



Empirical study

What makes good and bad days for beginning teachers? A diary study on daily uplifts and hassles



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ABSTRACT

Beginning teachers' first years in school have been described as demanding and stressful. In explaining beginning teachers' stress, previous research mainly focused on either trait-like personality characteristics or general work-related stressors. In contrast, the present study focused on the day-to-day experience. The aim of the current study was (a) to identify the task-related *daily* uplifts and hassles of beginning teachers, (b) to examine the association of daily uplifts and hassles with teachers' socio-demographic and personality characteristics, and (c) to investigate the effect of daily uplifts and hassles on teachers' emotional exhaustion. The sample consisted of 141 beginning teachers up to four years in the profession who completed an online diary for 14 consecutive days. Results showed that most daily uplifts and hassles were related to teaching in class and interacting with colleagues. Both hassles and uplifts showed only a few unsystematic correlations with teachers' characteristics. However, daily uplifts and hassles significantly explained beginning teachers' daily emotional exhaustion.

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1. Introduction

The first years of teaching are an important phase in the professional development of teachers. After the transition to practice, beginning teachers are confronted with the real-life tasks of teaching and are supposed to transfer their knowledge to performance (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). However, there is evidence that beginning teachers have difficulties in adapting to the challenges of working life and that this results in high rates of job turnover within the first five years of teaching (Dicke, Parker, et al., 2015; OECD, 2005). Beginning teachers constantly report not feeling well-prepared for the reality of the classroom (Hebert & Worthy, 2001).

To better prepare young teachers for the transition to working life, it is crucial to know which of their new professional tasks are particularly stressful. However, previous research on the reasons for beginning teachers' experience of stress has mainly focused either on trait-like personality characteristics (e.g.,

Klassen & Durksen, 2014; Klusmann, Kunter, Voss, & Baumert, 2012), different aspects of social support (e.g., Chan, 2002; Richter, Kunter, Lüdtke, Klusmann, & Baumert, 2011), or stable work-related stressors (e.g., Chaplain, 2008; Veenman, 1984). Instead, we argue that, in order to understand the professional tasks that are particularly stressful, teachers' day-to-day experience must be focused on, since students, colleagues, and the teachers themselves behave differently every day. Therefore, both the occurrence of stressors and beginning teachers' stress might fluctuate from day to day (Goetz, Lüdtke, Nett, Keller, & Lipnevich, 2013; Ilies, Huth, Ryan, & Dimotakis, 2015; Tsai, Kunter, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Ryan, 2008).

We conducted a diary study over 14 days with 141 beginning teachers who had up to four years of work experience. Every day, participants reported on work-related hassles and uplifts and on their emotional exhaustion. In the present paper, we address three research questions. First, using an idiographic-nomothetic approach, we aimed to describe, from a day-to-day perspective, which work-related tasks, such as teaching, preparing lessons, interacting with colleagues, counseling parents, or working on school development, are most frequently reported in terms of hassles and uplifts. Second, we addressed the question of how daily hassles and uplifts are related to certain teachers' characteristics, such as work experience and neuroticism. Third, we investigated

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whether daily hassles and uplifts predict beginning teachers' emotional exhaustion on a daily level.

2. Theory

2.1. Beginning teachers' transition to working life

It has been repeatedly suggested that beginning teachers are especially vulnerable to high levels of stress after the transition to working life. Their stress reaction has also often been described as a reality shock (Goddard, O'Brien, & Goddard, 2006; Veenman, 1984). It is assumed that this phenomenon is reflected in psychological and physiological complaints, changes of attitudes and personality, and emotional instability (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010). It has been argued that a reality shock is—among other reasons—due to the fact that beginning teachers are immediately confronted with all the real-life tasks of the teaching profession, such as teaching, lesson planning and preparation, interacting with colleagues, and organizational tasks, and also have full pedagogical responsibility (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011).

The transitional phase has thereby been described in three distinct phases: a pre-entry or anticipation phase, when the transition is foremost in the mind of the individual, making preparation vital; an encounter or confrontation phase shortly after the transition, in which young professionals face multiple changes almost simultaneously; and, finally, a recovery or adaptation phase, during which individuals adapt to the new requirements (c.f. Nicholson, 1984; Reicherts & Pihet, 2000). The confrontation phase in particular has been regarded as a highly stressful period of time and has also been called the “survival stage” (Fuller & Brown, 1975; Huberman, 1989). However, Huberman (1989) also included positive aspects in the first stage of teaching, referring to a “phase of discovery,” which describes beginning teachers' experience of initial enthusiasm. The length of the confrontation phase and how long teachers can be regarded as beginning have been unequally described. Huberman (1989) suggested that the confrontation phase covers the first three years in the teaching profession. Veenman (1984) described beginning teachers as those who have been working up to two years, whereas Lavigne (2014) also included teachers who had been working up to five years.

Empirical studies covering different phases of the transition into teaching practice are rare. Many studies in this field are cross-sectional and vary in their understanding of the first teaching experience. The first practical experience in the context of university teacher education is seen as highly stressful for student teachers (Chan, 2002; Chaplain, 2008; Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2007). The few longitudinal studies covering the first years of teaching after graduation predominantly report small to medium increases in burnout levels within the first year (Dicke, Parker, et al., 2015; Goddard et al., 2006; Klusmann et al., 2012) but also for the first three years of teaching (Hultell, Melin, & Gustavsson, 2013). Only Gavish and Friedman (2010) found a slight decrease in emotional exhaustion during the first year of teaching. Taken together, these studies lend empirical support to the view that the first teaching experience is stressful. Therefore, the question arises as to what in particular makes the first teaching experience stressful.

2.2. Stressors and resources of beginning teachers

Identifying the individual or work-related characteristics that enhance or reduce beginning teachers' stress has inspired many empirical studies, which follow the theoretical guidance of the transactional stress model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) or the job demands-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Self-efficacy (e.g., Fives

et al., 2007), occupational self-regulation, and professional knowledge of classroom-management (Dicke, Parker, et al., 2015; Klusmann et al., 2012) were revealed as protective individual characteristics that reduce the stress experience of beginning teachers. In terms of work-related characteristics, social interaction with students seems to be a major issue in beginning teachers' working life. Starting with Veenman's (1984) literature review, classroom discipline was the most important problem for beginning teachers, followed by motivating students, dealing with heterogeneity, assessing students' work, and relationships to students. More recently, in an interview study with beginning teachers, Goddard and Foster (2001) found almost the same problems as reported by Veenman (1984): classroom management, motivating students, assessing students' work, or relationships to parents. Chaplain (2008) asked beginning teachers how stressful they found different aspects of their job and derived four categories of stressors: managing students' behavior, organizational tasks and time pressure, lack of support from colleagues, and self-worth. The greatest number of stressors dealt with the management of students' behavior.

As previous research focused on work-related stressors, less is known about potential factors that reduce beginning teachers' stress. Kyriacou and Kunc (2007) investigated the experiences of 28 beginning teachers within their first two years of teaching. Most positive experiences were related to students' success and supportive colleagues. Uusiautti, Harjula, Pennanen, and Määttä (2014) reported from qualitative interviews with 14 beginning teachers within the first year of teaching that support of colleagues and positive interaction with students increase teachers' well-being. Consistently, Richter et al. (2011) reported from a large-scale study that social support of mentors is experienced as the main resource of beginning teachers. In correspondence with Huberman (1989), these studies indicate that it is necessary to include not only negative but also positive factors when explaining beginning teachers' well-being.

Taken together, research on beginning teachers has indicated that the transition to the teaching profession is experienced as demanding. Thereby, between-person differences in stress have been explained by typical stressors and trait-like characteristics.

2.3. Beginning teachers' day-to-day experience: hassles and uplifts

A major life event such as “transition to working life” is likely to have an impact on almost all aspects of daily life (Almeida & Wong, 2009). We propose that gaining a deeper understanding of the demands associated with the transition to working life requires the consideration of individuals' daily experiences. One reason is that the consequences of the transition are manifested on a daily basis in terms of daily hassles and uplifts (Almeida & Wong, 2009). These are distinct events on particular working days, such as teaching a lesson in front of a more or less motivated class, counseling the parents of a difficult student, or having a nice chat with a colleague. Moreover, the new demands associated with the transition will only partly be stable over time, and will rather vary from day to day. Neither students nor colleagues or supervisors can be expected to behave perfectly consistently towards the beginning teacher. Research has also shown that students' interest and motivation are not stable from lesson to lesson, thus making the teacher's task more or less demanding (Goetz, Lüdtke, et al., 2013; Tsai et al., 2008). Similarly, the quantitative and qualitative work load is plausibly different on a daily or weekly basis. Consequently, research on the transition to working life might significantly benefit from studying professional life on a day-to-day level (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Malmberg, Hagger, & Webster, 2014).

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