Personality traits linked to course withdrawal and retention for primary school teacher trainees

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The role of personality in teacher retention

Personality, or people’s preferences in how they think, feel and behave, influences the ways in which they cope with demands and find fulfillment in their work in caring professions such as teaching and healthcare (Blustein et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016). Such evidence indicates that prosocial characteristics relevant to the teaching profession can be measured in ways that predict workplace retention. Against the backdrop of an international crisis in early career teacher retention (Worth and De Lazzari, 2017), this article explores the value of using an online personality assessment tool to inform pastoral care and mentoring activities for these COVID-19 times and beyond.

Research partners and goals

The Suffolk and Norfolk School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programme commissioned Relational Schools, in partnership with Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing and the Open University, to carry out a five-year research and development project to explore whether diagnostic tools can inform early career teacher retention. This article focuses on one of these tools trialled: Cambridge Assessment’s Cambridge Personal Styles Questionnaire (CPSQ), reporting on data from the first two years of the project and offering clues towards protective and risk factors for trainee retention, drawn from individuals’ self-reports of prosocial characteristics.

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How CPSQ works

The CPSQ tool is based on the well-researched personality traits known as the Big Five: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability. Questionnaire respondents are shown a set of four, and are asked to rate the extent to which they reflect typical behaviours, from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. If a respondent rates two or more statements equally, they are encouraged to reflect and rank which are ‘more’ or ‘less like me’. Whilst the
average total flags against performance. As circled in red, ‘trainees with excellent progress’ against the teachers’ standards had on average better scores compared to their peers for the ‘self-management’ competency, confirmed as a significant difference $t(93) = 2.38$, $p = .020$.

Trainees with excellent progress typically described themselves as aspiring to high standards and setting their own goals, as well as taking a self-disciplined and organised approach to tasks. These trainees endorse the Big Five trait of conscientiousness through helpful attitudes and behaviours for goal, task and, hence, course completion.

**Implications for practice**

There is a dearth of relevant previously published work in the educational context to draw upon, and even this study draws on a limited pool of participants. However, the findings provided the SCITT with clues about potential protective traits and behaviours as an early warning system to inform teacher retention. In particular, they used an individual’s ‘coping’ score to help match trainees to tutors and mentors with the necessary skillsets and resource capacity.

They also noted the value of improving trainees’ ‘self-management’ skills, which include a focus on achievement. The findings supported evidence from a US study of nearly 2,000 teachers, which found that high conscientiousness scores could predict high performance and retention in first-year teachers (Bastian et al., 2017).

The CPSQ training given to SCITT tutors led to what programme leaders referred to as ‘aha! moments’ of insight about: what might constitute a risk factor; how different personal characteristics in interaction might increase or reduce vulnerability; and possible interpretations of trainee behaviour linked to their self-reported traits. It has been possible to pinpoint potential ‘at risk’ trainees at a much earlier stage, before ‘wobbles’ arise, and offer personalised, informed support – for example, providing guidance to specific trainees about time management and strategies for coping with a variety of different pressures, specifically encouraging trainees to build support networks with each other. These personalised and timely interventions have contributed to the stabilisation of the retention rate of the SCITT programmes. The trainees who have withdrawn from the programme have withdrawn for circumstances beyond the SCITT programme’s control. Using the information that the CPSQ tool has provided, the course team feel much more confident about anticipating, rather than reacting to, issues that can affect a trainee’s progress.

This article discusses a chargeable product/service.

**REFERENCES**


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