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Emotional labour demands in enabling education: A qualitative exploration of the unique challenges and protective factors

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Abstract*

Students in enabling programs bring richness, diversity, and complexity to the teaching and learning environment. They are often from under-represented backgrounds, have experienced educational disadvantage or disruption, belong to multiple equity groups, and face academic and non-academic challenges, including mental ill-health. This pilot study explored academic staff experiences in teaching and supporting students in enabling programs. Using a collaborative autoethnographical approach, four members of a multi-institutional research group wrote first-person reflections in response to guiding questions. From generative and reflective discussions, different themes arose. A major theme was the high 'emotional labour demands' of teaching a vulnerable cohort, with both positive and negative effects on staff. Other major themes included: the diversity of emotional responses and coping strategies; the complex, sometimes contradictory, role of the enabling educator; the importance of communities of care and support; and the impact of witnessing students' transformations. Within these themes, the challenges, rewards, and protective factors, which mitigate stress among enabling educators, were identified.

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Introduction

Teaching students from diverse backgrounds is increasingly the norm in Australian universities (Trees, 2013) under the government's widening participation agenda, triggered by the Bradley Review of Higher Education in 2008 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). An increased proportion of the student community are from a wider socio-cultural spectrum and have access to tertiary study via a variety of non-traditional pathways, such as pre-university enabling programs. The Australian *Higher Education Support Act 2003* defines an enabling program as "a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award" (p. 215). Also referred to as "bridging courses, university preparation courses, foundation courses and pathway courses" (Hodges et al., 2013), these programs contribute to expanding and enhancing diversity in university cohorts by providing non-traditional students with an unprecedented pathway to enter and participate in higher education (HE).

Enabling programs generally attract students from under-represented and equity groups, such as: low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds; regional or remote locations; culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) backgrounds; and students with a disability or medical condition. Many of these students have experienced educational disadvantage or disruption and, as a result, are not able to access HE via traditional pathways (Hodges et al., 2013; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Enabling cohorts are diverse in terms of demographics, level of past educational attainment, past educational experiences, aspirations, interests and motivations (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2014). Students tend to enter enabling programs with low confidence and academic self-efficacy, little understanding of the university environment, and with a wide

scope of learning needs (Atherton, 2015; Crawford et al., 2015). Of note, mental health issues are prevalent amongst enabling cohorts (Crawford et al., 2016; Jones, Lisciandro & Olds, 2016). Therefore, these students may require more support with academic and non-academic challenges than students who enter via traditional pathways, to ensure a successful transition to first-year university studies.

Meeting the needs of this vulnerable cohort is a complex and demanding task. The aim of this study was to explore the experience of the enabling educator, including the perceived challenges and rewards unique to the enabling education context and the strategies used by educators to mitigate stress and burnout. Although this topic has been investigated in other educational settings, such as in schools [e.g. in Europe, see Chang (2009) and Vercambre, Brosselin, Gilbert, Nerriere and Kovess-Masfety (2009); in the United States, see Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) and Chang (2009)], it is not the case in the field of enabling education. However, discussions between members of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Mental Health (Crawford, 2015), as well as an internal report about themes arising from the NAEEA's Southern Symposium in 2016 (NAEEA, personal communications), suggest that the issue of staff burnout is perhaps a common and concerning experience for enabling educators. Here, we set out to qualitatively explore our own experiences as a group of enabling educators working in several enabling programs across Australia, brought together through our involvement in the NAEEA SIG on Mental Health.

Literature review

Teaching can be described as an art form (Lupton, 2013), as it is a multifaceted role requiring application of a complex series of techniques and methods. Educators inevitably contend with students' non-academic

challenges in the process of addressing academic growth, transition to the university environment (acculturation), along with attempting to build students' resilience, confidence and effective study habits. The range and complexity of students' needs in enabling programs require educators to be flexible, supportive and inclusive in their approaches to teaching and learning (Devlin, Kift, Nelson & McKay, 2012). Further, the building of a supportive learning community and fostering of relationships appears key to retaining and engaging such students in these settings (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016; Tinto, 1997, 2003). Notably, fostering these relationships and creating an effective and supportive teaching and learning environment requires the practice of "caring" in teaching (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Chang (2009) suggests that "teaching is intensely emotional work" and that "emotions, coupled with mental energy needed to deal with complex social interactions, require teachers to draw on their intellectual and emotional resources" (p. 203).

Emotional work is a term used to describe an effort made to understand and empathise with others and their situation, such as taking the time to listen to students' concerns, offering advice, and demonstrating genuine care (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). This *work* becomes *emotional labour*, a term originally coined by Hochschild (1983), when it requires the "regulation of emotional expressions and feelings" (Kiely & Sevastos, 2008, p. 1). An example is when educators "have to induce, neutralize or inhibit their emotions so as to render them appropriate to the situation" (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 123). Price (2001) offers a nuanced, psychoanalytic description of emotional work and labour in the classroom, describing it as an emotional attunement and a holding of an unconscious tension. Emotional work and labour can drain emotional resources leading to negative psychological and physical health outcomes including burnout, a syndrome that may involve emotional exhaustion,

depersonalisation (cynicism and distancing), as well as reduced efficacy and sense of personal accomplishment (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Kiely & Sevastos, 2008). Of note, Robson and Bailey (2009) along with Waterson (2011) suggest that this work demands an emotional management of self and the cohort. Essentially, the emotional work in educational settings is an application of a set of emotional intelligence skills such as self-regulation, social awareness and management of relationships (Goleman, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, the term "emotional labour demands" (Näring, Vlerick & Van de Ven, 2012) will be used to describe the combined theories above.

It is difficult to locate a theory that adequately describes the complex and demanding emotional, cognitive and social tasks that enabling educators perform. Applying the notion of emotional labour to the work performed by enabling educators is novel. We propose that an enabling educator is akin to a juggler, holding many roles in the air. We are simultaneously educators, social workers, and university employees subject to politics and policy. We carry "multiple identities...with different demands, time allowances and constraints" (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 221). The nuances of this role of multiple identities as well as the costs and benefits are explored in this study.

Method

In order to explore the emotional labour demands on enabling educators in the varying contexts, a "story pot" approach was used. This qualitative mode of inquiry is a type of collaborative autoethnography, a simultaneous study of culture and self (Chang, 2013). This social scientific approach allows for an intimate, nuanced and detailed narrative of experience (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013) that cannot be captured with quantitative methods. Although it includes significant subjectivity, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) assert that "community

autoethnographies use the personal experience of researchers-in-collaboration to illustrate how a community manifests particular social/cultural issues” (p.6). One advantage is that the researchers-in-collaboration have the opportunity to verify interpretation of their individual experiences. A limitation of this study is that the findings capture the experiences of a small sample of enabling educators and may not be representative of the entire enabling education field. Thus, the evocative nature of this qualitative approach encourages validation through larger, mixed-methods research in the future.

The autoethnographic data were collected in the form of first-person reflective writings completed by the author-researchers themselves. The reflective writing was guided by reflective questions concerning the challenges and benefits perceived as unique to enabling educators, as well as the personal impacts of the role, and the management required. Four of the co-authors fulfilled the dual role of participant and researcher. These female participants were from three HE institutions in three Australian states, with an average of 18 years’ teaching experience. All participants had been teaching in the enabling space for an average of six years in various roles including coordinating, lecturing, and tutoring. The reflections were shared within the research group. The reflective pieces were first viewed individually and holistically and, as Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2016) suggest, were then dissected and grouped by dominant themes. Collaborative autoethnography relies on generative and collective discussions to confirm shared meaning in texts (Chang et al., 2016); therefore, group discussions were undertaken to further distil the main themes.

Findings

Five main themes dominated the reflections. Two themes, emotional labour demands and the complex, contradictory role of enabling educator as “gatekeeper”, are understood,

predominantly, as challenges. The theme of diversity underpinned all reflections in several ways. The diversity of the enabling student cohort was noted; however, it will not be elaborated on in detail here. Diversity will be discussed in regard to the participants’ descriptions of variances within their role, the articulation of their emotional responses, and the coping mechanisms employed in their professional and personal lives. Two themes, community of care and support, and witnessing students’ transformations, are considered to be protective factors for mitigating stress. Boundaries also merge between the five themes. When quoting or paraphrasing from the four reflections, the participants are referred to as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), and Participant 4 (P4).

Emotional labour demands

The enabling educators in this study found that working in the field of enabling education required considerable emotional labour demands. Teaching the diverse and vulnerable enabling cohort requires constant, tentative care. Across all four reflections, descriptions of the emotional labour demands were present. P1 noted that the role was “demanding from a supportive and empathetic perspective”. Similarly, P4 highlighted the self-regulation required:

I’ve sat carefully holding my own shock inside as a student has told me about their attempted suicide, or the death of a loved one, or an abusive husband, and calmly provided options for support, then walked back into the classroom with a game face to discuss paraphrasing.

This kind of emotional labour, a deep acting where one is required to manipulate internal thoughts and feelings, Näring et al. (2012) argue, is typically taxing. Notable in all four reflections were the range of emotions felt by the educators, and this emotional oscillation or “emotional roller coaster” (P4) was often times

the source of stress and fatigue. The “holding” (Price, 2001) of students with complex issues adds an “extra layer of stress” (P2).

High emotional labour demands increase the risk of burnout, compassion fatigue or empathic distress (Klimecki & Singer, 2012; Seidler et al., 2014; Vercambre et al., 2009). The student/tutor relationship in enabling spaces calls for a close involvement, and Bathmaker and Avis (2007) state that this comes at an emotional cost. Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) describe emotional exhaustion as “feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources” (p.399). Evidence of emotional exhaustion was noted by the participants in this study; P2 acknowledged that the role was “more emotionally draining than other teaching” and that this at times resulted in “utter exhaustion”. Of additional interest was the impact on personal relationships. Three reflections noted that fatigue prevented the participants from interacting as desired with friends or partners; for instance, as P4 explained: “after teaching all day my words were used up and my poor husband got hand signals when I got home”.

Yet, not all emotional labour has a negative cost. Price (2001) acknowledges that emotional labour has rewarding dimensions and that teachers could benefit from the recognition of this kind of work. Kinman, Wray and Strange (2011) found that teachers who performed higher levels of emotional labour had higher levels of personal accomplishment. Some emotional labour can be termed as “philanthropic emotional management” (Hebson, Earnshaw & Marchington, 2007) where the educators feel sincere positive emotions in the role and this can increase job satisfaction. Building positive relationships with students, Gray, Wilcox and Nordstokke (2017) argue, helps build teacher resiliency. Work in the enabling space, this study revealed, can be “joyful” (P3) and “exciting and fulfilling” (P1). The participants all

acknowledged the rewards of working with enabling cohorts and that the emotional lows were offset by emotional highs.

Diversity of emotional responses and coping strategies

The reflective narratives demonstrate how diversity shapes the nature of the participants’ daily work, their emotional responses and regulation (Goleman, 1998), as well as the variety of mechanisms they consciously employ to meet the demands of their roles. The diversity of the individual learner, which is multiplied in the classroom environment, impacts on practice, as illustrated by P1: “All aspects of the individual impact on learning, and influence pedagogy, classroom culture, relationships and the development of curriculum.” The participants’ reflections overflowed with emotional terminology such as: *challenge, exhaustion, stress, shock, distress, frustration and difficult*, and positive feelings: *pride, reward, trust, transformation, satisfaction, fulfilment and joy*, thus revealing the dichotomous and diverse nature of the emotional reactions experienced.

Responding to the emotional labour, participants expressed drawing on a diverse range of reactive and proactive coping strategies (Snyder, 1999) in their professional and personal lives to maintain their health and wellbeing, including: debriefing with colleagues (P1); seeking advice from professional staff (P3); and undertaking reflective practice (P1). They drew on their professional experience, which helped them to recognise their limitations (P2), and create boundaries (P1). On-going study (P4) and professional development were also mentioned. Maintaining contact with students within the trajectory of their HE experience was also a proactive strategy (P3). While emotional coping strategies of individuals can vary (Näring et al., 2012), Yin (2015) acknowledges that emotional intelligence is a

protective factor when engaging in emotional work and organisations can create training opportunities to enhance emotional intelligence. Stress management workshops and peer collaboration have been found to reduce burnout (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996). Kinman et al. (2011) express the need for enhancing social support to mitigate teacher stress. All four participants acknowledged the informal and formal avenues for debriefing and its power to reduce worry and prevent the “transmission of trauma” (P4). P3 wrote: “reward is found in traversing the challenges such teaching brings with humour, trust, daily conversation and connection”. The literature supports this approach, suggesting that debriefing (e.g. with colleagues) is an effective strategy for reducing emotional exhaustion (Kinman et al., 2011).

Most notable in the reflections were a host of strategies that demonstrated the emotional intelligence of the participants. Self-care strategies emerged in the reflections as effective for recharging, for example: “sleep, healthy food and exercise [are] my solution” (P3); “I ensure I meditate” (P4); “being creative, being in the garden and ... family focus” (P1); “I practice art, meditation, walking, eating well and reading” (P4); “One step in the forest and biophilia is at work!” (P2). Meditation, according to Klimecki and Singer (2012), circumvents compassion fatigue as it offers emotional self-regulation and creates impartiality. Participants espoused the benefits of early intervention when a student issue arose and acknowledged how experience enhances the ability to proactively manage situations, like setting clear boundaries early and referring students to counselling, to alter the emotional impact (Gross, 1998). These strategies could be useful for educators in a variety of contexts.

Drawing hard lines in shifting interpersonal sands: the teacher as gatekeeper

The role of the enabling educator is defined by emotional, moral and political complexity. Questions of what the role is, where it begins and ends, and how enabling educators understand or come to know the impact they yield on their students, remain open ended. The point, however, is not to close down these questions, but to be conscious of their presence, the complexity they illuminate and try to use them as a guide from which to navigate student and self-wellbeing. Deepening, and for some darkening, the problematic of enabling teaching is the role in which the enabling educator sits in the socio-cultural and HE setting. This role is unique, as the “alternative pathway” experience is the threshold, the gate, through which a student must pass, if s/he is to be considered fit for university education. The power to confirm or deny the intellectual validity of a student is thus placed upon the enabling educator. Coupled with this responsibility is the allegiance formed over a semester with one’s students, issuing from the emotional and intellectual space that is traversed (what P2 describes as a unique “*rapport and trust*”), alongside the somewhat arbitrary and, at the same time, crucially subjectively situated point of difference between a pass and a fail. Here, the teacher is trapped in the moral and emotional mire of needing to determine “readiness”, whilst understanding that the power to so determine reasserts the social inequity that brought the student to the enabling program in the first place. This situation produces for teachers, semester after semester, an ill ease, which P4 described as a “*tired and delicate balancing act*”. P3 described her concern around the way in which negative academic outcomes may impact on these students, and thus return them to where they were before enrolment, “*but now with a reinforced set of insecurities.*” If a student “fails”,

what becomes of their sense of self, when this inroad into HE has often been a choice born of deep reflection, acted on with courage and is nearly always a gesture for change against circumstance.

The anxiety this balancing act induces is reinforced by the institutional confines that university staff work within. The teacher straddles the space of treating their student as at once a subject – a person with hopes, aspirations, opportunity, fears and trust – and as an object – that which can be measured, codified, considered, accepted or rejected. In the undergraduate journey this duality persists; however, the impacts are lighter than they are in enabling education, and thus the moral responsibility, and arguably moral investment, is less. If a student fails an undergraduate unit they can repeat it or even change courses and degrees if they are consistently failing. But, most significantly, they are already inside the gate – their intellectual self-worth has been institutionally affirmed.

The question then becomes, how do we as ‘enablers’ deal with the disappointment of our failure to enable and our own consequential sense of loss? If we situate this more broadly, the question and challenge becomes one of working with and within the recognition of our power and our powerlessness. Key to self-care as enabling educators, and as educators per-se, is the identification of the social, moral and political contexts within which we work and the inescapable vulnerability this implies (Kelchtermans, 2005). In so doing we can begin to redefine the scope of possibility we have as a teacher and thus guard our expectations. Recognition of limits means we can situate ourselves in the moral complexity of gatekeeper, as a keeper who keeps moral watch over one’s students, knowing and communicating that loss or ‘failure’ (our own and that of our students) is part of the process and yet loss and failure can present opportunities of their own. Perhaps then, if we

as enabling educators work at the crux of opportunity and disappointment, commitment and loss, we may be in a uniquely advantaged position to deepen our understanding of the cognitive-emotional and social grounds that shape us as teachers and as selves.

Communities of care and support

Communities of care and support were found to be a powerful protective factor for the participants. The enabling space can be viewed as a community of teachers and learners; the learners arrive with hopes and dreams of a different and enriched life, whilst the teachers share a common thread of desire to enable the changes to happen. The community of teachers and learners share aspirations and hopes, and work through difficult times together. As articulated by P4, the students “form a community of learners, and care for and support each other”. There is a palpable sense of community, which, at its core, are the building blocks of bonding that begin with a basic sense of trust, care, support, and eventually encompass the notion of boundaries (Lidz, 1986). The primary role of enabling education is education; however, by the very nature of the cohort and those who choose to work within it as educators, a community of caring is also established, as evoked by P1: “in my working life I have never worked with more caring, empathic, professional, highly qualified, and cross disciplinary team of educators who are truly student centred”. There can also be a sense of isolation, as highlighted by P3, particularly if the enabling program is located at a distance from the central university campus, such as in a regional setting; however, in such a context the sense of bonding with students can also be increased: “we, in an isolated setting are in a community where the experience is viscerally shared” (P3).

Enabling educators can feel overwhelmed with the emotional labour (Kiely & Sevastos, 2008) of caring and performing a role of both

educator and non-professional or 'accidental counsellor'. Paradoxically, it is these very bonds of understanding and connection that also give rise to the greatest rewards, as illustrated by P3's comment: "[you] share in the triumphs and joys, knowing that you are a part of a community that together changes people's lives". Enabling educators are academics from diverse fields; however, there is a reliance on each other for debriefing and peer support (especially emotional support). There are other professional supports, including university services (e.g. counsellors) as well as community supports (e.g. Employee Assistance Programs), which are an extra resource when debriefing and personal counselling is required. When working with students living with a mental health condition, P2 found that knowledge and understanding of a particular mental health issue or diagnosis can help with management of an individual and clarify potential challenges, as she explained: "Another useful tactic I find is to learn as much as I can about the student's condition. This is where organising a session with the counselling staff is beneficial". Sometimes, services outside of the university can provide confidential and helpful support, as experienced by P4: "After this challenge I debriefed then with ... our university service provider" (P4). Certainly, the existence of communities of care and support are a strong mitigating factor in reducing the ever-present spectre of "burnout" for enabling educators, and, specifically, the social support provided by colleagues is paramount (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Grandey, 2000).

Witnessing students' transformations

The theme of transformation featured in each reflection in regard to educators bearing witness to students' growth, revelations, and turning points in their enabling courses, and this emerged as a protective factor. For example, as P4 expressed: "I witness the

growth in every enabling student's academic self-efficacy and a growth in their life skills... I love watching students discover their authentic selves, realising their passions and yearnings and imagining a different future." P1 stressed the privilege of "observing the transformation of people across the course of a semester. Students develop a set of skills that prepare them for university learning, but the most satisfying observation is that of the growth of students' self-belief, love of learning, enthusiasm and confidence." P2 articulated the gradual, step-by-step developments in students' skills and confidence, and emphasised the ripple effect of their transformations: "they really transform and change their lives and the lives of their families".

The educators are more than witnesses to the transformations; they are involved in these transformational journeys. Their involvement is acknowledged repeatedly by grateful students, during and after their enabling course, as illustrated by P2:

Students reflect on their personal and academic growth, and they express (sometimes quite extraordinary) gratitude to me (and my colleagues) for my part in their transformational experience. Not a day goes by on campus when I don't bump into a former student who is now studying in a degree. They proudly inform me of their marks, share their new set of challenges, and reiterate how they wouldn't be where they are without the enabling program.

All participants viewed working in this field where they witness transformations as rewarding and a privilege, and they referred to the meaningful nature of what they do and the deep sense of purpose they experience, as described by P1: "I believe I am in a job where I am making a difference and that this will impact on future generations, it is exciting, fulfilling and diverse." The reflections exuded the intrinsically rewarding nature of enabling

education in the personal and the broader social context, as a sustaining feature of the work (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006; Schwartz, 2015). The transformational effects experienced by students mentioned here is supported by literature on enabling education, which describes the changes in the way students think and view themselves, and the potentially life-changing nature of enabling programs (Crawford, 2014; Willans & Seary, 2007). In this study, we see a potential ripple effect on staff. Whilst the emotional labour load is heavy in the enabling space, witnessing and being a part of students' transformations enables a more effective "carrying" of the emotional labour load.

Conclusion and future directions

In summary, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of a group of academic staff working in the unique field of enabling education. Most notably, the qualitative data suggests that there is an emotional labour cost for staff as they navigate and juggle the demands of diverse academic and non-academic student issues within their learning communities. Further, the disjunct between establishing supportive and caring relationships with students and acting in the role of "gatekeeper" can be an additional source of unease for staff. However, the building of community connections of care and support, along with bearing witness to students' transformations, appeared in the self-reflective writing here to be protective factors that may guard against staff burnout.

These preliminary findings are based on the experiences of a small group of cross-institutional enabling educators in Australia. Given the small scale, further research using a larger sample size is warranted in order to better understand some of the issues that have arisen here, including the impact of persistent emotional labour on staff working in this field. Further, an improved understanding of the factors that protect staff against potential

burnout and safeguard their sense of wellbeing and career satisfaction may also influence institutions, enabling programs, and staff policies and practices in the future.

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