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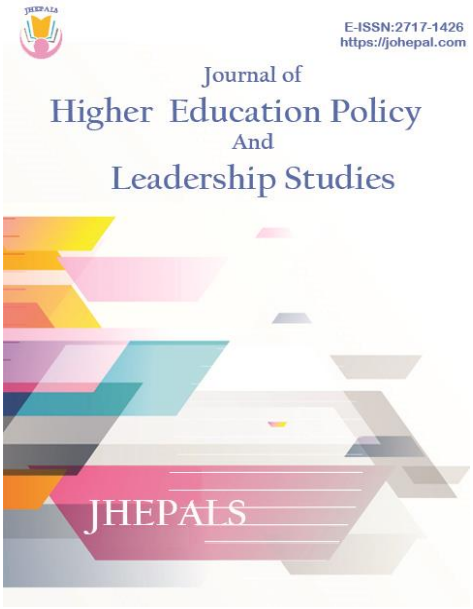

Benjamin Kutsyuruba
Email: ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5162-0099

Dylan Lewis
Email: 21dtdl@queensu.ca
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3726-9897

* *Faculty of Education, Queen's University, CANADA*

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Using Traits of Leadership to Overcome the Challenges of Becoming and Being a New Teacher in Ontario

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Benjamin Kutsyuruba *
Dylan Lewis

Abstract

This article details a self-study and collaborative response to an early career teacher (ECT) facing challenges in the first year of teaching. Some of the experiences were so demanding that the ECT considered leaving the profession altogether. It is for this reason that the ECT completed a self-study in the first year of teaching under the guidance of a mentor (a former instructor in their teacher education program). The ECT worked as both an occasional teacher and long term occasional teacher in Ontario, Canada during this study. Each teaching assignment presented different kinds of challenges. Although each experience and the accompanying challenges were unique, all of them were overcome with attention to specific traits of leadership. The use of these traits was explored through a self-study methodology that included daily self-reflection, frequent journaling of experiences, and timely communication with a mentor. This article discusses the greatest challenges the ECT experienced in the first year and the ways in which the ECT overcame them through leadership. The article concludes with system-level recommendations developed from these experiences. It is hoped that the insights herein can be used by other new teachers as they navigate the vicissitudes of teaching themselves.

Keywords: Early Career Teachers; Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices; Teacher Resilience; Mentorship; Leadership in Early Career Teaching; Reflective Practice; Teacher Leadership

*Corresponding author's email: ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca

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On the Profession's Attrition Rates

Teacher attrition is an internationally observed problem (Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Kutsyuruba et al., 2013; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Williams et al., 2022). High rates of teacher attrition affect everyone in school systems: students suffer from a lowered quality of education (Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Schleicher, 2018; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020); remaining teachers have difficulties establishing and maintaining cohesive school climates (Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE], 2004); administrators spend an inordinate amount of time staffing vacancies (AEE, 2004); and governments spend billions managing the fallout (AEE, 2004; Karsenti & Collin, 2013).

Historical studies on Canadian teacher attrition are equivocal: some studies have found attrition rates between 3-6% (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005, p. 171), while others have discussed rates upwards of 40% (Clandinin et al., 2015). Such variations may be explained by how attrition was defined by the authors, which cohort of teachers (e.g. novice or experienced, elementary or secondary, full-time or part-time) were studied, whether peripheral staff members (e.g. educational consultants, educational assistants) were considered "teachers" in the study, and whether any re-entrances into the profession were accounted for (Macdonald, 1999; Williams et al., 2022).

The contemporary reality of teacher attrition across Canada is also equivocal. Conclusive statistics on attrition rates are limited, in part because of the provincial jurisdiction and accompanying compartmentalization of school systems and educational studies in Canada, but also because existing research indicates attrition rate variances across jurisdictions **(**Kutsyuruba et al., 2018). Generally, however, the common view is that teacher attrition across Canada occurs mainly within the first five years and that attrition disproportionately affects new and/or young teachers (Clandinin et al., 2015; Gunn et al., 2023; Ingersoll, 2002; Kutsyuruba et al., 2013; OECD, 2005).

To estimate new teacher attrition in the province of Ontario, the authors retrieved license renewal data. The Ontario College of Teachers claims that five years after initial licensing, the percentage of new teachers that do not renew their college membership is 17% (Ontario College of Teachers, 2022, p. 21). In recognition of the abundance of extant literature and news articles talking about teacher shortages in Ontario, the authors maintain that attrition—particularly with new teachers—needs to continue to be studied and actioned upon.

On Traits Associated With Leadership

Attempts to distinguish leaders from non-leaders through recognizing, measuring, or otherwise substantiating their differences have been made since at least the latter half of the nineteenth century (Hoffman et al., 2011; Zaccaro, 2007). Since that time, the pursuit of better understanding leaders and what distinguishes them from non-leaders has been described as "one of the most discussed and debated topics in the social sciences" (DeRue et al., 2011, p. 7). No wonder: trait-based leadership, the model of focus in this study and itself only one of several discussed in literature (Northouse, 2022) is sometimes criticized as undergoing construct proliferation and being too narrow in scope (DeRue et al., 2011; Hoffman et al., 2011; Zaccaro, 2007). Nonetheless, the recognition that certain traits are

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correlates of effective leadership, as well as the fact that some of these same traits were used by the ECT in this study will suffice for its intended purpose: to help forthcoming teachers consider certain traits as responsive and efficacious tools to overcome some of the challenges they may face.

Leadership traits are considered a facet of "qualities that can consistently and reliably differentiate leaders from non-leaders" to help them "respond appropriately across different dynamic organizational requirements" (Zaccaro, 2007, p. 9). There are a lot of traits recognized in research as being correlated with effective leadership (Northouse, 2022). One meta-analysis on leadership traits describes conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness as "particularly important" predictors of success in leadership contexts (DeRue et al., 2011, p. 40). In another meta-analysis of leadership, Hoffman et al. (2011) identified dominance, creativity, charisma, interpersonal skills, management skills, problem-solving skills, and decision-making ability as relatively strong correlates of leader effectiveness. Although all of the aforementioned traits are important pieces of effective leadership, they are by no means exhaustive; while many of the traits employed by the ECT in this self study were identified within either DeRue's or Hoffman's meta-analyses, some were not.

Researchers have suggested that leadership traits should be considered within and across different situational contexts (Northouse, 2022, Zaccaro, 2007). Leadership traits are also unlikely to operate independently of one another and other articulated models of leadership (Derue et al., 2011; Zaccaro, 2007). The ECT in this self-study relied upon multiple traits of leadership, oftentimes simultaneously, to overcome the challenges he faced. Depending on the specific situation the ECT faced, the use of certain traits were found to be more efficacious than others; such traits are shared in this study.

Purpose of This Study

This article, co-written by the ECT and his mentor (former instructor in the teacher education program), details a self-study and collaborative response to challenges experienced by the ECT in his first year of professional practice. The purpose of this self-study was to document the experiences of an ECT with dual aims: (a) to reflect and improve upon the practice, and (b) to help other new educators navigate some of the challenges they might face.

The idea of authoring a self-study started in the ECT's teacher education program, during the leadership class taught by the mentor, and evolved into a self-reflective practice when the ECT recognized early in his first year of teaching that careful introspection, reflection, and refining of his practice was necessary to curb the frustration and pessimism he felt. This ECT also realized that the act of critically reflecting through journaling was an antidote to the sometimes chaotic nature of being a new educator. Journaling helped him organize his thoughts and improve upon his practice.

Throughout this ECT's first year of teaching, he met other new educators who, like him, were also going through challenges. Whenever possible, he learned from them and offered advice that was commensurate with the teachings realized through his journal, conversations with the mentor teacher educator, and interactions with students and colleagues. This dialogic process was an integral part of his growth and well-being.

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The Self-Study Methodology

The self-study of teaching, at its core, is a methodology used by educators to improve their professional practice (Hamilton et al., 1998; Samaras & Freese, 2006). LaBoskey (2004) conceptualized self-study as a methodology for studying professional practice that is self-initiated, focused, improvement-aimed and interactive, with multiple, mainly qualitative methods, validated by trustworthiness. Educators using this methodology seek improvement by better understanding their professional practice, developing practical knowledge that can then be applied to their specific teaching context, investigating questions that stem from their own experiences, and working collaboratively with others to consider system-level changes (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

How the S-STEP Methodology Was Employed in This Study

Literature on self-study is often contextualized to the self-study of teacher educators instead of primary or secondary school educators. Importantly, however, the principles underlying the self-study of teacher educator practices, or "S-STEP", can be appropriately applied to other educators' self-studies. Zeichner (1999, p. 11) corroborates this with the following statement: "[The] disciplined and systematic inquiry into [a teacher educator's] own teaching practice provides a model for prospective teachers and for teachers of the kind of inquiry that more and more teacher educators are hoping their students employ."

LaBoskeys' (2004) foundational requirements of S-STEP provide the principles of self-study methodology upon which this study was completed. The first characteristic of S-STEP that applies to this self-study is that it is "self-initiated and focused" (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 842). The moment the ECT in this self-study recognized a discrepancy between what he wanted his primary and secondary school teaching to be like and how it unfolded, he responded to this "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 1989) by initiating this self-study.

The second characteristic of S-STEP that applies to this self-study is that it is improvement aimed (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 844). Immediately after deciding to undertake this self-study, the teacher asked himself questions, including "Why am I doing this?", "What's the point?", and "How will this help me, my students, and the education system?" He only proceeded once he had satisfactorily answered those questions to himself. Unnecessary stress seemed to befall many of this ECT's colleagues—particularly those who were new to the profession as well. Thoughts of "There has to be a better way" or "These stressors are so unnecessary and avoidable" motivated him to undertake this study.

The third characteristic of S-STEP that applies to this self-study is that it is interactive (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 847). This ECT's first year of teaching involved interacting with students every day. The ECT reviewed literature, consulted websites, and adjusted his practice on a weekly basis to then see how students would react. He also communicated with new and experienced colleagues daily. The ECT emailed his mentor with updates approximately once a month. Such interactions allowed the ECT to gain more perspective on each challenge and separate trivial, day-to-day banalities from the deeper, more significant issues that warranted more attention.

The final characteristic of S-STEP that applies to this self-study is that it includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 849). The ECT began qualitatively journaling his experiences in a Microsoft Word document within weeks of becoming a licensed teacher. He added to this journal throughout his first year of teaching, particularly

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when something noteworthy happened. These noteworthy events stemmed from observations. Observations were gathered from in-class instruction and careful attention to students' responses to his actions. Such observations were made daily. "Noteworthy events" were those that presented challenges he did not immediately know how to address, events he felt to have handled improperly or ineffectually, or events that he perceived to need more analysis. The teacher structured each journal entry into three parts: (1) what the noteworthy challenge was; (2) how he overcame the challenge; and (3) what connections could be made to leadership and/or mentorship. Such entries were typically a few sentences long and captured the most critical discussion points of each challenge. These entries were dynamic too: the ECT added or removed information as the year progressed and sometimes deleted entire entries. The completed journal comprised seven of the most significant challenges the ECT faced throughout his first year as a teacher.

Regular communication with a mentor teacher educator was essential to completing this self-study. On top of the monthly updates mentioned before, the ECT arranged a Google Meet call with the mentor teacher educator approximately halfway through his first year of teaching. This Google Meet call was used to share his experiences and learn more about S-STEP. In a final follow-up virtual meeting after having completed his first year of teaching, the teacher discussed possible system-level changes with the teacher educator. In this case, the mentor teacher educator acted as a "critical friend" (Costa & Kallick, 1993), which is considered an essential and helpful practice in the self-study approach, providing support and maintaining constructive tone in the relationship (Schuck & Russell, 2005). Because self-study is inherently a critical activity seeking to challenge one's fundamental assumptions about personal professional practice, the following sections of the self-study are written from the ECT's voice to convey his musings, reflections, and deliberations.

Mind the Gap: The Challenges to Becoming and Being a New Occasional Teacher in Ontario

Challenge One

The first significant challenge I faced was during the final few months of teachers' college: being unemployed when an ever-increasing number of my colleagues were gaining employment. At this time, many of my colleagues had already secured long term occasional (LTO) contracts, domestic and international assignments, and in some cases, permanent contracts. The stress I experienced was exacerbated by the fact that my qualifications in biology and physics were described as "in demand" whenever I talked to colleagues. They were certainly unique: I was one of two pupils in my graduating class that had those two qualifications specifically. Not only did I have what were referred to as qualifications in demand, but I made a concerted effort throughout college to become a more competitive candidate and increase my employability: I attended multiple extracurricular workshops; joined the Science Teachers' Association of Ontario (STAO); consulted with staff to improve my resume; secured excellent references; retrained in extracurricular courses like first aid; and applied to multiple different school boards and positions within them. The stress I experienced arose from failing to understand why finding employment was so difficult for me, yet seemingly routine for others.

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To overcome this discrepancy, I ultimately used two traits of leadership: tolerance of ambiguity (Zaccaro, 2007) and determination (Northouse, 2022). Although I was initially uncomfortable and increasingly intolerant with the ambiguity of not having work when others did, I reframed my mind over the course of a few days to ultimately not only tolerate, but genuinely appreciate the flexibility afforded to me by not knowing where I would be working. This reframing involved meditating on my circumstance and reminding myself that finding work as an educator was not a matter of *if*, as I had previously and impulsively thought, but *when*, which was reflective of the reality that the abundance of teaching jobs at the time presented to everyone.

Still, reframing and reminding myself that employment would eventually arrive was not enough to make me feel completely satisfied or feel like I overcame the challenge completely. I was determined to have some sort of plan in the event I graduated unemployed. I decided to communicate with one of my professors. I knew this dialogic process would have been beneficial in some way; at the very least it would help me prepare properly for my first few months out of school in the event I was unemployed. Having some sort of backup plan was the final thing I wanted, so I determinedly began the communicative process to that end.

Days after working to reframe my mind, I talked to this professor after their class. I needed someone to hear that it was frustrating not being able to find work in a workers' market. I confided in them and used their input to help make a contingency plan upon graduation. Their wisdom, calmness, and pragmatism imbued me with the same. I remember so viscerally their final, almost cinematic, response to my doubts and concerns from earlier in the week as I began walking away: "Dylan, just remember to breathe." I remind myself of this statement to this day, particularly in trying times. Use of leadership traits—namely being tolerant of ambiguity and determined—were the two reasons I was able to overcome this pre-service challenge.

Challenge Two

The second challenge I faced was traffic to and from work. Although this may seem trivial, especially given that many people deal with some degree of traffic while commuting, it is worth mentioning because I am convinced this made my first few weeks of teaching unnecessarily stressful and tiring.

Immediately after I graduated, I was hired as an occasional teacher in a public Ontario district school board (ODSB1, pseudonym) which required a considerable commuting time. If there were no accidents on the major highways, I commuted for approximately two hours a day. In reality there were accidents almost every day, causing the roundtrip commute to be upwards of four hours most days. I had to budget my time in anticipation of accidents every day.

Teachers in Ontario are required to arrive at least fifteen minutes before class starts (Ontario, 1990, s. 20(d)). Whenever I entered a new school, which happened almost every day as a new supply teacher, I tried to arrive thirty minutes early to orient myself. Considering this alongside commuting times meant that I needed to budget approximately five hours each day to commute and arrive sufficiently early to be ready to teach on time.

To overcome the challenge of commuting, I used two traits of leadership: the willingness to tolerate frustration and delay (Northouse, 2022) and problem solving

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(Northouse, 2022). Indeed, sitting through stop-and-go traffic for hours after supply teaching tests your resiliency and tolerance of prolonged frustration and delay. It is at that exact moment that I would build my resiliency by using long-term thinking and reminding myself that the experience gained from supply teaching is beneficial to my future self as an educator. I would also consider the opportunity cost of not enduring the long commute and facing new classes: less experience to build from and reflect upon; less income; and less capacity to strengthen both my resiliency and my professional practice. Alongside the exercise of tolerating frustration and delay, I solved the problem of long and stressful commuting by looking for work in school boards that I did not initially consider but that were closer to my home. I also began using a provincial highway that, in the interim, halved my commute time for a justifiable toll.

I noticed my mood markedly improved when I began working for ODSB2 with total daily commuting times under two hours long. As a general guideline, the authors here recommend that new teachers avoid commuting for more than two hours per day whenever possible to reduce the risk of experiencing symptoms consistent with burnout.

Challenge Three

The third challenge I faced became apparent mere weeks after beginning work as an educator: the social pressure to prioritize working at one school over others. As a new teacher I wanted to gain experience supply teaching with different students, grade levels, courses, schools, and regions. The ODSB1 was the only board that had hired me out of college, so I began my career there. Once office staff met me from supply teaching at their school, they would ask me for my contact information. In some cases, administrators would personally greet me in the office. I was often asked to commit to supply teaching weeks in advance as well. What I perceived these conversations to have communicated to me—correctly or not—was that each school was having a hard time staffing vacancies and depended on me to some non-trivial degree. Although this challenge was self-inflicted as I voluntarily applied to and accepted work at a faraway school board that I did not intend on staying in, it was one that nonetheless needed to be addressed.

To overcome this challenge, I used the leadership traits of being people-oriented and sociable, an effective communicator, and having curiosity (DeRue et al., 2011; Hoffman et al., 2011; Northouse, 2022). More precisely, I used all three simultaneously. As soon as ODSB1 staff members started asking me to commit to working in advance, I responded in a way that (a) effectively communicated my curiosity with experiencing different classrooms, schools, and work in boards that were closer to me, and (b) showed gratitude to those who were interested in having me back. In some cases, the predictability of an excellent working environment justified committing to working at schools well in advance, even if it meant enduring long commute times. However, in many cases I had to politely and respectfully decline work to leave my schedule open to find work in new and closer contexts, particularly when I gained employment in the ODSB2 and ODSB3 approximately six months after graduating.

Challenge Four

The fourth challenge I faced, again almost immediately after graduating and beginning to work as a supply teacher, was the ambiguity of the online staffing system. Multiple school

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boards in southern Ontario use SmartFind Express (SFE) to staff vacancies. Once you have access to SFE, you can see available jobs. Although SFE is supposed to make it clear what kind of work you will have, and for whom you will work for when you accept a job, the reality is that jobs are sometimes ambiguously classified. Examples of ambiguous classifications included "elem[entary] release teacher" or "sec[tion] sciences." What this meant, in practice, is that when I accepted "elem[entary] release teacher", I was accepting any position from kindergarten to grade eight for a given day, and when I accepted "sec[tion] sciences", I had to be prepared to teach any of the sciences from grades nine through twelve. In either case I did not receive lesson plans until I arrived at the school in the morning, unless I was voluntarily given notes by the teacher I was replacing or voluntarily reached out to them requesting the same.

The most striking example of this system's shortcoming is when I first accepted an elementary release job. I had anticipated teaching either grade seven or eight because my qualifications obtained from the teacher education program prepared me for them specifically, but as soon as I entered the school, I was expected to teach kindergarteners all day. No plans were left for me. Furthermore, there was no indication of working with kindergarteners on SFE, even after I had accepted the job. In essence, there was no way to fully prepare for the assignment. Fortunately, the class had an educational assistant who helped me administer my last-minute lesson. Even still, the ambiguity of SFE made the day unnecessarily challenging.

To properly manage the ambiguity of SFE, I had to assume leadership through multiple traits. Reactionary traits I used immediately, for example, when finding out I was teaching kindergarteners included emotional stability (DeRue et al., 2011), confidence (Northouse, 2022), and creativity (Hoffman et al., 2011). Traits I used proactively whenever I subsequently faced ambiguous job classifications included initiative in communication and intelligence (Northouse, 2022).

The unexpectedness of finding out I was assigned to teaching kindergarteners frustrated me. I knew then—as I do now—that frustration is destructive to teaching effectively, and so just as soon as I experienced it, I worked to remove it. Thankfully I arrived early enough at the school to make last-minute preparations for the kindergarten class. While I was doing this, I channelled my frustration into focused energy on planning for the group. Alongside my creativity, this emotional stability allowed me to plan a last-minute, but effective, lesson plan that included playing select kinaesthetic games and learning about the children afterwards through a "circle talk" that invited them all to answer such questions as "What is your favourite colour?" or "What is your favourite sport?" I also had the kindergarteners show me around their classroom and talk about their classwork and select areas of the room. I am convinced that I would not have taught well if I did not feel confident in my abilities at the beginning of the class.

To be proactive and avoid unexpected assignments after that experience, I made sure to initiate communication with the teachers I was replacing as soon as possible. Oftentimes, I would email the homeroom teachers *before* accepting an assignment to better contextualize the day and ensure I fully understood what the assignment would entail. I would ask such questions as "What subjects and grades do you teach?", "Are there any behavioural issues I need to be aware of?", and "What are the main topics for the day that I can review to maximize everyone's time?"

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Effectively communicating with colleagues was used in conjunction with analytical prowess (i.e. intelligence). I sometimes forfeited assignments when colleagues did not respond, especially if their job's classification was ambiguous. I realized quickly that analysing available assignments beyond the superficial classification of them was prudent. Deeper intellectual analysis included noting and responding to how far in advance the job was posted by the homeroom teacher and whether notes were voluntarily left by the teacher on SFE. In my experience, assignments that were made available weeks in advance were usually indicative of an exceptionally-organized colleague with exceptionally-organized classes. I also prioritized accepting job assignments in which notes were voluntarily provided on SFE because this communicated to me that the homeroom teacher had as much of an interest as I did in maximizing their students' learning while they were away.

After having supply taught for a month, I created a spreadsheet to summarize my daily experiences. I would reference this spreadsheet throughout the remainder of my first year to help me prioritize which assignments to accept. This practice also helped me quantify the percentage of experiences that were "good" to those that were "mediocre" or "bad". While this spreadsheet was initially used as a vetting tool, it ultimately became a self-reflective tool: I pushed myself to supply teach a second time at each "mediocre" and "bad" class to see if the changes I made resulted in better experiences. Sometimes they did and sometimes they did not, but I believe it was worth the effort anyways.

Challenge Five

The fifth challenge I faced some months after licensure was supply teaching when a student teacher was within the class. In Ontario you may be assigned a supply teaching job in which you are legally the teacher but in the classroom with a student teacher finishing teachers' college. In such cases I would not be aware of any student teachers being assigned to the class I had until the morning of the job itself, unless, as mentioned earlier, teachers voluntarily and proactively shared information or responded to my inquiries.

Having a student teacher in the class presents a somewhat awkward social dynamic because the student teacher is typically regarded as the *de facto* teacher from the student perspective. In almost every case the student teacher has a full lesson prepared, so I would hesitantly assume the role of a visitor. At the best of times, I simply watched the lesson, but at the worst of times, particularly when students were demonstrating challenging behaviours, I felt ineffectual because I was not leading the lesson; I presumed the student teacher would manage their class while delivering their lesson.

In one experience the student teacher I was with did not seem phased or disturbed by student misbehaviours. It was not clear to me whether I should respond to the students or await a response from the student teacher. I ultimately followed the student teacher's lead and ignored behaviours that I otherwise would not have. I maintained a "red line" in my head, however, of behaviours that would not be tolerated, even while observing the lesson. It was a careful balancing act that thankfully worked in the few instances I faced this challenge. Upon reflection, however, my response pushed me to consider changes and refine my practice because I was not convinced it was the best approach possible.

After I taught with a student teacher once, I prepared for the inevitability of it happening again. I took initiative, particularly in communicating with colleagues (Hoffman et al., 2011; Northouse, 2022), and problem solved with a new classroom management

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strategy (Northouse, 2022) to do so. With respect to using initiative, I refined my emails—the same ones I mentioned earlier to inquire about assignments—so that they asked about student teachers. In other words, I began communicating more effectively. I now try to ascertain whether a student teacher will be present, how little/much experience they have, and how comfortable the group of students is with them. I also take the initiative to talk to student teachers before lessons begin so that I can better understand their preparedness and how much intervention they may need. Finally, I insist to student teachers that I have an opportunity to introduce myself to the students before they begin their lesson. When introducing myself to the class, I make it explicitly clear that questions related to washroom breaks or attendance (e.g. arriving late or signing out early) need to be asked to me directly. I also offer support to the class and encourage them to ask me questions about what they are learning at any point in the lesson. Embedded in this is the use of both the leadership traits of problem solving and managing others (Northouse, 2022). Students responded positively to this problem solving and change in classroom management. Acknowledging that I was not leading the lesson but was nonetheless there to lead and be the teacher seemed to help groups settle into the day. Indeed, students respond well to clear instructions, effective communication, honesty, and authenticity (Scott & Nakamura, 2022), all of which were a part of my problem solving and classroom management strategies in student teacher contexts. The success of the changes I made are also in line with effective leadership described in research: DeRue et al. (2011, p. 14) exemplify this by saying "highly intelligent and conscientious leaders, for example, will be especially adept at ensuring their followers have sufficient role clarity, structure, and goals to help facilitate their performance." One only needs to exchange "leaders" with "teachers", and "followers" with "students" to see the value in that statement.

Challenge Six

The sixth challenge is broad in nature and presented itself throughout my first year of teaching: ascertaining and managing culture. This should not be conflated with classroom management. While cultural management includes classroom management, it also includes responding to existing behaviours more generally within a school and a given region itself. Cultural management is defined here as the ascertainment and management of patterns of behaviours recognized and observed in a class, school, or region over at least two experiences, though often more, such that one can predict behaviours or experiences in the future and prepare themselves accordingly.

Observations I made that revealed information about classroom culture included whether or not supply teaching materials were readily available and/or organized, and whether students seemingly felt comfortable initiating any of the following behaviours: standing up or moving around the classroom at will; signing themselves out of class if they were eighteen; using earbuds during class time; using phones during class time; working on other classes during class time; asking to go the washroom when one or more peers were already there; or eating and drinking light snacks and juice at will. None of these observed phenomena were necessarily bad, but the way I managed classrooms was influenced by how many of them were observed, and how often they were observed.

Broader patterns I noticed in schools that helped identify school-specific culture included whether students ran through the halls at will, horseplayed on school property,

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left/ignored litter on school grounds, or audibly swore without seemingly caring for who was listening. Again, my response to these behaviours was influenced by observations I made over the course of at least two assignments within a school in which one or more of these behaviours were present.

Regional culture was best ascertained through conversations with colleagues and was identified, at least in part, by statements such as "We do/don't do [a certain practice] around here," "Parents in [region's name] expect..." or "This area is known for that." Other clues included how little/much sports and/or clubs were emphasized within or near school property and how students typically acted directly outside of school property.

The reason culture is difficult to manage is because not only does it depend on one's ability to ascertain it correctly, but trying to change it whenever it misaligns with your own conception of what a class, school, or regional culture ought to look, feel, or be like can result in conflict. Deciphering these cultures as a new teacher, in a short period of time, and in a way that allowed for an appropriate response was particularly difficult. What was clear to me after having taught for one year is that cultures need to be understood and managed properly to teach effectively.

At the core of this ECT's management of culture are the leadership traits of intelligence and conscientiousness (DeRue et al., 2011; Northouse, 2022). It is imperative that new teachers critically think about the environment they are working within. It is also imperative that teachers take note of patterns of behaviours, and equally importantly, how more experienced colleagues respond to said patterns. I will now review two experiences I had that exemplify how I managed pre-existing cultures.

In the first case, approximately two months into teaching, I was at a school that had litter all over the property. This school also had walkie-talkies in every classroom, presumably for faster contact to the office than traditional intercoms should problems arise. There was a palpable feeling of unease and unrest in the building. Other staff members were seldom seen in the hallways, or, if they were, they were seemingly in a hurry all the time. Electronic keys were needed to enter the school at all hours of the day. Finally, the student body, by-and-large, seemed comfortable behaving erratically.

In the class I was assigned to supply teach in, I remember one student became upset at others for whispering amongst themselves at the back of the room. This student stood up from their desk, turned around, and yelled at the two students at the back. My immediate reaction was one of disgust and anger at everyone involved, but those feelings were immediately tempered by the culture I perceived to be ensconced in. I had a feeling that that was not the first time such an outburst occurred—probably because of all the observations I had just mentioned and the way they made me feel. I calmly responded, "[Student's name], that wasn't very appropriate," while walking over to the two at the back who were being disruptive to begin with. I then calmly sat down with the two students at the back. I sat in such a way that I was physically between them and the one who yelled. I proceeded to help them complete their work. Interestingly, the student who initially got upset apologized to me before the end of class. This student also told me that they were working through managing their anger with other staff members. I believe this student would not have apologized to me or explained their situation if I had responded to their outburst with anger. Because I had responded in a way that showed I correctly understood

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how to respect and respond to the local culture—in other words, with both intelligence and conscientiousness—I was immediately met with respect in return. The homeroom teacher told me afterwards that such an outburst had happened before and that I handled it excellently.

That same day, after the in-class outburst and during my preparatory period, I thought about how I could manage the school culture while respecting my positionality within it as a supply teacher. I made the decision to pick up some litter outside, slowly and methodically, such that several students saw me. Although this alone will obviously not change the school's culture, it was a way to manage it, work towards improvement, and reconcile my belief that it ought not have excess litter everywhere.

In another experience I had, the classroom culture was misaligned with my own conceptions of what it ought to look, feel, and be like. This experience involved a four-week-long assignment teaching grade eleven and twelve physics. When I began that LTO assignment, the teacher on leave was being vicariously represented through their colleagues, who were now my colleagues. It became clear by the end of the first day that I was expected to teach in essentially the same way the teacher on leave would have. Expectations included the following: using the exact same schedule; beginning and completing projects from before I arrived; gathering missed work from before I arrived; and marking late work exactly the same way as the previous teacher would have. Exacerbating the problem was the expectation that I continue facilitating a rocket-building program with the grade twelves. This program included organizing a field trip for students to launch model rockets. Some of this rocket-building program used principles of physics that were beyond the scope of the curriculum. Rocketry also involved 3D printing and the use of engineering software, as well as coordination with colleagues to print physical rocket parts in their rooms—all of which were additional and unnecessary stressors for me, particularly as an ECT.

Therein lied the challenge: my vision of how I would teach physics for four weeks had nothing to do with rocketry and was thus markedly different from my colleagues'. I elected to communicate to others that I would move forward with my own teaching methods, assignments, and assessments that were outside rocketry but nonetheless commensurate with curricular expectations. This assertion was met with disagreement and culminated in a forty-minute-long conversation with a department head that was spirited, but ultimately productive. The department head and I reached a compromise that had me teaching rocket-related physics without physically building them with the students or organizing the field trip.

Good leaders know how to negotiate and compromise. I used the leadership trait of intelligence to negotiate and compromise in this LTO. I did not remove the culture of rocketry in the physics class entirely, but I modified it in a way that satisfied everyone and reduced my stress. This entire process was driven by a careful interplay of both intelligence and conscientiousness.

Challenge Seven

The final challenge I faced throughout my first year of teaching was the administration of lesson plans themselves. In all three of the school boards I worked in, the teachers I supply taught for left plans with the office. These plans were forwarded to me electronically or in-

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person during the morning of each assignment. As mentioned earlier, I sometimes had access to these plans earlier on if I proactively asked for them or they were proactively given to me.

Administrating lesson plans can be difficult for a variety of reasons, all of which manifested at various points in my first year of teaching. Firstly, I was sometimes tasked with assigning review for classrooms that had already finished reviewing the topic(s) at hand. Other times I was given multi-day lesson plans that were completed on the first day. Finally, administration of lesson plans also became difficult when the management of physical assets like cameras were involved, particularly when instructions related to their use were ambiguous or missing altogether.

I used the leadership trait of adjustment (Northouse, 2022) within such lessons. When I supply taught classes reviewing for upcoming assignments, I began the lesson with a class vote to see what proportion of the class was "completely finished [reviewing]," "well underway," or "had not started." I would then talk with students who were already finished to build rapport with them. After building rapport quickly through interpersonal skill, I would encourage these same students to complete other classwork and use their time productively. Adjusting the lesson plan by socializing with select students and focusing on general productivity made my teaching more effective. Over the course of the year, I also adjusted my practice by creating lesson plans for all the subjects I taught. These lesson plans were standalone lessons that were engaging, relevant to the course, and were used whenever I faced multi-day absences with lesson plans that were completed on the first day. The authors here recommend that new teachers have a repertoire of materials for as many different courses as possible so they are always prepared to teach as effectively as possible.

To address the handling of physical assets—namely equipment like cameras and art supplies—I exercised leadership through confidence in both decision making and problem solving (Northouse, 2022). As an example, in one communications technology class I supply taught in, students had asked throughout the period to operate expensive equipment and, in some cases, bring the equipment home by signing it out. There were no instructions on how students were supposed to sign equipment out, much less whether they were allowed to do so in the first place. Whenever this happened, I had to decide whether to allow students the privilege, and how they were to go about exercising it. I confidently made the decision to allow them to use and sign out equipment with a makeshift sheet I created, thus solving both the problems of instructional ambiguity and student accountability. I then emailed the teacher I was covering for and forwarded my decision.

Results of the ECTs Self-Study

The result of this self-study was the ECT reporting more time to expand upon their repertoire of teaching materials, collaborate productively with colleagues, and prepare for future challenges to their mentor teacher educator. The ECT also communicated more job satisfaction and optimism towards the profession to their mentor teacher educator as their first year of teaching concluded. Such a result is consistent with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, which stipulates that when workers gain more resources (e.g. time) to handle work-related demands, they can feel a greater sense of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). When the ECT used traits of leadership to

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overcome each challenge, they not only prepared themselves for facing the same challenges later, effectively reducing the demands of their career, but they began to feel a greater sense of agency.

Discussion and Analysis of the ECTs Reported Increase in Job Satisfaction

The challenges outlined in this self-study suggest that some of the systems in place for Ontario's ECTs are suboptimal and may result, unintentionally, in additional work and unnecessary stress. This is significant because, as noted by Karsenti and Collins (2013), excessive workloads outside the workplace (at home, etc.), experiencing heavy workloads too often, and not having enough time to address workloads properly are usually the main reasons related to teachers leaving the profession in the first few years of teaching. This ECT's experiences, in part made more stressful through preexisting conditions in the education system he worked within, created unnecessarily heavy workloads. The ECT's awareness of how overbearing these challenges were—and perhaps more importantly how preventable they were—likely contributed to the pessimism he felt in the beginning stages of his career.

The ECTs perception of his ability to manage challenges changed as a result of undertaking this self-study: any additional challenge or collection of challenges ceased to be perceived as overwhelming. Importantly, leaders within educational systems can work towards outcomes like this by continually seeking out improvements to lower the demands of ECTs and increasing the number of supports available to them (Fernet et al., 2015).

Developing environments in which an ECT's resources are maximized and demands are minimised not only works towards reducing attrition; it creates opportunities to better develop ECTs as leaders, potentially leading to larger pools of candidates for administrative positions in the future (Woodhouse & Pedder, 2016). Indeed, the responsibility of leadership cannot be confined to department heads and administrators if schools intend to flourish. The responsibility of leadership should be actively and thoughtfully disbursed amongst all other teachers, including ECTs (Huggins et al., 2017; Woodhouse & Pedder, 2016). For ECTs specifically, processes need to be in place that support the development of their capacity as leaders. Such processes may include facilitating the involvement of ECTs in peer support groups, communities of practice, collaborative decision making, and professional mentoring, as well as structuring induction programs, opportunities for interaction with more experienced colleagues, access to professionally trained mentors, and professional learning circles (PLCs) (Woodhouse & Pedder, 2016). The facilitation of these processes may even create a positive feedback cycle in which ECTs respond to feeling more trusted, competent, supported, and motivated as leaders by seeking out opportunities to further improve upon their identity in the role itself (Huggins et al., 2017). ECTs should begin to develop these skills through specific curricula while in teachers' college (King et al., 2019).

System-Level Recommendations

The first system-level recommendation from these authors is the updating of SFE so that jobs are unambiguously classified, and occasional teachers have the clarity they need. To achieve this clarity, job classifications on SFE should always be grade-specific and subject-specific, or, if the nature of the work is broad in scope, it should be explicitly stated as such.

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Better job clarity can also be achieved by requiring that teachers or administrators post supply lesson plans and notes on SFE as soon as the job itself becomes available. While the preemptive posting of supply notes is sometimes impossible due to exigent circumstances, the observed reality of schools retaining plans and emailing them in the morning of an assignment, or worse, only providing them upon the arrival of a supply teacher can—and should—be discouraged.

Another system-level recommendation from these authors is the integration of an assignment or course in teachers' college that is focused on occasional teaching and the establishment of a repertoire of materials. Although existing courses typically prepare teachers for teaching specific subjects, programs risk neglecting the reality of teaching a course or subject outside one's background if they do not address occasional teaching specifically. Such a change will increase the likelihood that a new teacher enters the workforce feeling better prepared and more confident.

Concluding Thoughts

It is hoped that this self-study can be helpful for other new teachers by demonstrating the benefits of developing and using one's capacity for leadership. As shown from the ECTs' reflection, challenges are inevitable in teaching. New teachers are—and must consider themselves to be—leaders so that they can feel prepared to face whatever challenges lie ahead. Traits of leadership can be considered analogous to tools in an educator's toolkit: once recognized, developed, and practiced, the educator should quickly realize that such traits make them better equipped to handle the vicissitudes of teaching.

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Originality Note

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Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba is a Professor of Educational Policy, Leadership, and School Law in the Faculty of Education, Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario. For 10 years, he served as an Associate Director of Social Program Evaluation Group (SPEG). Throughout his career, Benjamin has worked as a teacher, researcher, manager, and professor in the field of education in Ukraine and Canada. His research interests include educational policymaking; educational leadership; mentoring across the professions; induction, mentorship, and development of teachers; trust, moral agency, and ethical decision-making in education; international education; school climate, safety, well-being, and flourishing; and, educational change, reform, and restructuring. His current research projects focus on positive leadership, flourishing in schools, educator wellbeing, and mentoring practices in international settings.

Mr. Dylan Lewis is an ECT who currently teaches as a substitute teacher within the Calgary Board of Education in Alberta, Canada. Dylan has experience teaching in both Ontario and Alberta, spanning a multitude of grades, subjects, schools, and jurisdictions. Dylan obtained his Bachelor of Education from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario with a concentration in Educational Leadership. His current research interests include identifying and constructively using the synergies that arise from mentor-mentee relationships; helping ECTs navigate the teaching profession; and strengthening the teaching profession, as a whole, through the identification of pragmatic and implementable system-wide solutions.

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