The impact of a coaching project on the resilience of Newly Qualified Teachers

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Abstract

Concerns over teacher retention and resilience led to a coaching project designed to support and nurture a group of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in a University school partnership. Research interviews were conducted with the group to ascertain the issues that they had faced during the year and impact of the coaching experience. The NQTs reported familiar stresses related to workload, pupil behaviour and in some cases a lack of support from the schools that they worked in. The coaching had, to varying degrees, acted as a protector where the NQTs felt that they could 'let off steam' in an environment that was less judgemental as the coaches were removed from school organisations. This allowed the NQTs to recalibrate and be reminded of the bigger picture of why they came into teaching. They were then in a position to develop their practice. Recommendations are made that coaching can be an important part of professional development in rather low stakes environments that can have valuable returns for those concerned and that this should be considered at a time when the Government in England is reviewing the process of awarding Qualified Teacher Status.

Key words
Resilience, coaching, mentoring, Newly Qualified Teachers.

Introduction
The research reported on in this paper sought to answer the following question; How are Newly Qualified Teachers' perceptions of their resilience affected by participation in a coaching project and what do they consider to be the main factors affecting their resilience at the end of their NQT year? This had come about following concerns about teacher resilience and retention which had led to one of the Head Teachers in the University partnership network initiating a coaching project designed to support a group of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) through their first year in teaching. This, in turn, led to case study research interviews designed to examine the pressures these NQTs faced and the impact the coaching might have had in supporting them. Tentative recommendations are made in the context of a 2018 national review in England of the length and nature of the process for teachers gaining Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

Literature Review
Issues with teacher resilience are international in scope and nature (Scheopner, 2010, Hong 2012, Le Cornu, 2013) but have been thrown into sharp focus in England by a recruitment problem which is destabilising the workforce (Howson, 2018). With recruitment as an issue with prospective teachers coming into the profession, resilience affecting retention for those already in teaching becomes increasingly important in terms of teacher workforce numbers. Resilience has been defined and redefined as resulting from a complex interplay between environmental and personal pressures and protective resilience factors (Bernard, 2004, Mansfield, Beltman and Price 2014, Gu and Day, 2013). Teacher resilience is also recognised as an unstable construct which fluctuates over time (Gu and Day, 2013). Gu and Day examined how resilient teachers were able to maintain their sense of equilibrium when faced with the stresses and strains of the role. They also suggested that resilience was not innate and could be nurtured and developed in supportive school communities. Hong (2012) investigated teachers in the US who remained resilient and a group that left teaching. The leavers lacked the

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support structures and self-efficacy that the 'remainers' had benefited from. These findings are borne out by Le Cornu's (2013) research conducted in Australian schools in an examination of the benefits of mutually sustaining relationships in building early career resilience.

Mentoring and coaching have a particularly strategic role in creating the types of relationships that can support resilience. Traditional humanistic conceptions of mentoring are closely associated with coaching as a nurturing, developmental construct where the individuals' emotional needs are emphasised (Jones, 2009). However, in England as in other countries mentoring takes on 'mandated' functions where the mentor acts as gatekeeper to the profession in a performativity culture (Edwards, 1998). The highly complex process of learning to teach in an arena where the new teacher faces the prospect of 'witnessed failure' is daunting (Childs, Edwards and NcNicholl, p. 29, 2014). There are concerns that this performativity culture undermines a nurturing role and casts the mentor as a 'judgementor' with potentially damaging power imbalances (Hobson and Malderez, 2013).

However, coaching can be envisaged as offering a 'third space' where the accountability measures are minimalised and the nurturing function is ring-fenced (McIntyre and Hobson, 2016, Burch and Jackson, 2013). A review of school leadership in 2010 led Ofsted to conclude that coaching played an important role in the development of school life (Ofsted 2010). They stated that in the schools they had visited where coaching was successful, trusting and transformative relationships had been developed by creating separate coaching and mentoring 'spaces' (Cordingley and Butler, 2012).

The coaching project
The project we undertook aimed to examine how a coaching project might provide 'third space' external support structures to a group of seven NQTs. The project emerged from one Head Teacher's concerns about resilience and from his own experiences about how coaching had supported him as an NQT. The NQTs were chosen from local schools within a network of partnership schools and were initially identified according to how well they had performed on their initial teacher training courses. The idea was to have a selection of trainees, some who had performed well and some who had struggled more with the challenges of their training course. This paper examines case studies of three of these trainees out of a group of seven that were coached. Each one was supported by a different coach. To get different perspectives, a younger male teacher, Brian (all names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants) was chosen who had worked as a sports coach. Kathy was working in a school in more challenging circumstances having worked in the arts for over 20 years. The third, Andrea, had several years' experience working in industry.

The three authors of this article who were involved in the coaching were not qualified coaches. Each has accumulated a great deal of experience in supporting teachers as mentors but were aware of their inexperience as coaches and were learning themselves as they went through this process. A set of resilience coaching tools were developed for the sessions based on Cooper and Robertson's 'I resilience' questionnaire (2016). This questionnaire identifies 4 key areas of resilience; adaptability, purposefulness, confidence and social support. This questionnaire was used as the basis to develop discussion tools for each of the meetings with the NQTs to support them to consider their own resilience and the stresses and protectors. The aim was to encourage the trainees to consider each area and work out strategies to develop their resilience with the experienced voice of the coach offering guidance. This could then provide the equilibrium Gu and Day (2013) identify as essential in resilient teachers.

Methods of research design
At the end of the process of coaching the NQTs through the year, group semi-structured research interviews were set up with the NQTs to ask them to consider their experiences of being an NQT in terms of their resilience and the impact the coaching may have had on them. This approach to group

interviews was used as a 'construction site for knowledge' (Kavle, 1996, p.2) with the interviewees having freedom as active *informants* involved in a 'conversation' rather than more passive *respondents*, answering structured questions (Powney and Watts, 1987). It was felt that the advantages of group interviews outweighed the potential pitfalls of the group unduly influencing each other's comments in ways that did not reflect the reality of their situations. A qualitative approach to capturing each case study was used to gather what Adelman calls 'the principle of an instant in action (cited in Yin, 2009, p.253)'. Ethical considerations were fully considered. All names have been changed to protect anonymity and ethical approval was granted by the University. We were mindful that the NQTs might feel swayed to say positive things to the research team during the research interviews owing to the fact that the interviewers were also the coaches. To mitigate this to some extent the interviews were not conducted with the 'coach' who had supported them personally so they did not have a relationship with the interviewer as a coach/coachee. Once the transcriptions were complete themes were sought which would covey key issues emerging from the research. The 4 themes identified were workload, support from the school/mentor, behaviour and support from coaching. The findings are presented below according to these themes.

Findings
Workload
To varying degrees all of the NQTs discussed the pressures that the workload brought them and their ability to cope as new teachers particularly in the first term. Brian was a younger male NQT who had taken some time out to be a sports coach before joining the profession. He said:

> I think the first couple of months were really tough, hitting the ground running and establishing routines. Organisation is really key. There were times, staying up really late doing loads of work and thinking '*is it going to be like this all the time?*'. That got to me the most.

The interviewer asked if it was a lot more than he expected?

> I knew it was going to be tough but it kind of snowballed. You would be ploughing through marking and then something else would suddenly come up. And … I think I found it a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. I think the PGCE went well but then you did not have all the 100% teacher things - meet the parents, things happening after school etc.

The breadth of the job and the scale of what is expected on a New Teacher seemed to catch Brian out:

> "It just seemed to be that the time was going so fast and then there was always things to do so you try to do the most important thing first and then someone comes along and asks you to do 'this' and you think OMG, there are so many things to think about and things keep popping up all the time. Once I got used to a routine it was okay."

Andrea came from working in industry and was no stranger to pressurised environments. However, she struggled to cope with how to manage the sheer breadth of what was expected as an NQT in the first term:

> From my previous career I am used to a huge volume of work, which is fine. I can churn it out, but I think with teaching there was no prioritisation. So as newbies it was quite difficult to prioritise what absolutely needs to be done there and then and what can be slipped for a day or two. So you would have the Head coming and saying

> this needs to be done and then someone else says this needs to be done. Then you would go to a staff meeting and come out with another ten things to do, whilst you knew you had marking to do, planning to do and a something else to do. It gets to that pressure cooker where you feel like you are going to explode. And it is like' Whoa! What is the priority?'

Andrea made comparisons with the nature of working life in her previous role in industry and how prioritising work was undertaken:

> I don't think schools are good at prioritising and you know that everyone is going to say, 'This is what needs to be done'. Whereas when you come from a business perspective it is much more about team work and you have the discussion about what is more important and what doesn't get done. Obviously if you have a parent meeting then that has to over-ride everything else, but it is just physically impossible to get it all done.

She went on to discuss that schools do not seem to help NQTs manage these competing priorities and that it is only in the end seeing other teachers take helpful short cuts or ways of coping that led to her making some practical changes that reduced her workload and the very long days she was working. Brian also agreed that prioritisation caused issues and seemed to feel that this was something you got better at with experience:

> I agree with the prioritising part, especially in the beginning when I had so much to do, so I would say, okay, maybe I will do marking now and this later. Whereas, I think that part of it you had to kind of learn that yourself throughout the year. And now, for example, I have books today that need to be marked for next week, I have a few days but I might do that straight away. I don't think you are told what to prioritise but that was learnt through time.

One of the NQT's Kathy decided to quit her school and teaching having successfully completed the NQT year. She came from a background of working in the Arts and had considerable life experiences and passion for the job. However, she found the demands of the job too overwhelming. She commented that:

> Everyone says don't take work home leave it at school but because you're new you feel like you want to do your best you do bring it home every night… The biggest obstacle is fatigue and everything becoming quite bleak because you're too tired.

Some of this was down to the particular pressures of teaching her class.

> Well in my situation I had a very difficult parent who had Asperger's and was super demanding every day, coming in every morning making demands whilst I am trying to do the register. So every day started 'bang in'.

Support from the school/mentor
The NQTs discussed differing experiences of the support they had received from the schools and their mentors and the varying impacts that this had on their ability to survive and thrive. Brian was generally positive about the support he has had from a range of colleagues but also discussed the lack of time his busy mentor was able to give him which echoed with what Andrea had experienced:

> My mentor was head of year 6 and a member of SLT as well. We haven't spoken to each other in a long time. I really like her and we got on really well but she is very busy with what she is doing. She is moving to a bigger school with a bigger role. I didn't have as much time with her as I probably would have like to. She was still approachable and I would go and talk to her. In the beginning she was quite proactive in coming to see me once a week but then that sort of faded.

Andrea agreed and felt that the lack of support may have been down to her projecting an image of competence because she did not want to be seen to be struggling. She said: "I think that is the danger, and I think that was my danger that I was seen to be surviving better than I was."

Brian had faced issues where he was seen by his Head Teacher to be quite lazy at one point and he felt frustrated that his voice was not being heard in meetings. Perceptions of his practice were circulating which he felt were unfair and did not represent him.

Katy described the lack of positive feedback in her time in the school and how demotivating that became in the face of very challenging circumstances. She said:

> The only time I've spoken to the head teacher is when they are unhappy because in their view a parent is unhappy even though the parent is unstable and they want me to do more for this child but I couldn't do more. I know it sounds a bit childish to say I need a bit of praise but come on that's how we get a child to behave; it should work for the teachers.

She also felt she had not been offered day to day support by her mentor who did not have time for her and reported her as saying "let's pretend we met".

Behaviour
Behaviour has been widely reported in the media as an issue that presents challenges to new teachers. We did not specifically ask the NQTs about behaviour but it did emerge in some of the responses. Katy reported having to deal with a 4th form that had been created out of late entry pupils and that this was seen within the school as where the challenging pupils had been placed and she was in charge of this class as an NQT. Andrea was also concerned about the issues she faced. She commented that, "mine [class] was a bit special in terms of behaviour. I am not sure where my year group got let loose from but they were awful."

Particular issues with behaviour left her questioning the support she was receiving to deal with these matters.

> You know, I find that really tough! I found it really tough the day I was standing there teaching and someone was swearing at me to F off. You just think – Whoa! I didn't feel I was getting enough support from the Head and maybe I did not complain enough, maybe I should have. But, there was a time when a child was trying to hit me with a cushion and the Head walked past. No one came to say, 'Are you okay? This is what we will do. Then I was left questioning myself, thinking, 'Is this normal? Is this place insane?

Brian was generally more positive about behaviour issues. Katy on the other hand came back tom the lack of support that was on offer to deal with a class who presented with challenging behaviour issues.

> I think they [senior management] think I'm weak because my class has difficult behaviour. When I say I have a very difficult class they say it doesn't make a difference, if you want to be

to be a teacher…so there is no kind of feeling of acknowledgement, and so I don't have that perspective.

Support from coaching
The NQTs were positive about the benefits of having a coach who was independent from the school who they could talk openly to about their experiences. Although they were positive perhaps not surprisingly the benefits varied depending on the extent to which they were finding life as an NQT difficult. Brian who had a relatively straightforward time in a supportive environment felt that it was a useful additional support rather than something more fundamental. However, he did talk about the benefits of having an alternative 'perspective'.

> I think it helps you to see things with a different perspective, because in the heat of the moment sometimes you think in the straight and narrow, think what is happening there and then. Whereas having someone to talk to means you can analyse the situation in a different way.

This sense of a perspective came across strongly and the way that it allowed for reflection. Andrea commented that:

> It was like Brian said, having that objective person that is not involved with the day to day running of the school. I think what [coach] did really well was make me take a step outside. You know, when you are in the thick of it and getting shot at from all angles, you feel exhausted, it is quite hard to see the wood for the trees. What it has definitely helped me to do is to take that step back and to reflect before reacting because I think everything is so fast paced. …

Katy talked about the benefits of having someone come in who she did not feel 'inhibited' in front of. This ability to talk openly seems to have acted as a safety valve. A way or unburdening issues to in a way that was low risk as they would not be seen to be failing in from of their coach if they admitted to having problems. Andrea said:

> If someone else in the school has done something to you it is quite hard to let go about what issues you are having about that person's behaviour as that person is probably a longer member of staff than you are so there is the whole political game. Whereas having someone completely objective and not involved in the politics you can let rip if you want.

Brian talked about the reassuring nature of having someone to help keep matters in perspective. The safety valve aspect of the coaching was valued. "I was made to realise that when something has happened it is gone, there is no point in dwelling on those things. In a few weeks' time you have probably forgotten about it."

Kathy placed great emphasis on letting off steam to her coach particularly as she felt she was not in a supportive school:

> [coach] was very good at recognising I need to get some of these upsetting things off my chest. She was just someone I really respected. We would spend 2/3s of the time…I'm embarrassed to say … you know saying how difficult it was. And then a very useful final third of the time saying what could you do to make this better.

This last point about the advice offered by the coaches suggests another benefit that the three NQTs saw in the value of the project. It was not simply a chance to sound off but also to move on and develop

resilience. Some of this advice was specific day to day practical advice but it was also intended to help the NQTs see the bigger picture and develop longer term strategic ways of staying resilient. Andrea expressed it thus:

> There were days when I had that thought, 'What on earth am I thinking of?' I think coming into the profession you are quite naïve. You see the nice fluffy bit of working with kids, the reward when they learn, the progress and all that. But obviously there is a big chunk of it that is hard. I think if I did not have [coach] coming in each half term… He helped to develop me as a teacher, definitely my resilience. I really looked forward to the meetings. It was the thing that got me through. Partly because I would have felt guilty if I had let him down as well! (laugh).

To Andrea there were obvious practical benefits to having an experienced voice to support her to make progress:

> Yes, he made me completely analyse what I had done, how I felt, why it wasn't working. He would probe and ask questions and that would shed new light on why it wasn't working and we would discuss the possible things I could do. To make me come at it from a different angle to solve it and that is what got me through. He was probably following his set programme, unbeknown to me, but that worked.

For Kathy the connection with an experienced other provided her with much needed support in her challenging school and she put this support down to the reason she was able to complete her NQT year:

> It's like a lighthouse, like a beacon of light, you know and ironically when [coach] came along, because I was so busy I had forgotten she was coming, but when she arrived it was a sanguine calm, grown up very experienced person who had a perspective which I had lost quite often and she said very helpful things.

Shared coaching experiences

The NQTs made unprompted recommendations for any future projects of this kind. Although they had been coached on a one to one basis they all saw the benefits of having group coaching as NQTs. For Kathy this was for practical reasons for saving time and money and reaching more people. Andrea saw wider more benefits for her own resilience in being with others and Brian agreed with her point.

> I am thinking out of the box here, what could have been useful as well, you know, having a focus session like this with the other NQTs that are getting their resilience help so that you are like a club, so to speak. So that we can share, objectively, with people who are not in our own school. It is always tricky if you are with another NQT in your own school.

Analysis

Workload issues emerge as a complaint for the NQTs. Specifically the challenge that was encountered seems to have been how to prioritise this workload especially when it seems to have come from all directions. There was no filter or management techniques supplied by the schools to help the NQTs cope and remain organised. Andrea who had worked in industry before becoming a teacher made unfavourable comparisons with the expectation levels in teaching compared to her former employment. This lack of prioritising seems to have affected the equilibrium Gu and Day (2013) talk of as being a key factor in determining resilience. The coaching appeared to have offered an outlet for these frustrations as a basic level of support. Better still, the coach was able to offer some strategies to develop practice. This formed part of the transformative interaction that coaching can offer, which

research suggests can be an advantage of such 'third spaces' (McIntyre and Hobson, 2016, Burch and Jackson, 2013).

The fear of being seen to fail in the experiences of the NQTs seemed to inhibit their self-efficacy. This confidence and ability to have one's own professional voice is crucial in developing resilience according to Gu and Day (2007). For Andrea, Brian and Kathy frustrations arose with a sense that they were or could be seen to be weak. Being in a performativity environment inhibited their ability to seek help or potentially have open dialogues about issues that they were experiencing. A 'Judgementoring' environment was not allowing them to express concerns and issues they were facing (Hobson and Malderez, 2013). However, they remarked that the coaching offered a risk-free environment where failure could be acknowledged and solutions discussed.

Particular issues arose in different school settings. For Andrea pupil behaviour made her question her own sense of what 'normal' was and this combined with a lack of support from senior management to make her consider whether teaching was the right job for her. Kathy really struggled with a problematic parent and again felt that senior management were unsupportive at best and at worst were blaming her for not dealing with the challenges. She was exposed to 'witnessed failure' which had a detrimental effect on her confidence daunting (Childs, Edwards and NcNicholl, p. 29, 2014). For Brian the issue arose that he was getting little time with his mentor who was too busy to see him. Coaching as a nurturing 'third space' where the individuals emotional and developmental needs were considered provided a vent to frustrations and the social support structure that nurtured in a way that the schools were not providing in this study (Jones 2009).

Conclusions and Recommendations
The conclusions and recommendations here are tentative and generalisations cannot be made purely on a few case studies. However, there are issues for teacher resilience that are raised by these case studies which might resonate with other NQTs. These issues are particularly pertinent at a time when the Government in England has been considering extending the time required to achieve QTS from one to two years. This change needs to be managed carefully otherwise more pressure could be placed on teachers in the 2nd year of their practice who may be considering if they want to stay in the profession. If the proposals allow for additional time and support for teachers to manage workload and prioritise what needs to be done, then this could be a positive. If the proposals also raise the status of mentoring in schools for new teachers and allow busy teachers time and space to fulfil this role, then this would be a welcome change. However, there are dangers. If new teachers continue to feel that they are being judged in high stakes environments or even that these judgements are intensified across an extended QTS period then the fear of failure and the associated pressures could be damaging (Childs, Edwards and McNicholls, 2014).

The NQTs we interviewed stated that the experience of having a coach supported their resilience in ways that mentors were not able to because a coach provides a sense of having an objective other who acted as a safety valve. They were able to unburden themselves about issues whilst also gaining a sense of perspective. This ability to see the bigger picture allowed them to recalibrate to some extent. Andrea and Brian gave examples of how their self-efficacy was developed as they could relocate what was normal and find strategies to develop their professional voice. The coaching allowed them to deal better with day to day pressures and maintain their sense of purpose even if this was just a mission to complete the NQT year in Kathy's case. The coaching was more than just a safety valve. The experienced other could 'pull them up' and help them to consider how they develop as teachers and cope with problems in the future. As Duckworth states it is important that teachers return to the positives and remain purposeful so that their motives for entering teaching remain at the forefront (Perkins-Gough, 2013).

The NQTs themselves discussed how beneficial it was or could be to work with other NQTs in joint coaching sessions so that they could share experiences in 'third spaces'. They also felt that they would have a lot to offer NQTs as recently qualified teachers themselves next year with aspects of the coaching particularly with prioritising work in the early months of being a full-time teacher in school as they had gone through this experience so recently.

The findings from these case studies have been shared with the University's partnership committee and proposals have been favourably received to move this coaching out to small groups of NQTs in groups of partnership schools. A coach can work with the groups to provide not just a safety valve but a sense of purpose alongside practical day to day strategies where needed. This can potentially supply a useful form of resilience training rather than schools adding professional development that is more about curriculum content at a time when new teachers feel most overwhelmed. A more beneficial focus should be on developing self-efficacy through mutually sustaining relationships in less judgemental, pressurised environments. The costs to schools can be kept at a minimum in these projects. Higher Education Institutions involved in teacher training are used to supply external mentoring to schools taking trainees. If some of this expertise can be converted into coaching capacity, there could be ready-made solutions to providing coaching to groups of schools working with a hub school providing a convenient and suitable location. If this can be achieved there could be low-cost methods of providing high stakes outcomes to support new teachers to be resilient. Further research could identify whether these coaching approaches support new teachers in self-identifying whether they are developing aspects of resilience.

Even if schools do not adopt these 'third space' approaches to coaching they can encourage mentors to concentrate less on the 'technist' approaches to mentoring and instead embrace ones that encompass aspects of coaching (McIntyre and Hobson, 2013) to value the 'humanistic, person-centred' dimensions of the role (Jones, 2009). The aim is to develop mentoring and coaching to support teacher development and retention.

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