Journal of Education, 2025
Issue 101, http://journals.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/joe http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i101a07

Normalising newness: Towards a model for facilitating the transition of newly qualified teachers

Rochelle Kapp

Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
rochelle.kapp@uct.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7878-8721

Mikhaila Steenkamp

Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
mikhaila.steenkamp@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5379-6482

Kate Angier

Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
kate.angier@uct.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8941-0545

Judy Sacks

Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
judy.Sacks@uct.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2526-3743

Hannah Carrim

Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
hannahcarrim@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3348-4369

Melanie Sadeck

Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
sadeckm5@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8200-9250

(Received: 4 May 2025; accepted: 12 November 2025)

Abstract

In this article, we explore the lived experiences of a group of newly qualified South African teachers who were participants in the Newly Qualified Teachers' Project, a programme established to support the transition of new teachers into the workplace. Informed by poststructuralist theory on discourse and teacher education research, we analyse participants' experiences of praxis shock as they confront the realities of the classroom. The data

highlights the emotion-work entailed in building professional identity, as well as the limiting effects of dominant school discourses. We argue that professional identity formation and development involve emotional labour, as well as professional capabilities and, therefore, newly qualified teacher support models must respond to both dimensions to be truly effective. In part two, we describe the contextually based, responsive support model that we developed to normalise the process of becoming a new teacher.

Keywords: discourse practices, emotional labour, newly qualified teachers, praxis shock, professional identity, support.

Introduction

Globally, retention of early career teachers has been identified as a key challenge (Shuls & Flores, 2020), while in South Africa, the most recent report on teacher supply and demand shows that hundreds of early career teachers (aged between 21 and 35) are leaving the profession each year (Van der Berg et al., 2022). Although the report reflects statistical awareness of this problem, at a policy level the solutions offered tend to centre on the goal of producing more graduates. And yet, as research has shown, high levels of staff turnover are known to inhibit teaching and learning, the efficacy and stability of schools, and efforts to redress the legacies of apartheid (Mafukata & Mudau, 2016; Shibiti, 2020).

This article is underpinned by poststructuralist theory and teacher education research and uses data from our qualitative case study (2019–2023) to describe and analyse the lived experiences of a group of newly qualified South African teachers who were participants in the Newly Qualified Teachers' (NQT) Project, a programme established in 2016 to support the transition of new teachers into the workplace. We are teacher educators from two universities. Over the past nine years, we have worked in partnership with experienced teachers, project alumni, government employees, and non-governmental organisations to support the 542 NQTs from 31 public and private universities who enrolled in the programme in their first of year of teaching. The project is conceptualised as a safe space which enables guided learning, peer engagement, mentorship, and reflection by providing practical and psycho-social support, strengthening subject teaching, and facilitating professional resilience and agency.

In part one of this article, we discuss the participants' experiences of praxis shock as they navigate the mismatch between their expectations of teaching and the realities and responsibilities of being a first-year teacher in a context in which novice teachers are expected to be fully competent (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). We describe and analyse the effects of the school context on how NQTs reflect, position themselves, and construct their professional identities. The data highlights the considerable emotion-work entailed in building professional identity (Alsup, 2019; Christie, 2018). We argue that professional identity formation and development involve emotional labour, as well as professional capabilities, so newly qualified teacher support models must respond to both dimensions to be truly effective.

We are engaged in a dialogic process in which our research informs our curriculum and development work in the NQT Project. In part two, we describe the contextually based responsive model that we have developed over the past nine years to normalise the experience of being a new teacher by supporting professional learning and the psycho-social dimensions of teaching.

Background and context

Teacher education research has shown that "[E]arly experiences as a teacher are crucial in determining beginning teachers' attitudes towards teaching, their understanding of the job, their professional behaviour, their classroom practice and their longevity in the profession" (Ballantyne, 2007, p. 2; see also Alsup, 2019; Esau and Maarman, 2019). Research has also shown that teaching is always situated in context, and that learning to teach well and making appropriate pedagogical decisions entails both cognitive and psycho-social dimensions (Alsup, 2019; Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008). Thus, as Christie (2018, p. xxiv) points out, developing teaching expertise and deep knowledge of classrooms and school contexts is ". . . a long-term project that extends beyond what initial teacher education programmes are able to provide."

Significantly, South Africa has no system of apprenticeship for newly qualified teachers, and there is no formal mentoring system at most schools (Bertram, 2023; Makhananesa & Sepeng, 2022). Research by Du Plessis and Sunde (2017) described how principals resent the responsibility of inducting new NQTs and often assign them to teach subjects in which they are unqualified. Moreover, increased casualisation of teacher employment has contributed to a context in which new teachers are given short-term contracts and consequently provided with rudimentary, administration-focused induction (Kapp et al., 2022).

Recent South African research has shown that NQTs are generally expected to teach a full complement of classes with sole responsibility for learner achievement. In most contexts, schools are under-resourced, classes are large and teachers' work is also made difficult by bureaucracy and dysfunctional school management (Bertram, 2023). In addition, new teachers have to negotiate school environments in which teaching continuity, classroom practice, and learner well-being are routinely disrupted by social issues (Ngwira & Potokri, 2019). Research by Botha and Rens (2018) and Esau and Maarman (2019) showed that new teachers struggle to navigate differences between the teaching, learning, and assessment practices envisaged in the pedagogy in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, and practices in different schools.

This complex and challenging teaching environment was the reason behind the establishment of the NQT Project and has informed our focus on understanding NQTs' transition experiences, in order to support the process of building professional identity and resilience.

The concept of teacher professional identity

There is consensus in the field that social relationships are central to teaching. As Christie (2018, p. xxiv) pointed out,

> The practice of teaching and its co-constitutive activity of learning are interpersonal engagements of self-and-other that go well beyond the cognitive domain to include embodied and emotion-laden encounters.

While emotion and cognition are often seen as separate aspects of teaching, here, they are viewed as inextricably connected and as socially constructed (see Chubbuck and Zembylas, 2008; Hargreaves, 1998). Teachers have to negotiate and renegotiate who they are in the classroom in relation to their learners, and in relation to the context and culture of the school (Nias, 1996).

The concept of teachers' professional identities is thus critical to our research on the transition from student to teacher and has informed the development of the teaching model of the NQT Project. According to Ballantyne and Retell (2020, p. 1):

> Professional identities are the ways teachers make sense of themselves within their professional lives. They encompass and are interrelated with personal identities, social and cultural identities and norms, and professional roles and contexts.

This definition reflects the post-structuralist notion that while identities are fluid and multi-faceted, they are also situated. Teacher identity is thus a "dialogue between individual identity and social experience" (Britzman, 1994, p. 59).

We have drawn on the conceptualisation of discourse in Gee (1990, 1999) and Alsup (2019) to argue that schools have dominant discourse practices, that are understood as established, routinised norms and values, ways of constructing knowledge, and ways of identifying that are informed by national policy and local conditions and embedded in complex power relations. Dominant school discourse practices are strongly upheld as an integral part of school culture and may or may not be in the interests of teachers, parents, learners, and learning. New teachers enter the profession with discourse practices from their past social experiences of school and university and with social positions that may be at odds with those of their new teaching contexts. Nevertheless, they are expected to assimilate into the school's discourse practices and to construct what are considered to be appropriate professional identities (Kapp, 2021). Alsup (2019, p. 29) argued that ". . . becoming a new teacher is essentially living, and negotiating, a paradox between individual agency and institutional expectations. . ." Our research seeks to understand how new teachers experience these expectations and the consequences for how they position themselves and build professional identity as they transition into the workplace.

New teachers and the concept of praxis shock

A significant body of literature has foregrounded the concept of praxis shock and the ways in which NQTs are often overwhelmed, isolated, and silenced by their school environments (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020; Stanulis, et al., 2002). Alsup (2019) asserted that whereas teachers' emotions are often constitutive, they are dismissed as marginal to the job of teaching well (see also Ahuja et al., 2018). Ballantyne (2007) argued that, as a result of praxis shock and their negative experiences of the transition, new teachers tend to emphasise survival and conformity to school discourse practices. This emphasis leaves little or no space for reflection and agency and may result in a rejection of pedagogical approaches learnt in university (Ballantyne, 2007).

There is consensus in international and South African research on praxis shock that the first year of teaching poses serious challenges to NQTs' views about what teaching entails, as well as their sense of self (Du Plessis & Sunde, 2017; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). This research associates praxis shock with attrition and describes the ways in which "praxis shock predicts patterns of reported burnout, well-being, and self-efficacy. This impacts the development of productive professional identities, career satisfaction, success and ability to cope with change" (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020, p. 1). See also Botha and Rens, 2018; Esau and Maarman, 2019.

Research design and methodology

Part one of this article draws on data from 47 newly qualified teachers from diverse racial, linguistic, and social class backgrounds who taught at both well-resourced and under-resourced primary and high schools. While there are often marked differences in the workload required and social conditions in working-class schools, the experiences of praxis shock in the data suggest no significant differences between schools.

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the University of Cape Town Ethics Committee. Each year, participants in the NQT Project were invited to participate in the research. Volunteers signed consent forms, were assured that their identities would be kept confidential, and were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any stage. Names used in this article are all pseudonyms.

This article uses data from three sources. First, the data comprises information from a background questionnaire designed to elicit biographical and professional information. Second, a semi-structured, audio-recorded interview was conducted by three of the authors of this article. The interviews provided insight into participants' transition from university; their induction into the new environment; early experiences of school culture; and how they position themselves in relation to their peers, the school, and their learners. Third, participants' quarterly reflective writing submissions were analysed. Guided by prompt questions on pedagogy, professional development, and personal issues, the reflections

provide insight into participants' unfolding professional identities in relation to their experiences.

While this article does not draw explicitly on the NQT Project's workshops and individual mentoring sessions, the authors' experiences of those sources provide a rich, multi-layered context and offer an additional perspective that informs our understanding of participants' peer engagement and their journeys.

A central aspect of the development work of the NQT Project has been to foster verbal and written reflection as part of the process of constructing professional identity and engaging with the emotional work of transition. Reflection is consequently also central to our research process. We view reflection as a tool for making meaningful connections between theory and practice; as way of integrating content, pedagogical knowledge, and practice, and as a tool for informed decision-making and the development of professional judgement (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Kapp, 2021).

Tracing patterns, exceptions, silences, and contradictions in and across data sources was essential to the data analysis of participants' reflections in their interviews and writing. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 2010) was used as a tool to analyse "relationships of causality.". Rather than merely describing instances of discursive practice, Critical Discourse Analysis "aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes…" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132).

Our analysis concentrated on participants' reflections on their lived experiences of entering the profession, and consequent meaning-making processes and positioning (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017). In this respect, we do not assume that we can read identities from the data. We foreground participants' voices since we are interested in *how* participants processed their experiences and their consequent construction of professional identity (see Sfard and Prusak, 2005; Stanulis et al., 2002).

Experiences of praxis shock

Similarly to other South African research (Botha & Rens, 2018; Esau & Maarman, 2019), our data is replete with participants' descriptions of the gap between the idealised notion of teacher identity and practices they had held as pre-service educators, and the practical realities they faced in their first year.

Participants' descriptions of their early experiences foregrounded their emotions. Many participants spoke of their shock at the volume of work required outside of the classroom. They had seemingly conceptualised teaching as primarily performance in the classroom, centred on well-designed, creative lesson plans. This perception had been reinforced by their experiences of teaching practice in their pre-service education. As Ella[1] reflected,

1 Participant responses have not been edited.

> I thought teaching was a face-to-face job. . . I didn't anticipate the amount of energy it takes emotionally, and I definitely didn't expect the admin load.

Participants were taken aback by the extent to which the institutional focus was on administration and monitoring rather than on classroom teaching and learning practices. For Amaarah,

> I felt like there was a lot of emphasis on process, like you must do this, you must do that. . . that needs to be ticked off. . . And then I found that you'd be so preoccupied with ticking the tick boxes that the whole purpose of teaching and learning takes a little bit of a back step.

A significant feature of the data is participants' shock at how they were expected to be familiar with everyday school-specific practices. For example, while the regimen of compulsory tests in schools is extensive, many were left with little or no guidance and supervision about the pace of learning and assessment processes (see also Du Plessis and Sunde, 2017; Esau and Maarman, 2019). With few exceptions, the notion of workplace learning, joint planning, and sharing of resources and models seemed to be absent, as is evident in the following statements.

> [I felt] overwhelmed because I was expected to do and know things… I wasn't treated like a teacher who had just stepped into the profession. (Kerri)

> There was no orientation really. I was really thrown into the deep end. (Lucy)

> At first, I had a little bit of difficulty to get my head around the curriculum because I had to set it out all myself, um, what order I was going to do things in, how it was gonna happen because I was the only grade three teacher. We weren't given the guidance to work together as a foundation phase. (Sophie)

When mentors were assigned, they were often also participants' line managers and/or already over-burdened teachers who primarily issued instructions about administration.

A few participants narrated instances of experiencing a sense of exclusion from dominant discourses in the school environment when race, gender, perceived class position, university background, and/or language issues appeared to play a role. For example, Gita taught in an English medium school where her colleagues were home language speakers of Afrikaans, a language in which she had minimal proficiency. She said,

> I was the only Indian person there. . . I felt very out of place in the sense that I would sit in meetings as a new teacher. . . experiencing all of these things and new terminology being used. . . and the meetings would be conducted in Afrikaans, and it's an English medium school. We have 99.9% children that's coming from all over Africa, and yet they're not allowed to speak their home languages. . . I found it a struggle. . . I never felt comfortable around the staff, to be honest. At break times, I would sit in classrooms. . . I would keep myself busy with work.

Gita's lived experiences of exclusion from both formal and informal school discourse silenced and isolated her, placing her in solidarity with her learners, who were similarly allocated marginal positions.

Several participants spoke of being silenced when they asked questions in meetings, and they interpreted this as a collective consensus that they were ignorant. Gadija said,

> In term 2, my mentor was the acting HOD as well. There was almost no support from her and when she was asked a question [by another new teacher] in one of our grade meetings she said, 'You are supposed to know these things you studied.'

Gadija and others also spoke of their limited contact with the school principal and their difficulties with engaging with hierarchical structures in their schools.

Participants' classes were observed for the purpose of compulsory monitoring and evaluation, but not for guidance or mentoring. In instances where participants were perceived to be digressing from dominant school discourse practices, they were admonished and subsequently monitored. For example, Juliet spoke of how her sense of the type of teacher she wanted to be was "quickly broken down" by her colleagues as a consequence of her advocacy of child-centred teaching in the impoverished, working-class primary school in which she taught. In one instance, she was "chased" back into her classroom by the school principal when she engaged in creative play with her learners in the school grounds because this was considered a deviation from the prescribed curriculum. The principal threatened to report her to the Department of Education and took to standing outside her door

> . . . making sure I wasn't teaching the way that I wanted to, I was teaching the way that they told me to teach, um, and so I challenged that really, really hard in the first term and [had] a lot of fights with my principal and there came a time that I was just really exhausted and I just sort of gave in to what they wanted.

Like many other participants, Juliet's description of her exhaustion signifies the emotional toll of the pressure to conform to expected discourse practices that run counter to what she had previously learnt, and counter to her notion of professional identity. While she felt that she was watched to ensure behavioural conformity to the school's approach to teaching and learning, despite repeated requests, she received no resources and guidance from her head of department with regard to planning and assessment.

Andile's work as an English teacher at another under-resourced school was similarly unsupervised by a head of department, and, in addition to his own teaching load of 13 large classes, he was expected to teach and assess most of the principal's classes. At his school, there were five NQTs, who were all on short-term contracts and expected to carry heavier workloads and extra duties compared to experienced staff in permanent positions. In his words, "We, the newly qualified teachers, have to adapt. . . each and every time we are asked to intervene, we need to be there." Similarly to Andile, many participants felt compelled to comply with excessive demands since they feared termination of their contracts.

Teacher professional identity

In response to their experiences, participants spoke of their guilt, fear, shame, and anxiety, because they felt they ought to know, and/or because they believed that they were disturbing already busy colleagues by asking for help (see also Esau and Maarman, 2019). They articulated their perceived failures openly in the interviews (frequently using the word "honestly") and described themselves variously as "exhausted", "drowning", "overwhelmed" and "sinking." The following examples are typical.

> I did not ask for enough help. I definitely didn't ask for help soon enough and by the time I did, I felt very guilty because it was clearly too late in the term not to know, to feel like I didn't have my ducks in a row, and so I felt afraid of people finding out that actually that I had been winging it so much, so I didn't ask for enough help, I didn't, but I also wasn't quite sure that the help was there that I needed. (Hazel)

> I mean, I honestly felt for a long time like I was just a student teacher, just faking it, pretending I was a real teacher [it lasted] probably almost to the end of the term. (Lily)

> I felt guilty because I felt like I was pestering [my colleagues] a lot. . . I think I was having impostor syndrome. . . every time I come to my colleagues with a problem, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, what if they think I'm useless, what if they're irritated that I'm asking them another question, what if I'm getting a secret performance appraisal right now. (Maya)

The notion of "imposter syndrome" in Maya's comment is evident in various iterations throughout the data (see also LaPalme et al., 2022; Sims and Cassidy, 2019). There are many instances where NQTs felt that blame was assigned to them when they struggled to cope with above-average workloads, when they took longer than other teachers to complete sections of the curriculum, or when they failed to comply with organisational structure and processes which they felt had not been made explicit.

Some participants seemed to have internalised the deficit view that they ought to be familiar with school-specific discourses and that they ought to be adept at teaching in their first year. As a result of self-doubt, the NQTs appeared to compensate in various ways. The common pattern in the data is a desire to hide vulnerability and produce a semblance of authority and competence for their twin audiences—their colleagues and their learners (see also Alsup, 2019). While for some, the result is "faking it," others resorted to rote-learning, in Shazia's words, "to push through whether [the learners] understand or not" in order to "finish" the curriculum and fulfil assessment requirements. Many participants signalled both compliance and alienation, describing how they abandoned their belief in creating positive, participatory teaching environments and resorted to authoritarian classroom management practices.

> I started out not shouting. . . but you know, come the second term, you find yourself shouting and . . . and acting out in emotional ways that I didn't expect from myself. (Amaarah)

> I have not been doing a lot of exciting and fun things just because time is of the essence . . . it's like I need to focus on doing this sum, like we need to finish this. (Carly)

Alsup (2019) pointed out that many new teachers struggle with figuring out a professional identity that both expresses authority and connects to the student-centred and critical pedagogies that characterise their pre-service education. It is a process that benefits from open conversation with a mentor and guidance about context-appropriate strategies that enable learning. It also requires an environment which allows NQTs to be vulnerable to trying out different strategies and learning from mistakes over time (Alsup, 2019). The data suggests that the participants' experiences of being silenced and positioned as ignorant, as well as the precariousness of their employment preclude expressions of vulnerability.

Like many other participants, Aphiwe spoke of the struggle to come to terms with not being the super-star teacher she had imagined being. Her comment at the end of her first year verbalised a sentiment common to the data, "I was just on survival mode, and I haven't really sort of fully come into myself as a teacher" (see also Ballantyne, 2007). Interestingly, while the notion of "survival mode" signals Aphiwe's disappointment in her current identity as a teacher, it also reflects an understanding that developing a teacher identity that she considers appropriate is a process that will take time.

What is striking in the interview data is that while participants struggled to navigate survival mode, when asked what motivated them to stay in the profession, they spoke mainly about how they enjoyed teaching. They foregrounded their relationships with learners and their strong sense of social purpose. The teachers' reflections provide evidence for this in the form of many examples of resourcefulness, responsive classroom management practices, strategic learning interventions, fundraising for school-wide learner-centred resources and activities, and of constructive engagement with individual learners with behavioural problems. For example, although Juliet was left despondent by the disapproval of her perceived deviation from the curriculum, her later description of a successful teaching moment that enabled her to stay in teaching is both poignant and telling.

> I tended to see the beauty in it when you know, I introduced painting. . . not successfully, but you know, like just trying to do those things and seeing how they responded to me trying. [The lesson] was linked to healthy eating and . . . we had a vegetable garden, and we went and picked vegetables in the garden. . . brought them to the table, and they painted it, and he [a learner who had punched her the previous day] sat for an hour and a half, and he painted. I didn't teach them how to mix colours. I didn't. He realised if he mixed certain colours together, it became another colour, it was the most incredible thing to see this child, who has so much hurt, so

> much hatred, so much going on, so many negative things going on at home, who had quite literally physically assaulted me the day before, just sitting and being at peace.

The emotion expressed in this reflection is predominantly one of empathy, admiration, and care for the learner's well-being, as well as joy and tentative hope as a result of being able to facilitate learning and creativity within the child-centred paradigm, which she values. The language used by Juliet to describe the moment of learning is embodied, emotion-laden, and inextricably bound to its context (see Hargreaves, 1998). She had endured physical and emotional suffering in this school context. Nevertheless, she persevered to create an environment conducive to stimulating discovery and creativity. This moment carried significance for Juliet since she felt that it validated her pedagogy and represented a move towards the professional identity that she had struggled to realise. Through reflection and mentoring in the NQT Project space, she was able to place the incident in the discursive context of the learner's home environment and to reflect on it productively in terms of her own growth as a teacher.

Towards normalising newness: The Newly Qualified Project model

The experience of praxis shock is an expected part of the transition from the more theoretical orientation of the academic space to the practical, social reality of becoming a professional in a specific context. As in all professions, the transition is precarious, non-linear, and takes time. However, as the data shows, new teachers are treated as experienced professionals, and the onus is placed on them to connect and integrate idealised theoretical knowledge from disparate courses in initial teacher education to workplace contexts (Alsup, 2019; Britzman, 2003). Ironically, they are derided for not knowing and simultaneously allocated high levels of responsibility. They are seldom valued for their strengths, and the new knowledge they bring is often dismissed. Rather than being mentored into a professional identity, they are primarily line-managed and expected to conform to school discourses.

In response to this context, the NQT project was constructed as a shared professional learning community that resides between pre-service education and the workplace. In doing so, we recognise that learning happens in context, that transfer of theory into practice is a process, and that many aspects of the theoretical knowledge learned at university are not applicable in some school contexts. The project is structured around four interconnected components: (1) an interactive, accredited course which focusses on the psycho-social aspects of teaching and the practical aspects of teaching and learning; (2) individual mentorship and written reflection with teacher educators and experienced teachers (including past NQT participants who have completed an accredited mentoring course); (3) subject specific peer and expert support, which includes resource sharing among current and past NQTs, and (4) a winter school (with new and experienced teachers) which provides subject specific and general skills workshops.

We draw from Gee (1999, p. 22) and Alsup (2019, p. 6) to argue that the project represents a "borderland discourse," a space between discourses, where many often-conflicting meanings

and identities can be explored. In this understanding, it is a site for exploration of the boundaries, limits, and possibilities in initial teacher education and schools. The discourse practices of both domains are articulated and made explicit. This enables analysis of areas of connection and disconnection in the discourse practices of each domain, as well as exploration of how new teachers are positioned and how they may reposition themselves. Through the workshops and the individual mentoring, we provide models and context-appropriate teaching and learning strategies that enable NQTs to work out the applicability of theoretical knowledge from pre-service education to their specific teaching context and current problems.

Within the project space, participants are able to articulate their experiences and express doubt and vulnerability with peers and mentors in a safe space outside of the school setting. Their voices and emotions are heard, recognised, normalised, and placed in context. In the process, they are also moved away from isolation, silence, and deficit constructions. In Qanita's words, "I felt like I was going crazy, but then I also realised later on that I wasn't alone." The effects of the project space on individual motivation, sense of belonging, and purpose are evident in the following examples from participants' written reflections.

> The NQT Project has been a positive influence in my first year and a time I will value for the rest of my career. I have made amazing connections with other first-year teachers and friendships that I will value. The project has given me many reasons through the workshops and one one-on-one mentoring to continue in this profession. (Scarlett)

> The NQT Project has truly helped me personally and professionally. One-on-one sessions were very productive because I was able to share my feelings and thoughts with someone who did not judge nor dismiss me. (Kethiwe)

The emphasis on professional support and networks, as well as individual empathetic mentorship in these quotations signifies the role the project plays in supporting both professional learning and the emotional labour of teaching.

Critical reflection is central to our development work. NQTs are constructed as inquirers engaged in a constant "process of assessing and comparing existing practice and knowledge in order to predict, speculate and answer questions" (Ussher & Chalmers, 2011, p. 95). The process of reflection with peers and individual mentoring in different spaces contributes to meta-awareness (Gee, 1990) and to disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions and assumptions about social positioning (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Ryan, 2011).

Thus, while the project plays an important part in affirming teachers as in the examples quoted above, guiding them to develop beyond survival mode is crucial to building resilience. NQTs are challenged to set incremental, individual goals each term in order to reflect and learn from experience. This guided process entails taking the knowledge learned from reflecting on immediate problems, to figuring out who they are in the classroom and how they wish to reposition themselves to become more effective teaching professionals. In

Alsup's (2019, p. 3) words, ". . . borderland discourse grows out of cognitive and emotional dissonance but can lead to identity growth." The participants' purposeful engagement with the growth of their professional identities is evident in these extracts from their final reflections.

> I'm very glad and grateful that I joined the project because it gave me multiple chances to reflect and discuss my feelings, experiences, and goals. I work best when I have an objective, but a lot of the time, I became so busy or was so exhausted that I just went through the motions each day and forgot about what I wanted to achieve. Revisiting these goals and re-evaluating them in the mentoring sessions helped me find purpose again and a renewed energy because I knew where I was going again. (Samantha)

> I'm so grateful for the NQT mentor I was placed with, as she would often challenge me and not always give me the answers. She also made me realise it's okay to not always get things right and that teaching is a process. Having an outside voice in situations you face and not exactly wanting to share with colleagues has also been impactful; she has created a safe space. The one-on-one sessions leave me encouraged and motivated, too. (Zandile)

The many different perspectives made available through the project play a role in helping NQTs to question their assumptions, learn from their mistakes, analyse their practices, and work out ways to engage in innovative pedagogy within the limits of their contexts. Samantha's description of "revisiting" and "re-evaluating" signals meta-awareness that the process of building professional identity entails constant reflection over time. Participants often mention that they would not have made space for such reflection were it not a component of the project's programme.

The project's effect in building confidence that enables agency, and resilience is evident in many descriptions by NQTs. For example, Gita, who felt silenced by the dominance of Afrikaans in her school staff room, asserted that

> . . . after my [mentoring] meetings, it kind of liberated me to confront the principal, and I went to the principal's office, and I told her exactly how I feel around this whole Afrikaans speaking in meetings. And she took it very well, and from that time onwards, I realised if I'm not comfortable around something I will speak up. . . The project provided space like that for me because at school I felt like I wasn't growing in my profession so I will come to do NQT sessions and I would feel like I've been enriched and I was learning and I was being given advice and given strategies, and being told experiences where I can learn from and kind of use that experience to kind of reflect. . . and speak my mind and do what I was meant to do and try to fulfil my purposes as a teacher, I saw a lot of growth, a lot of growth in myself, a lot of growth in my learners.

What is evident in this extract, is the way in which stepping into a supportive space outside of her immediate school context, built confidence and enabled Gita to find her voice and engage constructively in the process of building her professional identity.

Conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted the transition experiences of a group of new teachers and described how they are expected to transition from the role of student to professional with little or no guidance. In many cases, they are also expected to assume a passive identity that complies with established school discourses.

The borderland space provided by the NQT Project supports new teachers both professionally and emotionally in the process of building professional identity. While it is a relatively small intervention and cannot substitute for school-based mentoring, it provides a model for normalising the experience of praxis shock. Furthermore, the project enables a process in which new teachers can work with the knowledge gained in initial teacher education and the workplace to reflect on what is appropriate for their contexts, as well as develop resilient, agentic, professional identities.

In the NQT framework, facilitating the transition of new teachers is seen as a shared responsibility across universities and schools. Teacher education is perceived as a continuum and teacher educators, experienced teachers, and NQTs work in partnership to provide a bridge from initial teacher education to the workplace. The goal is to scaffold and support professional identity development and improve professional practice. Working with new teachers in this way has enriched our pre-service teacher education by facilitating greater contextual awareness and relevant experience of the challenges experienced by new teachers. It has also built an energetic, growing community of stakeholders across education domains who work in synergy to mentor, share resources and expertise with NQTs, and ultimately work together to strengthen the teaching profession.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to HCI Foundation and The Saville Foundation for generous sponsorship of the NQT Project and to Emeritus Professor Pam Christie and our reviewers for helpful advice.

References

Ahuja, S., Heizmann, H., & Clegg, S. (2018). Emotions and identity work: Emotions as discursive resources in the constitution of junior professionals' identities. *Human Relations*, 72(5), 988–1009. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718785719

Alsup, J. (2019). *Millennial teacher identity discourses: Balancing self and other*. Routledge.

Ballantyne, J. (2007). Documenting praxis shock in early-career Australian music teachers: The impact of pre-service teacher education. *International Journal of Music Education*, *25*(3), 181–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761407083573

Ballantyne, J., & Retell, J. (2020). Teaching careers: Exploring links between well-being, burnout, self-efficacy and praxis shock. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02255

Bangeni, B. & Kapp, R. (2017). Introduction: Conceptualising access, persistence and retention. In B. Bangeni & R. Kapp (Eds.), *Negotiating learning and identity in higher education: Access, persistence and retention* (pp. 1–17). Bloomsbury.

Bertram, C. (2023). A systems approach to understanding novice teachers' experiences and professional learning. *Journal of Education*, *90*, 11–31. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i90a01

Botha, C. S., & Rens, J. (2018). Are they really 'ready, willing and able'? Exploring reality shock in beginner teachers in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, *38*(3), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n3a1546

Britzman, D. (1994). Is there a problem with knowing thyself? Toward a post-structuralist view of teacher identity. In T. Shanahan (Ed.), *Teachers thinking, teachers knowing* (pp. 55–75). National Council of Teachers of English.

Britzman, D. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. State University of New York Press.

Carrington, S., & Selva, G. (2010). Critical reflection and transformative learning: Evidence in pre-service teachers' service-learning logs. *Higher Education Research and Development*, *29*(1)*,* 45–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903421384

Christie, P. (2018). Foreword. In Y. Sayed, N. Carrim, A. Badroodien, Z. McDonald & M. Singh (Eds.), *Learning to teach in post-apartheid South Africa: Student teachers' encounters with Initial Teacher Education* (pp. xxiii–xxvi). African Sun Media, SUN Press.

Chubbuck, S., & Zembylas, M. (2008). The emotional ambivalence of socially just teaching: A case study of a novice urban schoolteacher. *American Educational Research Journal*, *45*, 274 –318. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207311586

Du Plessis, A. E., & Sunde, E. (2017). The workplace experiences of beginning teachers in three countries: A message for initial teacher education from the field. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *43*, 132–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2017.1286759

Esau, D. E., & Maarman, R. (2019). Re-positioning the competences of beginner teachers in South Africa: A capabilities perspective. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *33*, 111–132. https://doi.org/10.20853/33-6-3010

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Discourse analysis*. Longman.

Gee, J. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. Falmer Press.

Gee, J. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. Routledge.

Gelfuso, A., & Dennis, D. (2014). Getting reflection off the page: The challenges of developing support structures for pre-service teacher reflection. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *38,* 1–11.

Hargreaves, A. (1998). The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *14*(8), 835–854.

Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge.

Kapp, R. (2021). Engaging Deficit: Preservice Teachers' Reflections on negotiation of working-class schools. In C. McKinney & P. Christie (Eds.), *Decoloniality, language and literacy: Conversations with teacher educators* (pp.117–135). Multilingual Matters.

Kapp, R. Angier, K. Sacks, J., & Sadeck, M. (2022-08-10). Increasing casualisation of education jobs has serious consequences for newly qualified teachers. Daily Maverick. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-08-10-increasing-casualisation-of-education-jobs-has-serious-consequences-for-newly-qualified-teachers/

Kelchtermans, G., & Ballet, K. (2002). The micropolitics of teacher induction: A narrative-biographical study on teacher socialisation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *18*(1), 105–120.

LaPalme, M., Luo, P., Cipriano, C., & Brackett, M. (2022). Imposter syndrome among pre-service educators and the importance of emotion regulation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.838575

Mafukata, A. M., & Mudau, A. V. (2016). Exploring teacher mass resignation and early retirement from public schools. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, *43*(5), 2243–2255.

Makhananesa, J. L., & Sepeng, M. S. (2022). Exploring threats to novice teachers' development in selected secondary schools in South Africa. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *21*, 259–271 https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.12.14

Ngwira, H., & Potokri, O. C. (2019). Induction of women beginner teachers at two South African Community secondary schools. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, *77*, 774–789. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/19.77.774

Nias, J. (1996). Thinking about feeling: The emotions in teaching. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *26*(3), 293–306.

Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2013). Struggling for a professional identity: Two newly qualified language teachers' identity narratives during the first years at work. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *30,* 120–129. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.002

Ryan, M. (2011). Spaces of possibility in pre-service teacher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *32*(6), 881–900. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.614745

Sfard, A., & Prusak, A. (2005). Telling identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity. *Educational Researcher*, *34*, 14–22.

Shibiti, R. (2020). Public school teachers' satisfaction with retention factors in relation to work engagement. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, *46*, a1675. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v46i0.1675

Shuls, V. J., & Flores, M. J. (2020). Improving teacher retention through support and development. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, *4*(1), 1–19.

Sims, W. L., & Cassidy, J. W. (2019). Impostor phenomenon responses of early career music education faculty. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *67*, 45–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429418812464

Stanulis, R., Campbell, P., & Hicks, J. (2002). Finding her way: A beginning teacher's story of learning to honour her own voice in teaching. *Educational Action Research*, *10*(1), 45–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790200200177

Ussher, B., & Chalmers, J. (2011). Now what? First-year teachers' reflective journal writing. *Waikato Journal of Education*, *16*(3), 95–110.

Van der Berg, S., Gustafsson, M. A., & Burger, C. (2022). School teacher supply and demand in South Africa in 2019 and beyond. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4213003