Many complex feelings and power dynamics come into play as psychological challenges in a teacher’s first year of practice including isolation, insecurity, and struggling to adapt among many others (Chambers et al., 2010; Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2008). Although studies have been done on the transition from teacher education to teaching practice (e.g., Brackenreed, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Forlin & Chambers, 2011), few have pursued the methodology of an autoethnography. This approach can examine the resilience factors at play during the transition in a unique way that can add depth and narrative insight to an ongoing area of interest. As a response to the well-documented and alarmingly high turnover rates among new teachers, this study investigates the autonomy and relatedness experiences of two new teachers as they make their entry into the teaching profession as a means of interrogating some of the challenges faced by new teachers.

New teachers are the teacher education graduates who are making their entry into the teaching profession; they are synonymous with beginning teachers or teacher inductees. The important detail is that they are new and they are vulnerable. Beginning teachers are more vulnerable to teacher burnout and other forms of attrition than experienced teachers (Harfitt, 2015; Lavigne, 2014; Reichl et al., 2014) such that 14% to 20.5% of beginning teachers leave the profession within 3 years (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). This attrition is preventable and can be assuaged with adequate preparation and proactive mitigation of potential challenges. New teachers’ main reservoirs of strength and ability to persist should naturally come from their teacher education. Once in practice they could feel vulnerable for a variety of reasons such as missing the safe environment of teacher education, which constitutes a reduced or managed course load and easy availability of experienced mentors (Harfitt, 2015). Furthermore, when new teachers enter the workplace, the minimal and often short-term marking and planning they have experienced is replaced with the complicated and heavy workload of being fully burdened with day-to-day teaching and developing new courses, the politics of school environments, and the inevitable reality of life outside the bubble of higher education (Kutsyuruba et al., 2016). Their role has also changed from being a student to teacher, which is a significant increase in responsibilities and expectations. The authors propose that the swiftness of this transition and the relative lack of structure contribute to enhancing the insecurity and psychological vulnerability of teachers in transition. Wagner and French (2010) utilized self-determination theory (SDT) to a great effect in their examining of early childhood educators’ experiences in the classroom.
This study applies this theory to examine the experiences of two new teachers in their transition to practice.

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002) conceptualizes the psychological well-being of a person as the ongoing fulfillment of their innate psychological needs. As posited by SDT, there are three innate needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The need for competence is described as the desire to feel that they are good at what they are doing. A person who is seen as being good at something becomes increasingly motivated to continue doing it. The need for relatedness is characterized by the universal desire to be connected to others through care and acceptance. An individual is normally biologically predisposed to want connection to others via social interaction and to contribute to the group. Autonomy is the urge to be in control of one’s own life and to live up to one’s own perceived potential. A person who is autonomous in this way is seen as being in control of themselves and able to proficiently function independently and in groups by being themselves. In this way, they feel that they are growing into their role as autonomous beings, a phenomenon akin to Dweck’s incremental theory, commonly known as a growth mind-set (Dweck, 2014). While competence is of course important, this study focused on experiences of new teachers in their early years as they struggle to develop meaningful relationships with their peers and achieve successful autonomy in their careers. These innate needs, in the case of teachers, overlap with several important constructs in the teacher education and attrition literatures such as isolation, resentment, and appetite for growth (e.g., Wagner & French, 2010).

New teachers might feel that once they are out of teacher education, they will suddenly be able to dictate the happenings of their classroom without oversight (Weston et al., 2008), and without recognizing the amount of control that their administration has in combination with the policies in place through ministries and boards of education. New teachers could see these unanticipated restrictions and others as hindering their teaching autonomy (Day & Gu, 2010; Fry, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). New teachers may also feel that they are not as emotionally connected as they could be to their new peers and colleagues (Kutsyuruba et al., 2016; Soleas, 2015), in contrast to the easy accessibility of mentors and classmates within their previous teacher education setting (Harffit, 2015). It is the authors’ hypothesis that a teacher who has their innate needs met, as highlighted by SDT, is more likely to find teaching fulfilling and therefore more likely to continue teaching as opposed to leaving the profession for one reason or another. This study chronicles the pursuit of these identified needs through the author’s experiences.

Two Stories of the Transition to Teaching: Positionality of the Study

Authors 1 and 2 entered their Concurrent Teacher Education programs in 2008 with hundreds of other individuals with the same aspirations; they and their peers wanted to become teachers. This university program is offered in Canada and allows students who plan on attending teachers college to begin obtaining BEd credits alongside their undergraduate degree, and the authors graduated from teachers college in 2013 prior to the 2-year program now mandated in Ontario. The concurrent education program of Author 1 focused on science and that of Author 2 focused on the arts, and while in their respective fields, Authors 1 and 2 were ardent on improving their pedagogical practice through engaging with theory, practicums, and reflective practices. Upon leaving their programs and securing jobs in their fields, their passions organically led them to continue their reflective practices by documenting their dialogs, journal entries, and musings that detailed their experience of entering and working in the profession for the first time. Their continual journaling, reflections, and discussions on the realities of teaching in Ontario, Canada led them to a few startling points of observation; as said in one of their reflections they felt they “were the lucky ones” (Reflection 11) in understanding how to handle the challenges presented to them. They elucidate that they “were the ones that brushed off the confusion and had the resolve to keep going when we encountered difficulties while on the job” (Reflection 11) in a way that many of their peers and colleagues could not.

The zeitgeist of teaching in the authors’ province of Ontario is changing. In their view, teachers were more respected in the past. They felt as though the pressures were higher in the past and that society had never held teachers more accountable for student outcomes in comparison to other educational stakeholders. In response to the high teacher turnover rate, this study explores the challenges experienced by beginning teachers as they enter their careers. The authors’ lens is also informed by SDT as a means of identifying innate needs and connecting the various challenges through a macrotheory of motivation and fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2002). It is in this context and positionality that the authors conducted their study.

The authors acknowledge their positionality as graduated teacher candidates and current teachers examining their reflective practice. Researcher positionality is a powerful force in the shaping of a study (Luce-Kapler, 2006; Patton, 2015). In the case of the authors, they saw the world as new teachers, while at the same time having the research background and opportunity to conduct this study chronicling their experience. The authors have emphasized that while they were the participants, they also must attempt the impartiality of researchers (Patton, 2015). Their experiences motivated this study and it is their intent that by providing an honest account of their journey through the transition from teacher candidates to teachers, they can help prepare others for the realities of the teaching profession.

Method

This research followed an autoethnographic design (Hamilton et al., 2008), which looked at the essence of the authors’
experience of transitioning from teacher education to teaching practice. The researchers were the participants, and in this way, they analyzed their own perspectives while investigating their experience with the added benefit of a second set of eyes. An autoethnography is strongly iterative and comparative and their strength lies in systematically and methodically analyzing and reanalyzing experiences in light of other experiences as other culture and experience examining methodologies (e.g., LaBoskey, 2004; Martin, 2017). This research not only details initial reflections and experiences in the field but also provides analyses and commentary on their experiences through the lens of the teachers finishing their second year of teaching.

Data Sources

To collect data, the authors wrote journal reflections bimonthly for a period of 2 years (n = 24). These reflections explored their experiences of the transition including reflecting on the preparedness they felt from their teacher education program, their interactions with peers in the teacher education program, their interactions with fellow teachers and administrations in their schools, and the challenges and difficulties faced while on the job. There was no required format nor specific criteria established for the journals, and the authors contributed 12 individual reflections which varied in length from one page to nine pages. Each author wrote his or her journal on their own knowing that these reflections would later be shared with readers of any potential publications at the end of the project.

In addition to the journals, the two teachers participated in six semistructured discussions with one another that lasted 1½ to 2 hr, and then provided their own additional written reflection on each of the discussions which also varied in length from three to five pages (n = 12). Following transcription of the discussions, the interview transcripts were validated by member-checking and triangulation (Denzin, 2012). All reflections and transcriptions were kept securely and were thematically analyzed and sorted into categories this manuscript discusses the broad categories of relatedness and autonomy and the ideas elaborated within the categories.

Relatedness

Relatedness is described as the need to feel connection to others through activities and interactions as a means of experiencing belongingness (Niemiec et al., 2014). Teachers have an innate need to feel productively connected to their colleagues and students as a means of feeling that they belong and have a positive impact on their school.

False resentment. Animosity toward peers takes on different dynamics in Author 2 and Author 1’s reflections. Author 2 recorded her initial feelings toward her peers with unflattering accounts that created a narrative situating Author 2 as a victim. She has initially described her peers as unprogressive teachers whom she did not fit in with and described many interactions with them whereby she felt like she was being judged. As a second-year teacher, Author 2 explains that these feelings have dissolved, and she now feels her initial reflections were not entirely honest. She explains that

I see now that I was afraid of being judged for being incompetent, and that made me resentful of my peers and seek out reasons to justify negative feelings towards them. I also constantly justify my pedagogy and teaching choices in my reflections, and even feel the need to say that my paperwork is “consistently perfect” (Author 2; Reflection 03), as if the paperwork is the standard to which I was judged on as a teacher. Looking back on these reflections now, I do not think that my recorded feelings about my peers are genuine; I was so scared that they were judging me, that I would always reflect on their mistakes and point out the imperfections with their pedagogies. In one reflection I wrote that I have now “proven myself” to them and they were starting to warm up to me, and I don’t think this is true (Author 2; Reflection 03). I am very close with a colleague now and reading about how I felt like I had to prove myself to her makes me laugh, and reading how I felt judged by her when she would peek her head into my classroom shows me that I was the one creating the problems. I write that “I feel like I have not just hers, but all staff members respect now because of how hard I am trying” (Author 2; Reflection 03), as if fitting into a staff is this dramatic, almost primitive idea. (Author 2; Reflection 11)
Author 2 was scared of being perceived as incompetent, and this could have been what made her feel like she could not relate to her peers.

It is interesting that Author 1 also had a similar narrative in his reflections. Author 1 also felt like he did not fit in with his staff and explained many of their interactions through a similar lens of distrust and anxiousness. Looking back on his writing, Author 1 explains that

It’s almost like I needed to have an antagonist, a nemesis to hate and to therefore draw resolve from. A Malfroy to a Harry Potter. I wonder, if I would have had a different experience if I had lived the teacher’s life rather than just being a passer-by with a chip on my shoulder. Were my peers, ever actually my peers? I never went out for a beer with them, I just rubbed shoulders with them in the hallways [. . .] I definitely felt in control and skilled, but did I only feel this because I was counter dependent. Did my skills and control come at the cost of just cutting people our? How much easier could it have been if I let someone in and shared the load of teaching with my colleagues? (Author 1; Reflection 09)

Author 1 feels that his writing about his peers is also slightly skewed and admits that he frames his peers as educational antagonists to his progressive protagonist agenda. Author 1 also had no appetite for the drama as he associated with the teachers’ interactions at his school. He wrote that “We teach at high school, we’re not still high school students,” (Author 1; Reflection 09), and this was said dismissively about the cliqueness that he perceived among the teaching staff. While Author 1 was teaching in the private school sector, he was also completing a Masters degree and was unable to reach out and connect with his peers; in fact, he explains that he is “an island on my own island” (Author 1; Reflection 09), a metaphor that reflects how disengaged he remained from his peers. Author 1’s reflections reveal that he had difficulty connecting with his peers. Author 1 is left wondering what his first year of teaching would have been like if he was able to establish true, honest interpersonal connections with his colleagues instead of writing them off and ignoring them.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is described as the need to act harmoniously with one’s values and to feel that you are a causal agent in one’s life (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Specifically, the more that they feel autonomous, the more likely they are to be autonomy-promoting in their teaching.

**Rising to challenges.** Both Authors 1 and 2 were autonomous learners that, despite the many challenges, did not give up on their commitment to professional development, and teaching and learning. They became and continued to be autonomous learners because there was no other way of succeeding in their first year of teaching. They taught themselves how to adapt to this new environment and excel, and autonomy is part of the reason they have been successful. Autonomy is present in Author 2’s first year of teaching and throughout the author discussions, journals, and reflections. Author 2 wrote that “I am willing to do all of this extra work because I LOVE [sic] teaching and LOVE [sic] my job and at the end of the day I’m very thankful for this opportunity” (Author 2; Reflection 03). Author 2 never gave up on her dedication to teaching and learning, and in her final reflection goes on to ask,

So why is it that, despite the many challenges we faced, we are still in this profession, and still look forward to going to work? Why didn’t we look for other jobs? The fact is that we overcame the challenges because we knew it would be worth it. One thing our education did provide both of us with is a ferocious work ethic, and we knew that we just needed to learn what needed to be done, teach ourselves, apply our knowledge, and repeat. We’ve kept learning and are still learning.

Here, Author 2 further explains her love for teaching, and her belief in the value of education could be what contributed to her autonomous behavior. As Author 1 and Author 2’s passion fueled their autonomy, both were able to rise to the occasion and learn the ins and outs of the knowledge gap.

Author 1’s final reflection questions the chronicling of several of his interactions with his peers, but despite this realization he explains that throughout the process of teaching he always felt “in control and skilled” (Author 1; Reflection 10). Perhaps, he felt this way because he was counter-dependent and had no one else to rely on to help him. Author 1 remembered that he often worked collaboratively in his teacher education program, but as soon as the stress of teaching got to him, he felt that he had to go it alone. He was autonomous because autonomy was the only way to succeed. Either way, both Authors 1 and 2 acknowledged that they were able to teach themselves the knowledge they were missing and demonstrate characteristics of autonomous learners. Their autonomy helped them to fill in the knowledge gap, and this pillar of success is omnipresent in their past and in their writing. Their love for teaching as a vocation rather than a profession could be the reason behind their unwavering demonstration of this behavior.

**Growth mind-set.** Growth mind-set can be described as holding the view that ability and skills can be developed through exertion and hard effort (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Indeed, growth mind-set is the acceptance that failures occur from time to time and that it is for the best to learn and move on. In scholarly literature growth mind-set is often dovetailed with resilience as the two are connected as built capacities (Mansfield et al., 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

We position growth mind-set as an aspect of autonomy for new teachers as they tended to view growth mind-set as growing into their role as independently practicing teachers. While Authors 1 and 2 were autonomous learners, they understood that their growth mindedness was fostered along
the way by a variety of factors including their peers and the stresses of the job, which accompany the experience; Author 1 describes their learning on the job as attending “the school of hard knocks” (Author 1; Reflection 09).

**The stresses of teaching and the school of hard knocks.** Both Authors 1 and 2 discussed the stresses of teaching and how the experience transformed who they were as teachers. Author 2 contends, “Last year was one of the most successful and fulfilling years of my life while also being the most personally unhappy and at some points alienating years” (Author 2; Reflection 11). She explains, “I had to sacrifice a lot and struggle with my mental health to be where I am” (Author 2; Reflection 11). Author 2 points to the need to dust yourself off and see opportunities to develop and pursue betterment when faced with challenges. She articulates that her first year was tumultuous and often left her feeling isolated and drained, but that this did not stop her from pursuing her love of teaching. She also explains,

> I have to laugh when I read my reflection for November 30th in which I say that I “feel like crying”—because the truth is, I DID cry. I cried a lot during my first year of teaching but didn’t want to talk about it or share it with anyone. (Author 2; Reflection 11)

Author 2’s vulnerability shows exactly how raw the emotions that teachers experience in their first years can be and serves as an indication that other teachers may feel similarly and be in need of understanding and extra care and support. If these teachers do not have a growth mind-set and have not been primed for seeing challenges as opportunities, then they will experience emotional downturns that they may not be able to recover from. However, if they view challenges as opportunities and understand that these setbacks are natural, then they will be more ideally positioned to overcome them. The authors positioned in their journals and reflections that it would and should be the role of teacher education to provide the guidance that shapes this mastery approach.

Author 1 explains the contrast in his thoughts as he gained more teaching experience, as initially he writes, “It should be of no real surprise that the initial 4 days on ‘teaching block’ are more transformative and educational than the previous 4 years of teacher education” (Author 1; Reflection 01). He continues and explains that he later realized that he was wrong as he “did not understand that the reason I was ready was from the transformative moments in teacher education along the way” (Author 1; Reflection 1). Here, Author 1 explains how the role of teacher education is underappreciated and because of the underestimation of the value of the experience, further opportunities to learn are missed. Regarding the role of teaching practice, Author 1 concluded, “My first year of teaching taught me a lot and made me a stronger person” (Author 1; Reflection 10), though he grudgingly, acknowledged that he survived the first year as a result of the practicum and in-class lessons of teacher education.

**The role of colleagues in supporting each other’s growth.** Author 2 also points to the impact that her teacher colleagues had on her to support her growth. “My small and caring team is the reason that I was able to succeed as a first-year teacher while teaching myself the skills needed to become professionally competent” (Author 2; Reflection 11). While she initially felt insecure about her peer relationships, she has now come to see these relationships in a new way looking back on her first year. Author 2 chronicled how her peers, specifically those who were experienced, would support her growth through implicit and sometimes explicit means. This prompted internal growth and refinement of her teaching, more positive interactions with students, and impacted her overall attitudes toward the process of teaching and learning. Author 1 similarly spoke to the support he received from his administration.

> My principal on the other hand definitely looks at mistakes as learning opportunities. I’ve adapted a phrase of his; ‘today’s stumbles are the beginning of tomorrow’s strides,’ I have to say, I agree, and not only because he’s my boss, but because every mistake is a learning opportunity. (Author 1; Reflection 04)

Author 1’s “early arrogance,” in his own words (Author 1; Reflection 01), might well have presented a chronic impediment to his development if he had not had a peer who had the courage to challenge his ideas prompting necessary growth.

Overall, Authors 1 and 2 developed growth mindset, while in their first years of teaching, and their recoveries, and emotional endurance paved the way for their eventual success. Acquiring the belief that errors were an opportunity and that the learning was not done upon graduating from teacher education was facilitated by both experience and experienced mentors as opposed to self-developed.

**Conclusion**

The conclusions from this study can help inform best practices for teachers college programs by examining the experiences felt by Authors 1 and 2 in their first year of teaching. Authors 1 and 2 had similar experiences when relating to peers and had a shift in their attitudes toward their peers in their second years. Both initially felt it difficult to establish relationships with their peers, and both came to an eventual realization that they were the ones who were creating challenges in their peer-relatedness. In Author 2’s reflections, she explains that she felt so insecure about her teaching that she initially pushed her peers away as she was afraid of being judged. Likewise, Author 1 did not relate well to his peers, leaving him feeling isolated in place of building productive relationships.

Despite having difficulties with peer relationships, both felt autonomous and had a growth mind-set that allowed them to persist on the job and keep going within their fields.
both author’s remained dedicated and committed to their craft. They attribute the help of mentors and their positive mind-set going into the job as two crucial factors that helped them to succeed.

In the case of teachers, these intrinsic needs refer to their need to feel in control of their teaching, feel competent as a result of their training, and have fulfilling relationships, which make it more likely to promote autonomy within their students as noted as well by Wagner and French (2010). Autonomy promotion is more likely when teachers themselves feel that they have their intrinsic needs met, especially autonomy (Pelletier et al., 2001; Roth et al., 2007). Do teacher candidates understand fully that they are not islands and that they will have to play nice with others? Do they truly have a growth mind-set and understand the role of peers in supporting each other’s pursuit of growth and overcoming complacency? Author 1 and Author 2’s revelations from their experience as first-year teachers suggest that perhaps these high turnover rates are a result of not having adequate knowledge of the demands of teaching in a Growing Success era as well as having lingering innate needs that can be better addressed in teacher education programs.

This study lays a foundation for a larger study that looks at the experience of a higher number of teacher candidates as they make the transition from practice teaching to teaching practice. Soleas (2015) called for studies that looked at the experiences of teacher candidates across multiple universities to examine whether their transition experience would vary by program, or as is argued in the manuscript, which the experience has common elements that are in need of addressing by many teacher education programs and the students in these programs. Additionally, research similar to Kutsyrubra et al. (2016) that examines the role of school administrations and mentors for teaching specific to the mediation the threats to self-determination would shed light on this vulnerable moment in the lives of beginning teachers.

Teaching is one of the most important jobs in the world, and the authors hope their experiences will ignite a conversation to better help the incredible and selfless people who choose this profession. Author 1 and Author 2’s wish is that perhaps their honest, and at times uncomfortable, reflections will help improve teacher training and teacher preparedness to help make the world a better place for teachers, students, and learners alike.

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