

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

LYN DALE
CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT
ADMISSIONS TESTING, UK

ALISON FOX
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UK

ROB LOE
RELATIONSHIPS FOUNDATION, UK

ANNA RICHARDS AND KATE SIDA-NICHOLS
SUFFOLK AND NORFOLK SCHOOL-CENTRED
INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING, UK

BEN WINKLEY AND EVELIN GAÁL
EIDO RESEARCH, UK

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 fulfilment in their work in caring professions such as teaching and healthcare (Bastian 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 of 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

TABLE 1:
CPSQ REPORT COMPETENCIES

Caring and compassion	Puts others first and is keen to help. Responds with kindness and concern.
Person-centred communication	Confidently engages with others. Regularly uses empathetic and socially supportive forms of communication.
Working well with others	Works cooperatively with others by working towards shared goals and supporting others in the team.
Self-management	Conscientious and aspires to achieving high standards. Sets challenging goals. Proactive and determined to finish tasks.
Professional practice	Acts with integrity and has a sense of social responsibility. Alert to risk and safety issues.
Coping with demands	Resilient to challenges, change and setbacks. Calm when faced with stressful situations and work demands.
Engagement with learning	Keen to understand the theory behind practice. Regularly uses curious, critical and creative thinking styles that facilitate learning.

Source: Adapted from use in CPSQ reports (2013)

explore whether diagnostic tools can inform early career teacher retention. This article focuses on one of three 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. This data is interpolated with data from a demographic survey, socio-mapping of trainees' personal and professional networks and Relational Schools' Relational Proximity Framework.

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 behavioural statements on screen in sets of four, and are asked to rate the extent to which these 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

questionnaire is untimed, it takes around 30 minutes to complete.

CPSQ personality scores are reported against occupational competencies to aid interpretation. A competency refers to the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours that support job performance. This study used an adapted healthcare competency report (see Table 1), as this was considered relevant by the experienced SCITT trainers.

After completing the questionnaire, a feedback report is available for each individual and group. A competency score of one to five is benchmarked against a comparison or norm group. Higher scores mean that behaviour is more likely to be effective for the performance of a competency. Low score bands, one and two, are flagged as areas for attention. Within a competency, individuals might have strengths and areas for improvement. Hence, feedback includes a behavioural narrative, including positive points, neutral points and points to improve.

The evidence base

The article reports on CPSQ data from two cohorts of trainees completing a one-year SCITT programme for primary teaching. This constituted 95 trainees in total, including nine who withdrew during the programme. CPSQ was completed close to the start of the course, online

and remotely. In the first year, analysed data reports were shared with tutors and anonymously with researchers but not with trainees. Training was provided for tutors by Cambridge Assessment to help them use this data constructively with trainees as part of professional training discussions. However, it was agreed that this practice did not sufficiently empower trainees to control their data and so, in the second year, after revised ethical approval from the accrediting university, trainees' CPSQ reports were returned to them for them to decide whether to share reports with tutors. This resulted in an increased uptake of volunteering to complete the CPSQ in year 2 (as below):

- **CPSQ completion in 2017/18 (year 1):**
N = 29 of possible 64 (45 per cent), of which five withdrew from the course
- **CPSQ completion in 2018/19 (year 2):**
N = 66 of possible 69 (96 per cent), of which four withdrew from the course.

The self-reported data of trainees

To investigate the personal risk factors involved in course non-completion, analyses investigated the difference between trainees who passed the course and those who withdrew and consequently did not pass. Combining years one and two cohort data provided sufficient data for statistical significance

testing but, as drop-out numbers were small, more fine-grained analysis of reasons for withdrawal was prevented.

Figure 1 shows the average CPSQ scores for trainees, including 'total flags' (low scores) for each group. As circled in red, trainees who stayed and passed the course had better scores for the 'coping with demands' competency on average, compared to those who did not pass, confirmed as a significant difference through t-testing ($t(93) = 3.24, p = .002$).

Primary trainee course completers typically described themselves as more able to cope with challenge, change, setbacks and stress than those who left the course. This connects with the findings of Kokkinos's study of over 400 primary school teachers, which identified the Big Five trait of emotional stability (CPSQ coping) as a predictor of primary school teacher burnout (Kokkinos, 2007). The relationship-building competencies of 'person-centred communication' and 'working well with others' also saw course completers showing higher scores on average.

To investigate the potential protective factors involved in retention, the team looked at whether there were differences between trainees who not only completed the course but thrived on it, looking for performance-protective factors. Figure 2 displays the average CPSQ scores and

FIGURE 1:
AVERAGE CPSQ SCORES FOR TRAINEES WHO PASSED THE COURSE VERSUS THOSE WHO DID NOT PASS THE COURSE PER COMPETENCY AREA

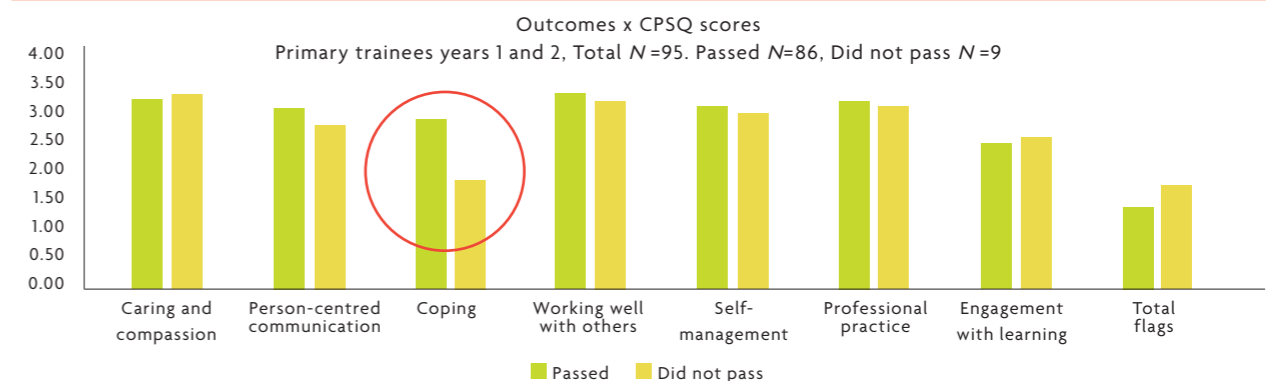
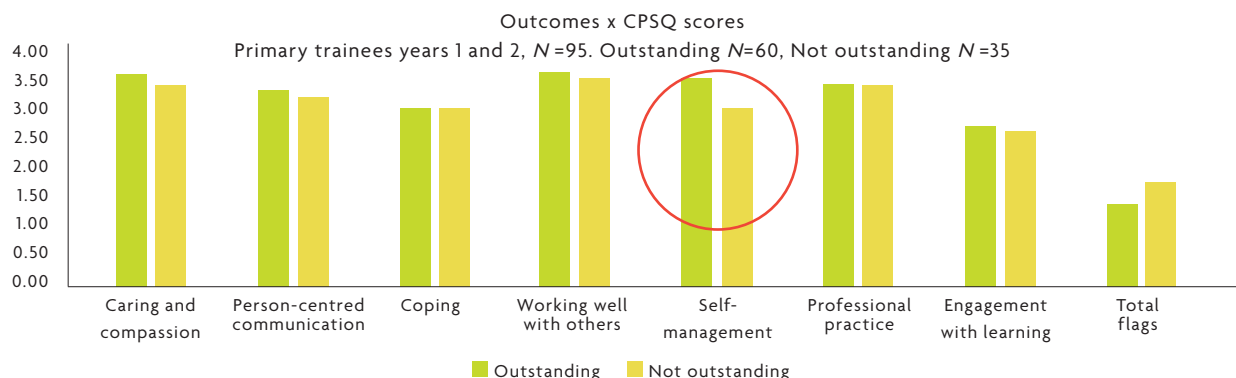


FIGURE 2: AVERAGE CPSQ SCORES FOR TRAINEES WHO WERE OUTSTANDING VERSUS THOSE WHO WERE NOT OUTSTANDING



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

Trainees with excellent progress typically described themselves as aspiring to high standards and setting their own goals

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



Bastian KC, McCord DM, Marks JT et al. (2017) A temperament for teaching? Associations between personality traits and beginning teacher performance and retention. *AERA Open* 3(1): 1–17.

Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing (2013) CPSQ for teachers. Available at: www.admissionstesting.org/for-institutions/about-our-tests/behavioural-styles-assessment/cpsq-for-teachers/ (accessed 9 December 2020).

Chen LC, Perng SJ, Chang FM et al. (2016) Influence of work values and personality traits on intent to stay among nurses at various types of hospital in Taiwan. *Journal of Nursing Management* 24(1): 30–38.

Kokkinos CM (2007) Job stressors, personality and burnout in primary school teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 77: 229–243.

Worth J and De Lazzari G (2017) Teacher retention and turnover research: Research update 1: Teacher retention by subject. Slough: NFER. Available at: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/nufs01/nufs01.pdf (accessed 30 November 2020).

This document was initially designed for print and as such does not reach accessibility standard WCAG 2.1 in a number of ways including missing text alternatives and missing document structure.

If you need this document in a different format please email admissionstesting@cambridgeassessment.org.uk telling us your name, email address and requirements and we will respond within 15 working days.