

Passion To Practice: Early Career Teachers' Motivation, Content Confidence, and Coping Strategies in Teaching

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Abstract: This study examines how early career teachers (ECTs) in South African schools perceive their readiness to teach, focusing on intrinsic motivation, perceived gaps in content knowledge, coping strategies, and the development of emerging confidence. Employing a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm and a multiple-case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected ECTs, and the transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Five themes emerged: (1) motivation and a service-oriented purpose sustain engagement; (2) feelings of inadequacy linked to content uncertainties undermine self-efficacy; (3) coping relies on preparation, collegial support, and digital resources; (4) variable quality in initial teacher education (ITE) shapes early confidence; and (5) growth occurs through repetition, feedback, and reflection. Findings indicate a need for induction that explicitly targets subject-specific fluency, predictable and content-focused mentoring, and timetabled collaborative planning. It is argued that, in addition to the passion that ECTs bring, they require systematic support to convert effort into confidence and content security.

Keywords: Early career teachers, intrinsic motivation, content knowledge, mentoring, work-integrated learning.

1. Introduction

Teaching is a profession that demands both intellectual competence and emotional investment. In South Africa, ensuring that early career teachers (ECTs) are adequately prepared for the realities of the classroom remains a pressing concern, as teacher quality directly influences learners' academic, social, and emotional development (Elyashiv & Rozenberg, 2024). Teacher readiness encompasses pedagogical and content knowledge, as well as the confidence, motivation, and coping capacity required to manage complex school environments (Scott et al., 2025). Despite significant investment in initial teacher education (ITE), many ECTs continue to report feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy, and anxiety during their early years, raising concerns about the effectiveness of ITE and induction frameworks in sustaining motivation and building professional competence.

Passion and motivation form crucial dimensions of teacher readiness. Passion is a deep emotional commitment to teaching, often drawing individuals into the profession and sustaining their engagement (Edward et al., 2024). Furthermore, passion represents the internal drive to teach for personal fulfilment and moral purpose rather than external rewards (Edward et al., 2024). However, research shows that passion alone, without structured mentoring, collaborative support, and enthusiasm, may decline as ECTs confront heavy workloads, content uncertainty, and learner behavioural challenges (Daines, 2025). In this study, ECTs are defined as individuals in their first five years after completing ITE.

Coping strategies also play a key role in navigating early career demands. These strategies may be individual, such as lesson planning, self-reflection, and the use of digital resources, or systemic, including structured mentoring, collaborative planning, and leadership support (Wang et al., 2024).

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Research consistently shows that relational and systemic supports are most effective in enhancing confidence and well-being (Nwoko et al., 2024). However, in South Africa, these support systems are often inconsistent, causing ECTs to rely heavily on personal resilience. As scholars and long-standing practitioners in the South African education system, our experiences mirror these challenges. In support of this, Tabe, Moyo & Dube (2021) note that ECTs frequently depend on informal networks due to limited structured support, which contributes to emotional strain and diminished confidence. Such shortcomings place ECTs at heightened risk of burnout and attrition.

The significance of this study lies in addressing these gaps. Without sustainable support interventions, inequities in Early Career Teacher (ECT) development will persist, reinforcing cycles of teacher turnover and undermining school performance (Tabé et al., 2021). Building on Lauer mann and König's (2016) findings on workload-related barriers to help-seeking, this study aims to inform leaders and policymakers about targeted strategies that enhance ECT confidence, retention, and well-being. Although global research has examined ECT motivation, readiness, and well-being (Lauer mann & König, 2016; Elyashiv & Rozenberg, 2024; Scott et al., 2025), limited scholarship investigates how intrinsic passion, motivation, and systemic support interact in the South African context (Tabé, 2024). Most studies examine these factors in isolation, neglecting their combined influence on ECT self-efficacy, coping, and retention (Brown, Myers & Collins, 2021; Daines, 2025; Nwoko et al., 2024). Yet research consistently shows that motivation cannot be sustained without structured mentoring, collaboration, and supportive leadership (Wang et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study investigates how ECTs' passion, motivation, and institutional supports jointly influence content confidence, readiness, self-efficacy, coping, and retention during the transition from initial teacher education (ITE) to full practice. It further examines how mentoring, collaborative planning, and feedback systems strengthen professional commitment and long-term sustainability in the South African teaching profession.

1.1 Problem statement

Despite the enthusiasm and passion many ECTs bring to the classroom, a substantial gap remains between their ITE preparation and the realities of South African schools, including those in culturally diverse Kimberley. Kimberley was selected for its unique cultural mix, which influences teaching approaches and learner engagement. Evidence shows that many ECTs struggle with classroom management, learner motivation, and curriculum adaptation (Zhukova, 2018; Franklin & Harrington, 2019). This under-preparedness often leads to feelings of inadequacy and professional failure, contributing to high levels of burnout (Ndebele, Ravhuhali, & Legg-Jack, 2022). Many ECTs resort to improvisational teaching strategies, exacerbating job dissatisfaction and raising attrition rates, with up to 50% leaving within five years (Nwoko et al., 2025).

These challenges have serious implications for schools and learners. High turnover disrupts continuity and negatively affects learner engagement, particularly in disadvantaged communities that rely on stable, high-quality teaching (Shengyao et al., 2024). Turnover also places financial and organisational strain on schools, hindering long-term planning and deepening educational inequalities. Hence, this study addresses a key gap in the limited understanding of ECTs' motivations, content confidence, and coping strategies within the South African context. By examining these factors in diverse environments such as Kimberley, the study offers recommendations for stronger induction, ongoing mentorship, and targeted professional development to build a resilient, equitable teaching workforce.

To address this problem, the study responded to the following questions:

- What drives early-career teachers to choose and remain committed to the teaching profession?
- How do feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt affect early career teachers' confidence and classroom performance?

- What coping strategies and support systems help early career teachers manage professional and emotional challenges?
- How does initial teacher education and teaching practice influence early career teachers' readiness for classroom realities?
- How do early career teachers develop confidence and professional competence through experience and reflection?

2. Theoretical Frameworks

This study utilises two complementary theoretical lenses: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive perspective on the motivations and competencies necessary for ECTs as they navigate their professional development. The image below is the representation of SDT and Shulman's Knowledge Domains in Shaping ECT Confidence and Retention.

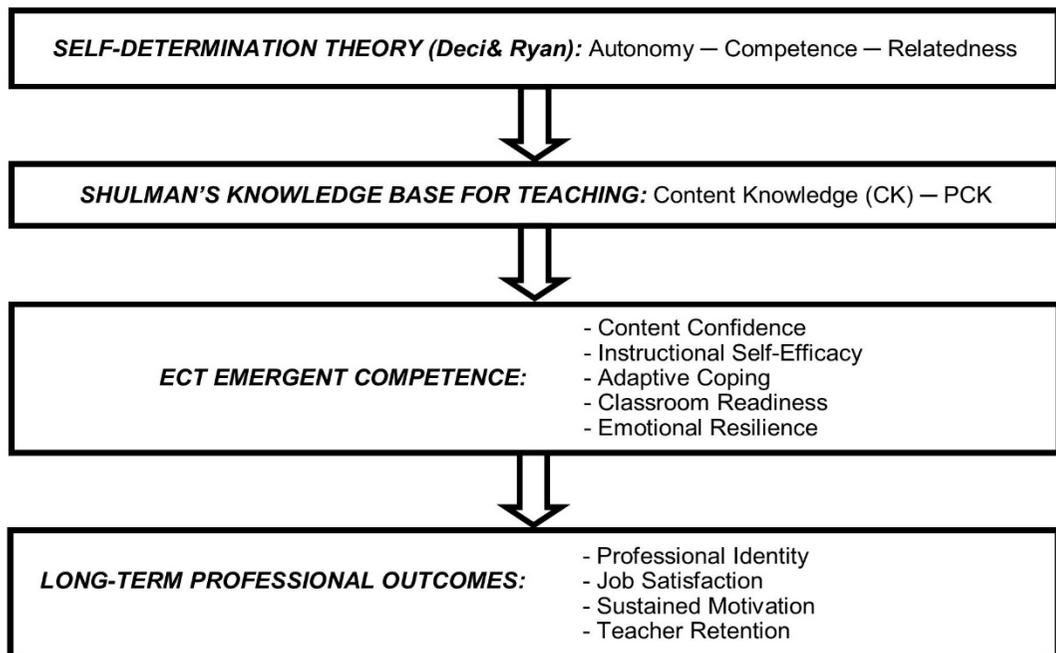


Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the integrated conceptual framework that underpins this study. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) elucidates the ways in which autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence ECTs' psychological motivation. Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching (1986; 1987) underscores the importance of Content Knowledge (CK) and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as foundational elements of instructional competence. The framework posits that when psychological needs are adequately supported, in conjunction with robust CK and PCK, ECTs cultivate content confidence, instructional self-efficacy, adaptive coping strategies, and emotional resilience. These emergent competencies play a pivotal role in the formation of professional identity, job satisfaction, sustained motivation, and long-term retention within the teaching profession.

2.1 Self-determination theory (SDT)

SDT, developed by Deci and Ryan in the 1970s, explains human motivation through the interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Central to the theory are three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which influence individuals' choices, well-being, and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy refers to the feeling of being in control of one's actions;

competence involves feeling effective and capable; and relatedness highlights the importance of meaningful social connections.

When these needs are fulfilled, intrinsic motivation increases, leading individuals to engage in activities out of interest and satisfaction. Conversely, when these needs are undermined, motivation and well-being decline (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT is relevant to this study because it helps explain ECTs' experiences as they transition into the profession. Supportive mentorship and structured induction promote autonomy, while training and constructive feedback build competence, enhancing ECTs' confidence. Strong professional relationships fulfil the need for relatedness, reducing isolation and contributing to greater job satisfaction and retention.

2.2 Shulman's knowledge base for teaching

To complement SDT, this study incorporates Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching, which highlights the pedagogical knowledge essential for ECT competence. Shulman identifies core domains such as CK and PCK, both crucial for developing content confidence, classroom readiness, and a strong professional identity (Shulman, 1986, 1987; Marshall & Adams, 2024; Brown et al., 2021).

Integrating SDT with Shulman's framework enables a fuller understanding of how ECTs' intrinsic motivation and perceived competence are shaped by mentoring, collaboration, and feedback in school environments. This combined perspective demonstrates how supportive contexts help transform emotional commitment into professional capability by aligning motivational, pedagogical, and contextual factors. Thus, employing both theories strengthens the study's ability to assess how ECTs convert passion into effective practice and underscores the importance of systemic support in sustaining their professional development.

3. Literature Review

This section investigates the theme of teaching motivation, emphasising its importance within the context of early career teachers (ECTs). Understanding the motivational drivers underpinning ECTs' engagement in the profession is critical, given the implications for their development and the learning experiences they facilitate. By reviewing pertinent scholarship, we explored how intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, and commitment to teaching converge to shape ECTs' instructional practices and influence learner achievement.

The issue of school performance in South Africa and globally remains contested, shaped by social injustice and systemic inequalities (Tshuma, Gqoli, Velle, Mbukanma, & Manganyi, 2024). While factors such as historical disparities and parental circumstances contribute to learner outcomes, the passion and motivation of ECTs remain central. Shepherd (2013) notes that effective ECTs combine strong intrinsic motivation with deep subject knowledge, which is a crucial factor for ECTs still developing confidence and competence. Tabe (2024) further explains that motivation is closely linked to self-efficacy and passion for teaching, as passionate ECTs find purpose in their work and demonstrate sustained commitment. Likewise, Cai and Negumbo (2017), as cited in Tabe (2024), observe that learner performance is strongly associated with ECTs' professional competence and attitudes toward their work, thereby highlighting the importance of this study. ECTs often struggle with instructional efficacy and sustaining their passion due to feelings of inadequacy and overwhelming professional demands (Nene, 2023). These challenges are intensified by teacher shortages, out-of-field teaching, and overcrowded classrooms, which limit ECTs' ability to develop motivation and confidence and to deliver effective instruction (Ma, 2024; Hobbs & Porsch, 2021). When ECTs are assigned subjects they were not trained to teach, they frequently experience a mismatch between their passion, knowledge, and classroom expectations, leading to incompetence and stress (Nakar & Du Plessis, 2023). Such conditions can diminish enthusiasm for teaching, with underqualified or unsupported ECTs becoming demotivated or dissatisfied (Pirro, 2024).

Large classes also restrict personalised teaching, making it difficult for ECTs to connect with learners and deepening feelings of inadequacy (Park & Ramirez, 2022). Without guidance from senior colleagues, both learner performance and ECTs' passion are negatively affected (Wang et al, 2024). Furthermore, when learners appear disengaged, even passionate ECTs may feel exhausted and discouraged (Nwoko et al., 2025). Broader schooling inequalities further compound these difficulties (Theoharis, 2024), highlighting the need for strong school management support to sustain ECT motivation (Thériault & Gazzola, 2023). Addressing shortages, class sizes, and support structures is critical for developing a confident and motivated ECT workforce (McLure & Aldridge, 2022).

SDT posits that individuals are most motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For ECTs, these needs are particularly critical during the transition into full teaching practice. Autonomy enhances self-efficacy, as motivation is contingent upon confidence in one's ability to teach effectively (Tabe, 2024). Educational leaders can support autonomy through professional development, flexible planning, and structured induction programmes such as England's Early Career Framework (Department for Education, 2024, 2025). Competence is equally vital, given its influence on learner outcomes (Tabe, 2023; Cai & Negumbo, 2017). Relatedness, fostered through mentoring and collaboration, reduces feelings of isolation (Tabe et al., 2021; Tabe, 2024). In South Africa, challenges such as shortages, overcrowding, and uneven induction undermine confidence. Consequently, robust ITE programmes and mentorship are essential to enhance motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Chinhengo, 2023).

ECTs often enter the profession with limited classroom management and behavioural intervention skills due to gaps in their ITE, which undermines their confidence and readiness (Lauermann & König, 2016). When ECTs encounter difficulties in creating engaging learning environments, their enthusiasm for teaching may wane (Tuzylak-Maguire, 2025). Although insufficient on their own, continuous professional development workshops are necessary to strengthen and supplement pre-service preparation (Carl & Strydom, 2017). International evidence also indicates that inconsistent ITE quality can leave ECTs feeling insecure and unsupported, negatively impacting motivation and job satisfaction (Marshall & Adams, 2024). Targeted, needs-aligned training aids ECTs in developing essential skills and sustaining their passion for teaching (Hussein, 2025), while inadequate in-service support contributes to disillusionment and diminished motivation.

Robust ITE programmes are essential for fostering learner-centred teaching, motivation, and classroom preparedness (Yli-Pietilä, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö, 2024). Although improvements have been observed, ITE still requires closer alignment with classroom realities and ongoing support throughout ECTs' early careers (Urkunova, Kennedy, Karabassova, & Ryspayeva, 2025). These scholars assert that holistic preparation benefits both teachers and learners, as passionate and well-supported ECTs are more effective and inspiring. The literature, therefore, underscores the critical link between motivation, passion, and strong ITE in cultivating confident and motivated ECTs.

ECTs learn rapidly as they adapt to classroom demands, with pedagogy, school adjustment, and self-efficacy being central to their confidence. Encouragement and recognition enhance engagement and success (Omodan, 2022). Omodan further concludes that cognisance must be given to individual staff to understand which stage of needs they are at, which levels have been met, and which level could motivate and retain them. International studies show that mentoring, structured curricula, and collaborative inquiry may strengthen these outcomes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).

England's Early Career Framework (ECF) and Ontario's Newly Qualified Teacher Induction Programme (NTIP) provide two-year induction models. The ECF reduces teaching loads and trains mentors to ease the transition from ITE, while NTIP's mentorship and protected time improve confidence and instructional quality (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). Scotland's Teacher Induction Scheme offers reduced class time and mentoring, while Australia emphasises mentor

quality and workload management. Lesson study and peer-group mentorship further build confidence. US teacher residency programmes highlight co-teaching with mentors for ECT development and retention (Papay, West, Fullerton & Kane, 2012). Effective induction, through time, mentoring, coherence, and safe learning environments, strengthens ECT confidence, judgement, and resilience (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).

4. Methodology

This section outlines the qualitative methodological approach employed to explore ECTs experiences, motivations, and support needs. It describes the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and interview processes utilised to generate rich, contextual insights. Ethical protocols implemented to ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data integrity are also presented below.

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the depth and complexity of human experience, capturing the subjective and individual meanings that shape ECTs’ interpretations of their professional journeys. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study acknowledged that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and reflection, thereby allowing for a nuanced, contextual understanding of complex social phenomena in real-life school settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This paradigm was particularly suitable for examining ECTs’ meanings, perceptions, and emotions as they navigated their challenges and growth (Yin, 2018). It also enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, providing authentic insights into their developmental pathways (Merriam, 2019).

Five secondary schools were purposively selected as research sites, with three ECTs chosen from each school in the Francis Baard District in Kimberley, resulting in a total sample of 15 participants. ECTs with 1 to 5 years of experience were targeted to ensure relevance to the study’s focus. It was assumed that these participants possessed the necessary experience and willingness to provide detailed accounts of their professional journeys (DeJonckheere, Vaughn, James, and Schondelmeyer, 2024).

The selection of the Francis Baard Education District was influenced by its unique educational landscape and demographic diversity in the area. Kimberley comprises both urban and rural contexts, offering varied conditions across private secondary schools and enabling a comprehensive understanding of resource availability and workplace environments. As a historically disadvantaged area, Kimberley presents socio-economic challenges that shape teacher experiences and professional development. Focusing on this district, therefore, allowed the study to generate contextually grounded insights that may be transferable to similar settings while contributing meaningfully to discussions on the transformative journey of ECTs in South Africa.

Table 1: Number of Participants in the study

| School | Participant IDs | Number of Participants |
|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| S1 | S1P1,S1P2,S1P3 | 3 |
| S2 | S2P1,S2P2,S2P3 | 3 |
| S3 | S3P1,S2P2,S3P3 | 3 |
| S4 | S4P1,S4P2,S4P3 | 3 |
| S5 | S5P1,S5P2,S5P3 | 3 |
| TOTAL | | 15 |

The sampling technique considered the saturation principle by collecting additional data and conducting more interviews until little to no new insights emerged. This is more prevalent in qualitative research, where the goal is to thoroughly examine complicated phenomena rather than generalise results to a broader population (Lim, 2025). There is no set sample size to achieve saturation.

4.1 Data collection and instruments

Data were collected from five secondary schools through individual face-to-face and telephone interviews with 15 ECTs. Semi-structured interviews, supported by probes and follow-up questions, ensured clarity and depth where responses were unclear. The interview guide aligned directly with the study's aim of exploring how ECTs' passion, motivation, and support systems influence their confidence, readiness, self-efficacy, and coping during the transition from initial teacher education to full practice. Five key themes guided the interviews: motivation and service orientation; feelings of inadequacy linked to content uncertainty; coping through preparation, collegial support, and digital resources; variations in ITE quality; and professional growth through repetition, feedback, and reflection. Additional questions were posed when further elaboration was needed.

The study utilised in-person and telephone interviews to gather detailed information on the working conditions of private secondary school teachers and their job satisfaction. The researchers scheduled appointments with participants to organise a timeline for conducting the interviews. Each interview was set to last between forty and forty-five minutes. The interviews were also recorded using an audio recorder, and all data were subsequently transcribed manually.

4.2 Data analysis

The researchers analysed and interpreted the data using the universally recognised six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which enabled them to systematically organise and analyse complex datasets (Dawadi, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that these steps involve reading the data, familiarising oneself with it, coding the data into themes, identifying similar themes, revising themes, naming themes, and developing theoretical meanings. Thematic analysis is suitable for this study because the research objectives, which form the basis of the interview questions, are already theme-based, and the data collected are intended to address these study objectives (Mguye & Omodan, 2025).

4.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the university's Senate Research Ethics Committee (SREC), approval number 0239/2024d. Invitations were circulated via university alumni networks and district professional contacts, followed by snowball referrals. School principals granted site access, and all ECTs provided written informed consent. Recordings and transcripts were securely stored on encrypted, access-restricted drives. No incentives were offered for participation. For ethical reasons, neither the schools nor the participants were identified by their real names; instead, pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Anonymised excerpts are coded by school and participant, for example, S3P1 for School 3, Participant 1. This approach helped to maintain privacy and confidentiality.

5. Results

Coding was used to protect the identities of the participants, as shown in Table 1. This paper presents findings derived from the participants' responses. The findings were categorised into themes: firstly, motivation and a service-oriented purpose sustain engagement; secondly, feelings of inadequacy linked to content uncertainties undermine self-efficacy; thirdly, coping relies on preparation, collegial support, and digital resources; fourthly, variable quality in ITE and how it shapes early confidence; and lastly, how growth occurs through repetition, feedback, and reflection among ECTs.

5.1 Motivation for teaching

This theme directly addresses what motivates ECTs by highlighting their passion for teaching and their perception of the profession as a calling. Motivation for teaching was mentioned several times by participants as an intrinsic reason that drives ECTs to choose and remain committed to the

profession. Participants frequently cited a strong sense of purpose associated with making a difference in students' lives. The data illustrate that ECTs who feel deeply connected to their purpose are more likely to exhibit sustained commitment and enthusiasm in their roles. Below are some responses recorded from participants regarding their motivation for teaching.

"I think it dates back to when I was in secondary school. I have always wanted to be a teacher; I would help people in group discussions." (S3P1).

"For me, it's always something that I've known I wanted to do. Teaching gives me a sense of purpose, even when I'm not sure about the subject matter, I know why I'm here." (S2P2).

This personal drive emerged as an inner source of strength for many ECTs. Even when facing anxiety, uncertainty, or doubts—especially related to subject content—participants described their motivation as the reason they persevered, with personal enthusiasm often outweighing professional insecurity. Most participants framed their motivation within broader narratives of service and social change, viewing teaching as a means to impact learners' lives and empower communities. These selfless narratives frequently appeared alongside honest acknowledgements of difficulty, particularly in mastering curriculum content or managing complex classroom dynamics.

"Even when I feel I'm still figuring out the content myself sometimes, what drives me is the idea I can be that one teacher to have an impact." (S3P3).

However, this passion also created tension. Participants noted that when their passion failed to translate into competence, they often felt guilt or frustration. The evidence suggests a mismatch between their emotional commitment to teaching and the realities of classroom work, particularly the pressure of effectively delivering subject content.

"I remind myself that I became a teacher to change someone's life. That thought keeps me going even when I feel completely lost with the content." (S2P2).

"Sometimes I walk into class nervous, but my love for teaching pushes me to try again the next day. I don't want to disappoint the learners." (S5P3).

"What keeps me in the classroom is my passion. Even when I doubt myself, I feel like this is where I am meant to be." (S1P2).

"I get stressed when I don't know something, but I stay because teaching feels like my calling. I believe the confidence will come with time." (S4P2).

All of this indicates that ECTs' motivation formed the foundation of their professional identity and shaped how they understood challenges related to subject knowledge. While passion helped them enter and remain in the profession, it did not shield them from feelings of inadequacy or gaps in preparation.

5.2 Feelings of inadequacy and struggle

This theme examines the emotional challenges that EECTs encounter during their initial experiences in the classroom. Many participants expressed feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, which impacted their confidence and performance. This theme addresses the research question regarding how feelings of inadequacy affect ECTs by providing evidence that emotional struggles can undermine their effectiveness and engagement. The transcripts below reveal that while motivation is crucial, underlying feelings of inadequacy can hinder professional development, creating a pressing need for supportive interventions.

"It's like I'm learning some of the content for the first time myself. There's always this fear that I'll be asked something I don't know how to answer." (S1P3).

"Sometimes I honestly feel like the kids know more than me, especially when it's something I haven't done in years." (S2P2).

"There are days I sit in the car before school and just breathe because I'm scared, I won't manage the lesson" (S1P3).

Many beginner teachers expressed that they frequently second-guessed their lessons or felt anxious before teaching particular topics. These moments were not just academic; they deeply affected participants' sense of professional identity and competence. For some, the feeling of not being "good enough" as a teacher was persistent and emotionally taxing, as illustrated in the narratives below.

"I always feel like I have to prove I deserve to be in front of the class, even when I'm not sure what I'm doing" (S2P2).

The quotes also highlight a broader issue of preparedness. Despite completing teacher education programmes, several participants felt that the training did not adequately equip them to handle the specific content or pedagogical demands they encountered in real classrooms. The narratives below indicate that, in some cases, ECTs reported resorting to surface-level instruction, over-reliance on pre-made resources, or avoidance of complex topics.

"In training we focused on methods, but now I'm expected to teach subjects I barely touched. I'm not confident, and it shows." (S3P2)

This lack of confidence wasn't limited to academic content; it extended to classroom management, student questioning, and impromptu explanations. Participants expressed concern that students would detect their uncertainty, which could undermine their authority or credibility in the classroom. Despite the prevalence of these struggles, some participants viewed them as part of the learning curve. A few, like S4P1 below, expressed hope that with time and support, their confidence would grow; however, they also emphasised the emotional toll of the early stages of teaching.

"I try to remind myself it's normal to struggle at the beginning, but it doesn't stop me from feeling like I'm failing sometimes." (S4P1)

In summary, feelings of inadequacy were widespread among beginner teachers, particularly concerning their subject knowledge. These emotional experiences shaped not only their teaching practices but also their self-perception as professionals. The findings highlight a critical need for more targeted support during the early years of teaching, especially in subject-specific preparation and mentoring.

5.3 Coping strategies and support systems

This theme focuses on the resources and strategies ECTs utilise to manage the professional and emotional challenges they encounter. Participants shared experiences with mentorship, collaboration with colleagues, and professional development opportunities as critical elements in navigating their struggles. This theme addresses the research question regarding coping strategies by illustrating how effective support systems can enhance ECTs' resilience and enable them to transform their motivation into practical teaching skills. The narratives below reveal that a strong support network fosters a sense of belonging and alleviates feelings of isolation.

"I usually try to prepare the night before, Google a few things and check YouTube videos. It's stressful, but it helps me feel more ready" (S4P3).

"I talk to other teachers in the staffroom; in some instances they give me past papers or summaries I can use. I don't want to look like I'm clueless" (S3P1).

"If I get stuck, I search online or ask a friend from university for help. I can't afford to walk into class unprepared" (S5P2).

A key strategy involved resource-seeking behaviour; that is, participants frequently described using external materials (often digital content) to fill perceived gaps in their subject knowledge. This often meant extra time spent reviewing topics the night before lessons. The verbatim quotations below indicate that while this approach sometimes alleviated anxiety, it also led to exhaustion and concerns about sustainability.

Most nights I sleep late because I'm trying to catch up on the content. It helps for the next day, but it drains me" (S2P3)

Peer support also played a vital role, as teachers with access to helpful colleagues or mentors reported feeling more confident and less isolated. In several interviews, participants mentioned the importance of informal staffroom conversations or WhatsApp groups where resources, tips, and reassurance were exchanged, as indicated by some participants below.

"There's a group of us who started at the same time, we're always checking in on each other. It helps knowing I'm not the only one struggling." (S1P2).

"We share lesson plans and sometimes even split topics between us when things get overwhelming." (S2P1)

"My mentor is the one who keeps me going. Even a five-minute chat with her can calm me down." (S4P3).

Notably, some participants were strategic in concealing their uncertainty. This included practices such as adhering strictly to lesson plans, avoiding open-ended student questions, and projecting a confident persona even when they felt unsure. Here is what some of them said.

"I pretend I'm confident, but inside I'm praying they won't ask a question I can't answer." (S5P1)

"Sometimes I just fake it. I act like I know exactly what I'm talking about even if I'm not sure. The students can't see me panic." (S2P2).

While these coping strategies reflect creativity and resilience, they also highlight a reactive rather than proactive approach to professional growth. Many teachers were "surviving" rather than developing, relying on short-term fixes in the absence of structured support, as indicated below.

"I wish the school had a proper induction programme. Most of what I'm learning, I'm figuring out on my own." (S1P1).

The findings suggest that although individual agency is strong, beginner teachers would benefit from more systematic mentorship, subject-focused induction programmes, and time for collaborative planning.

5.4 Influence of teaching practice and initial training

This theme investigates the impact of initial teacher education and practical teaching experiences on ECTs' readiness for the classroom. Participants reflected on their training, noting how comprehensive preparation can facilitate both confidence and skill development. By addressing the research question regarding the influences of training, this theme highlights the critical role that effective initial education plays in equipping ECTs for real-world challenges. The analysis demonstrates that well-structured training enhances ECTs' self-efficacy, empowering them to tackle classroom realities more effectively, as indicated by the participants below.

"We learnt about teaching methods, but not really the actual content. So, when I got to class, I had to figure most of it out myself" (S3P2).

"Most of the content I teach now was not covered in our modules. I walked into the classroom feeling like a beginner all over again" (S2P4).

"Teaching practice was useful, but it depended a lot on who you got as a mentor. Some of us didn't really get to teach the subjects we're now expected to teach" (S3P1).

"Some mentors hardly gave us a chance to teach. We mostly observed, so I didn't get real practice with the subjects I'm teaching now" (S1P3).

Participants frequently noted that teaching practice placements varied widely in quality. While some had supportive mentors and meaningful opportunities to teach subject content, others reported being sidelined or used for administrative tasks. As a result, their exposure to actual classroom subject

delivery was inconsistent. This variability often translated into uneven confidence when they began full-time teaching. S4P1 participants had the pleasure of sharing.

“During my practicum, I spent more time photocopying and marking than teaching. So, when I started working, everything felt new” (S4P1).

Several participants also expressed frustration that their training programmes emphasised general pedagogy, such as classroom management and lesson planning, while offering limited depth in subject-specific instruction. This was especially problematic for those teaching in multiple subject areas, where even basic content knowledge was insufficient. S4PS echoed this sentiment.

“We were trained to teach in general, not to teach maths or history in depth. I only really started learning the subject once I had to teach it” (S4P3).

“Our lectures focused on theory, but when it came to actual content, we were on our own. I had to relearn most topics before teaching them” (S2P1).

There was also concern that the formal assessments during training did not reflect the realities of managing subject content with real learners. For example, some participants passed their teaching practice without ever fully planning or delivering a complete unit of work, instead relying on mentor teachers or template materials. S3P3 confirmed this.

“Our TP assessments felt staged. You teach one perfect lesson for the lecturer, but real teaching is nothing like that” (S3P3).

Yet, in contrast, a few participants who had strong mentors or rich teaching practice experiences reported entering the profession with relatively greater confidence. This suggests that high-quality practicum experiences, especially those that include hands-on subject teaching, play a critical role in developing teacher readiness.

“I was lucky because my mentor pushed me to teach real lessons, not just observe. That experience made my first year much easier” (S1P2).

“My mentor teacher let me teach almost every lesson during practice. It was scary but also the best preparation. I still use some of the lessons I planned then” (S4P2)

That is, although teaching practice and training programmes are designed to prepare new teachers, the data indicate mixed outcomes. Many participants reported feeling inadequately equipped in subject knowledge, underscoring the necessity for enhanced content-specific pedagogy and more equitable, high-impact practicum experiences in teacher education.

5.5 Growth, adaptation, and emerging confidence

The final theme highlights the ongoing growth of ECTs as they develop confidence and competence through experience and reflection. Participants indicated that teaching practice, combined with reflective thinking, significantly enhanced their self-efficacy and professional identity. As they adapted to their roles, ECTs reported increasing confidence in their skills and decision-making, marking an important stage in their progression towards professional competence.

“In the beginning, I was so scared of getting things wrong. But the more I taught the same topics, the more comfortable I became. It starts to make sense.” (S4P2)

“Each term gets better. I learn from my mistakes, and I tweak my lessons, though I still don’t feel like an expert, but I’m not as overwhelmed anymore.” (S2P3)

Teachers described building subject confidence through careful lesson preparation, observing learners’ responses, and reflecting on what worked and what did not. They viewed these practices not only as survival strategies but also as meaningful professional learning. Over time, many reported a stronger understanding of the curriculum, improved lesson sequencing, and reduced anxiety when teaching. Participants also emphasised adaptability – being willing to learn, adjust, and

seek support—as central to their growth. Accepting uncertainty as part of teaching helped ease the pressure of feeling they must know everything. As S3P1 explains:

“I’ve learned to admit when I don’t know something and come back the next day with the answer. That honesty builds trust with my students” (S3P1)

This growth was not automatic but was largely driven by self-initiative, such as staying after hours to revise content, trying new teaching strategies, and seeking collegial support. While some institutional guidance was helpful, many teachers relied primarily on personal effort, as reflected in S1P5’s account.

“I wish there was more formal support, but I’ve learned a lot just by doing the work, asking questions, and staying curious” (S1P5)

Despite ongoing challenges, most participants expressed optimism about their development. The data show that beginner teachers are not fixed in their insecurities but actively learn, adapt, and grow. Confidence emerges gradually—slowly, unevenly, and personally. While initial struggles with subject knowledge are common, with time, experience, and support, ECTs build the confidence needed to teach effectively and establish strong professional identities.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings contribute new insights to existing debates on early-career teacher (ECT) motivation by demonstrating that passion for teaching functions not only as an entry point into the profession but also as a compensatory mechanism that sustains teachers amid feelings of inadequacy. While previous research highlights intrinsic motivation as central to teacher commitment, this study deepens the discourse by showing how ECTs actively draw on a sense of calling to navigate uncertainty, particularly when they perceive gaps in their subject knowledge (Shepherd, 2013). Participants described motivation as an inner resource that counterbalanced anxiety and inexperience, enabling them to persevere despite professional insecurity. This interplay between emotional commitment and perceived competence has received limited empirical attention, yet the data suggest it is a defining feature of ECTs’ early professional trajectories. Notably, the study reveals a tension: passion motivates persistence, but when it fails to translate into competence, it can also intensify guilt and self-doubt. This ties in with Shulman’s Knowledge Base for Teaching, which emphasises content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) as foundations of teacher effectiveness (Shulman, 1986, 1987). This highlights an important gap in the support structures available to ECTs, as motivation alone cannot compensate for inadequate preparation (Tabe, 2024). Thus, the finding advances the discourse by illustrating how intrinsic motivation shapes, but does not resolve, challenges linked to subject knowledge, underscoring the need for targeted professional development that strengthens both self-belief and instructional capacity.

The findings offer new insight into early-career teachers’ (ECTs) motivation by illustrating how intrinsic passion for teaching operates simultaneously as a source of professional strength and a site of vulnerability. While participants consistently expressed a service-oriented purpose shaped by formative experiences and role models, the study extends existing literature by showing that such intrinsic motivation is deeply entangled with perceptions of competence. Although SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness underpin optimal motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this study reveals that ECTs’ high autonomy, rooted in personal values, was often offset by uncertainty stemming from gaps in content knowledge or limited practicum preparation. This dynamic suggests that motivation is more fragile than previously assumed, echoing but also expanding on Tabe’s (2024) and Lauermaann and König’s (2016) arguments that enthusiasm cannot compensate for inadequate preparation.

By integrating SDT with Shulman’s Knowledge Base for Teaching, the findings contribute a novel theoretical connection: intrinsic motivation persists only when CK and PCK are sufficiently

developed to enable confident instructional decision-making. Despite a strong passion for teaching, many ECTs reported deficits in these domains, mirroring recent scholarship (Marshall & Adams, 2024; Brown et al., 2021). The findings, therefore, advance the discourse by demonstrating that strengthening competence through mentoring, collaborative planning, and structured professional development is essential for transforming intrinsic motivation into sustained, effective practice.

The findings provide new insight into how early-career teachers (ECTs) use coping strategies not only to manage daily instructional demands but also to build the professional capacities necessary for long-term growth. While prior studies acknowledge lesson preparation and collegial support as common practices, this study demonstrates that informal collaboration, particularly spontaneous staffroom interactions, plays a more significant developmental role than previously documented. These interactions provided ECTs with emotional reassurance, practical guidance, and shared resources that normalised their challenges, thereby fulfilling SDT's psychological need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Importantly, the data show that relatedness and competence develop concurrently: as ECTs engage with colleagues, they receive feedback that enhances their instructional confidence, illustrating a dynamic, mutually reinforcing process not sufficiently explored in existing literature.

These findings further extend Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching by showing that informal peer learning serves as an important conduit for developing CK and PCK, rather than relying solely on formal mentoring structures. By highlighting how everyday collegial interactions function as sites of pedagogical knowledge construction, the findings challenge assumptions that coping strategies are merely reactive survival mechanisms. Instead, they operate as proactive pathways through which ECTs build professional identity, strengthen resilience, and transform uncertainty into growing competence.

The findings offer new insight into the developmental value of coping strategies employed by early-career teachers (ECTs). While intensive lesson preparation, collegial collaboration, and strategic use of resources are well-documented practices, this study reveals that informal staffroom interactions operate as a particularly influential, yet often overlooked, domain of professional learning. These spontaneous exchanges provide ECTs with emotional reassurance, practical guidance, and shared materials that normalise uncertainty and reduce feelings of isolation. From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective, such interactions strengthen the need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), while constructive feedback and shared pedagogical strategies enhance perceived competence. The findings suggest that relatedness and competence evolve concurrently, a dynamic relationship that has received limited attention in the existing literature.

Moreover, the findings extend Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching by demonstrating that informal peer learning constitutes a critical mechanism for developing content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), particularly when initial training leaves gaps. Rather than functioning solely as survival tactics, the coping strategies identified in this study represent foundational pathways through which ECTs actively construct knowledge, refine practice, and cultivate resilience. This nuanced understanding contributes new knowledge by positioning everyday collegial interaction as a central driver of early professional growth, rather than a peripheral support.

The findings provide new insights into how early-career teachers (ECTs) develop confidence through a combination of experiential learning, reflection, and relational support. While existing literature acknowledges the value of reflective and adaptive practice for novice teachers (Liddicoat & Krasny, 2013), these findings expand current understanding by illustrating how ECTs' openness regarding their uncertainties becomes a strategic resource for both relational connection and instructional growth. By sharing their challenges with learners and colleagues, ECTs constructed supportive learning environments that align with Dweck's (2006) concept of a growth mindset and facilitate

deeper professional learning. The data further highlight that self-study, informal peer consultation, and iterative refinement of lessons contribute to the development of instructional competence, an interaction between learning modes that has received limited attention.

Integrating SDT offers additional explanatory power. Feedback and authentic classroom experiences enhanced perceived competence, while collaboration and mentorship strengthened relatedness, thereby reinforcing motivation and reducing anxiety (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Tabe et al., 2021). Autonomy increased as ECTs were entrusted with decision-making, further supporting intrinsic motivation. Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching elucidates these processes by demonstrating how practice-based feedback strengthens CK and PCK (Shulman, 1986, 1987). The findings contribute new knowledge by demonstrating that confidence emerges not solely through experience, but through a dynamic interplay between autonomy, relatedness, competence, and iterative knowledge construction – processes that are accelerated by effective mentorship.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes novel insights into early-career teacher development by illustrating how intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and collaborative support interact in more complex ways than previously documented. By integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with Shulman's Knowledge Base for Teaching, the study demonstrates that motivation alone cannot sustain early-career teachers (ECTs) unless it is supported by growing content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), relational belonging, and autonomy-supportive environments. The findings advance existing discourse by revealing the developmental significance of informal peer learning and showing how everyday collegial interactions serve as powerful sites for knowledge construction, resilience building, and identity formation. These insights highlight critical implications for strengthening induction and professional development systems.

7.1 Limitations and possible future directions

This study employed a multiple case study design, facilitating a detailed exploration of each case. However, the findings are not universally generalisable and are based on self-reported interviews rather than direct observations of work-integrated learning or induction. Future research should incorporate mentors' perspectives, training documents, and classroom observations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ECTs' experiences. Longitudinal studies spanning two to three years could identify which supports enhance content-secure teaching. Experimental approaches that test content-focused induction strategies, such as guided rehearsals or misconception clinics, could further illuminate their impacts on learner outcomes and ECT self-efficacy.

7.2 Contributions of the study

By examining intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and professional identity, this study clarifies ECTs' experiences and highlights the role of structured mentorship and targeted professional development in transforming enthusiasm into effective teaching. Future research should incorporate mentors' perspectives, training materials, and observational studies to deepen understanding. The study emphasises the need for realistic, content-focused ITE programmes aligned with classroom realities. Policymakers and school leaders should strengthen induction and development programmes to support reflective, resilient, intrinsically motivated ECTs, thereby improving retention, job satisfaction, learner achievement, and the overall journey from uncertainty to confidence.

7.3 Recommendations

To support ECTs effectively, schools should implement comprehensive induction activities that address both emotional and practical needs, thereby strengthening classroom performance and resilience. Organised mentorship and targeted professional development are essential for helping

ECTs thrive and improve learner outcomes. The study highlights the need for authentic, content-focused, practice-based ITE programmes that align with classroom realities, thereby reducing the gap between training and practice. Policymakers, teachers, and school leaders should apply the calling-to-competence paradigm to design induction and development programmes that foster reflective, resilient, and intrinsically motivated ECTs.

8. Declarations

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