which ultimately served as a factor in their return to teaching. These positive personal stories might therefore be powerful driving forces for teacher-training institutes and schools seeking to manage beginning teachers’ expectations of the classroom and to promote the retention of committed young educators.
Conclusion

This study focused on just two beginning teachers so generalisations are inappropriate, but the notion of employing narrative inquiry to examine the reasons why Carmen and Alice initially left the profession only to rejoin it 2 years later has been most valuable. It has provided a more personal, complex and intertwined examination of teacher attrition that has often been documented using decontextualised, quantitative research methods. By examining the two teachers’ stories as they joined the teaching profession after 4 years of teacher education, only to realise that the imagined stories were very different to the realities facing them, it has been possible to see identity change as a framework for conceptualising the global phenomenon of teacher attrition. By exploring their stories to live by, it can be seen how the personal and professional landscapes “bumped” and merged for Carmen and Alice. The study created a space that allowed for them to talk about their teaching; to make their personal and professional experiences public and transparent before finding themselves part of a more conducive learning, professional community. Implications have been suggested for schools, policy makers, and teacher educators, particularly over the importance of fostering support networks in schools and for allowing beginning teachers the time to develop as teachers rather than expecting them to be able to cope with the work and tasks normally reserved for more experienced educators. Tentative conclusions from this study point to the need for further qualitative examinations of beginning teachers’ lives through the organisation of longitudinal studies which capture the fine details of teachers’ stories by focusing on the personal, temporality, and place of each individual. It has also shown that narrative inquiry is a most powerful research methodology to address the chronic problem of teacher attrition among beginning teachers around the world and how those teachers might be best initiated into schools.

Notes on contributor

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References


