



Factors improving the beginner teachers' professional identity in induction at schools in Thobo Thabo-Mofutsanyane

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Abstract—This study explored the factors that improve the beginner teachers' professional identity during an induction programme. It adopted a qualitative approach, drawing on survey and interview data from beginner teachers in the Thobo Mofutsanyane district, Free state, South Africa. The data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings show various factors could improve the beginner teachers' professional identity in induction programme. This study recommends strengthening induction programmes to help beginner teachers in dealing with the existing challenges as they develop their professional identity.

Keywords: Beginner teachers, Induction programme, Schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

LIKE other countries, teachers leave their professional careers after only a few years in South Africa. Evidence suggests that the availability of professional development through social contact among teachers in school settings significantly influences beginner teachers' decision to stay in their careers (Reference needed). Since teaching is a dynamic profession necessitating social interactions, it is crucial to recognise, its dynamics from beginner teacher attritions (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2020).

Beginner teachers' challenges in the international context

There is increased research on beginner teachers and why they mostly leave their professional careers locally and globally. Literature demonstrated that beginner teachers face various challenges across countries, and they are mostly similar in their first years.

According to census statistics in the United States, 24 percent of beginner teachers quit teaching in their first year, while 33 percent of them leave after three years, and 40 to 50 percent leave within the first five years (Schmidt, 2017). Unlike their more experienced colleagues, beginner teachers could not yet develop a repertoire of skills to turn to when they try to take on and fulfill equal duties as their senior teacher peers.

Similarly, studies showed in Belgium that many beginner teachers quit teaching during their first five years (Colognesi et al., 2020). Flores (2017) found that beginner teachers significantly linked their reasons for leaving their employment to their commitment and self-efficacy. Kasalak and Dagyar (2020) suggested that their commitment and self-efficacy were determined by their intentions to leave their job and connected to their perceptions of the working environment.

Furthermore, Den Brok, Wubbels, and Van Tartwijk (2017) highlighted beginner teachers experienced challenges that affected them to leave the teaching profession, such as high workload, student disciplinary issues, a lack of support and insufficient teaching resources, poor working conditions, social isolation, and a lack of professional development opportunities.

However, McGeehan (2019) indicated that although BTs globally face similar challenges, they must recognise that they are not constant or permanent; they may vary from school to school, state to state, country to country, and district to district.

It is thus essential to recognise their individual needs and challenges to support better and equip them with adequate support in their initial years of teaching. Similarly, Toropova, Myrberg, and Johansson (2021) emphasised that beginner teachers who receive adequate support in their first years are likelier to report high levels of job satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and self-efficacy than those who do not receive support.

Unfortunately, many beginner teachers in South Africa, like their peers in other countries worldwide, abandon the profession during their first few years of employment (Caluza & Niemand, 2019).

Beginner teachers' challenges face in South African schools

After the 30th year of democratic governance in South Africa, the government has reformed policies to improve its educational system. Thus, teachers, especially those from rural communities, continue to face challenges in their teaching profession (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

However, quality education remains an inclusive ideal in South Africa, where the education system is characterised by severe inequalities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Socioeconomic and racial inequalities, poor learning outcomes, and teachers' and students' dropout rates persist in South African schools (Wilmot, 2017).

Despite relatively high education funding levels in South Africa, teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate school infrastructure all contribute to the challenges that most teachers confront in the classroom in South Africa (Meier & West, 2020). Overcrowding, for example, causes disciplinary problems, which causes additional difficulties such as poor student engagement, a lack of teacher evaluation and assessment, and noise disruption. These difficulties make it difficult for teachers to control their classrooms (Obadire & Sinthumule, 2021). Overcrowded classrooms can easily become unbearable, particularly for beginner teachers who are not adequately trained and appointed according to their training and have a high workload, contributing to beginner teacher's burnout (Köhler,

2020; Nkuna, 2017).

Matsepe, Maluleke, and Cross (2019) concurred with these findings, which supported that teacher in those schools experienced numerous challenges in teaching and learning due to overcrowded classrooms, such as difficulty interacting with learners and the learners' inability to participate in critical thinking and problem-solving activities.

These overcrowded classrooms could influence learners' academic performance (Meier & West, 2020). These classrooms prevent teachers from paying attention to each learners' educational requirements.

This is corroborated by data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) cycles of 2006, 2011, and 2016, which revealed that learners consistently ranked last among fifty countries in reading scores in South Africa (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019; Govender & Hugo, 2020). The PIRLS showed that seventy-eight percent of South African fourth graders cannot read fully in any language (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) further highlighted that critical learning abilities are severely deficient among learners in South Africa at the early levels of schooling.

Furthermore, teachers have been shown to have the lowest level of subject-content knowledge compared to other sub-Saharan African countries (Nsengimana et al., 2020). This is a concern since teachers cannot teach knowledge they do not possess or acquire (Taylor, 2021). Teachers cannot appropriately assess learners' progress and assist them in progressing forward due to their limited subject knowledge. At the same time, inadequate education and support remain a nationwide issue in South Africa, contributing to the high rate of beginner teachers' attritions (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

To support beginner teachers, stakeholders must first address three fundamental problems in the South African educational system: teachers' lack of preparedness, non-accountability of school managers and teachers, and support to equip beginner teachers' as competent educators (Liwane, 2017). Furthermore, stakeholders must recognise the current challenges that beginner teachers face. These include the most conspicuous demands of COVID-19 and the transition to online learning, which provided new challenges and barriers to the identified problems that beginner teachers face, as discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Beginner teachers' challenges in transiting to online learning in the COVID-19 pandemic

After the World Health Organisation (WHO) designated the outbreak and spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020, schools, colleges, and businesses worldwide were completely shut down to prevent individuals from COVID-19 pandemic (Landa, Zhou & Marongwe, 2021).

Similarly, all schools, universities, and educational institutions were closed, and precautionary measures were adopted to offer education through online learning in South Africa (Mpungose, 2020). Among the many challenges beginner teachers already face, the most conspicuous consequence of COVID-19 is the expectation, if not demand, that teachers continue to educate virtually due to social distancing measures (Sahu, 2020). Due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions transited from conventional face-to-face teaching to virtual learning (Coman et al., 2020).

It is important to consider that teachers were not well-prepared for online teaching, while others may have laboured tirelessly to develop online resources. However, beginner teachers with no previous teaching experience may have encountered fundamentally different difficulties, such as a lack of appropriate workspaces or a minimal grasp of the subject matter. The abrupt and unexpected online transition arguably impacted millions of teachers, particularly beginner teachers across the globe (Jandrić et al., 2020).

While COVID-19 brought various difficulties, I was interested in this study's transition to online learning. This study explores the experiences of beginner teachers while transitioning to online teaching and learning at schools.

Opportunities for online learning

Besides the above-reported challenges of the abrupt transition from traditional to online teaching, such as the unreliability of internet connections and beginner teachers' lack of use of online platforms, there were also opportunities. This subsection aims to analyse the opportunities and experiences of remote teaching during COVID-19, specifically those of beginner teachers.

The benefits of online learning are based on the range of teaching media (videos, readings, exercises, and others) available on online platforms, enabling teachers to locate and incorporate effective materials into their classroom practices (Rapanta et al., 2020). Online learning in supportive contexts allows time for exploration, improvement, assessment, and experimentation in teaching and learning that is impossible in traditional settings (Rosângela & Vera, 2020).

Despite the difficulties associated with online education, 32 beginner teachers from Israel who participated in a qualitative study provided positive comments. This is demonstrated by a participant's statement: "This [online learning] was an opportunity to make progress in the curriculum because I hardly had any problems with classroom discipline, and I could help each child" (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020:9). Additionally, Hyseni and Hoxha (2020) found that teachers' motivation and willingness to expand their skills and knowledge grew because of the shift to online learning.

This pandemic was (and continues to be) a catalyst for digital transformation in all areas of education worldwide (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic reduced opportunities for socialisation and face-to-face interaction, online learning platforms continue to provide opportunities for socialisation by incorporating communication and class-based interaction (such as group projects, online clubs, and individualised contacts). This lowers social barriers between teachers and students (Pietro et al., 2020).

Le Grange (2020) emphasised that, despite physical isolation, teachers should view online learning as an opportunity to strengthen their commitments through academic research, teaching, and learning. At this point, technology should facilitate difficult dialogues about the issues that beginner teachers face, such as curriculum-related issues, to understand one another better (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Implementing structured and formalised induction programmes can provide beginner teachers with opportunities for exploration and learning, improve overall educational quality, reduce social isolation, and support beginner teachers' professional development through online learning platforms (Hawkes, 2018). In so doing, beginner teachers and teachers of all ages would be even more prepared and equipped with blended and online learning pedagogies (Pietro et al., 2020).

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the factors that improve the beginner teachers' professional identity in induction programme at schools in the Thobo Thabo Mofutsanyana.

III. METHODS

Research methodology refers to studies' actions, techniques, and data collection strategies (Manfra, 2019). This study's research design and methodology aimed to answer the proposed research questions. A research design can be considered the planning process, indicating the type of study that will be conducted. It is a systematic, deliberate, well-planned approach (Sileyew, 2019).

The study had a strong qualitative approach. Qualitative research investigates how people act and attribute meaning to their lives (Cosgrove, 2018). This research seeks to analyse a social phenomenon. Hence, a qualitative technique was deemed the most suitable and best suited for this study. This inquiry was founded on social network theory (SNT), which states that knowledge, interpretation, and observation occur in social settings. This research employed an interpretative paradigm and relied substantially on semi-structured interviews. This

qualitative technique mainly focused on data acquired through audio recordings and interview transcripts. Choosing the appropriate approach was thus vital for this comprehensive inquiry to obtain the necessary knowledge from the research participants. In contrast, the research method details the processes, techniques, and instruments used to answer the research questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Research design

The research employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative research approach that centres on individuals' lived experiences in the world, with a core objective of describing "what the experiences are and how the individual experienced them" (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019:2). This design was selected for this research due to its alignment with the study's objective of delving into and comprehending the experiences of newly appointed educators. Phenomenological research design provides a suitable framework for investigating and addressing inquiries related to the firsthand experiences of novice teachers (Henriksen, Englander & Nordgaard, 2021). This design is pertinent to me as a novice educator because it enables me to investigate and understand the development of my professional identity as a novice educator by considering my experiences with those around me.

Research paradigm

The interpretive paradigm (Gašević et al., 2019) suggests that one's social position shapes human development and achievement. It focuses on understanding individuals' social realities through subjective experiences (Berryman, 2019; Cuthbertson, Robb & Blair, 2020). This paradigm fits well with SNT, which emphasises that individuals' understanding, and interactions are shaped by their social networks and interdependencies (Thomas et al., 2019). SNT views individuals as embedded within social structures and stresses the importance of social interactions in shaping attitudes and professional development (Sannen et al., 2021; Saqr, Fors & Tedre, 2018).

For beginner teachers, this means their professional identity development is influenced by their interactions and relationships within educational settings. Social networks facilitate the exchange of resources and knowledge, impacting teachers' attitudes and growth (Sannen et al., 2019; Van Waes et al., 2018). Understanding these dynamics helps address professional identity development as a shared responsibility between teachers and their workplaces (Prenger, Poortman & Handelzalts, 2021).

Thus, the interpretive paradigm provides a framework for exploring how social contexts and interactions shape beginner teachers' experiences and identities. It highlights the need for a deeper inquiry into these social influences to better support their development through induction programmes.

Participants

Sampling is often used in qualitative research when researchers conduct experiments with a small group of individuals who can offer detailed descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon under inquiry (Nicholls, 2017). In this inquiry, I used purposeful sampling, the most viable method for selecting the most suitable participants for the study (Turner, 2020). According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), purposeful sampling is choosing and identifying research participants as experts on the phenomenon under study. Sharma (2017) refers to this form of sampling as intense sampling, which implies a specified group and includes well-articulated examples and a thorough understanding of the studied phenomenon.

However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown limitations in South Africa, only forty-seven beginner teachers attended the induction training sessions. The initial plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews in 2020. Nonetheless, due to COVID-19 and lockdown regulations in SA, the interviews were conducted telephonically in January 2021 with fourteen beginner teachers. A sample of fifteen beginner teachers was invited to the training sessions in February 2020 in Bethlehem, schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district, to participate in the induction programme training. The beginner teachers'

biographical and background information were considered in this study. The beginner teachers were asked to volunteer to participate in interviews; from those who consented, fourteen were selected and invited to participate in follow-up interviews. The participants were stratified based on gender, age, education level, and teaching experience.

These participants were invited to participate in a second round of interviews (T2) scheduled for August 2021. Telephonic and in-person interviews were conducted. The third round of interviews (T3 – exit interviews) will take place in 2022 as part of the larger project. The first round of interviews focused mainly on beginner teachers' first-year experiences and contextual challenges. The second set of interviews focused on the development of beginner teachers' professional identity during an induction programme, specifically on the various components of the induction model and their influence on the development of beginner teachers' professional identity. This study only draws on data from T0, T1, and T2.

Research site

The Free State Department of Education, in collaboration with the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance, launched a one-year induction programme for first-year teachers in the Free State province. Initially planned for 2020-2021, the project was extended to August 2022 due to COVID-19 delays. This study focused on schools in the QwaQwa area of the Thabo Mofutsanyana district.

The study's inclusion criteria required participants to be first-year teachers within their first three years, with a teaching certificate and SACE affiliation, who consented to participate in the induction programme trial. Participants also needed to be involved in research funded by Gent University and the University of the Free State (UFS). Data collection methods included a baseline survey and semi-structured interviews, with the study considering constraints like time and COVID-19 restrictions.

Exclusion criteria

The study excluded beginner teachers in their first years of teaching in the Free State who did not participate in the induction field test, those not based in Bethlehem or QwaQwa, and those unable to engage in follow-up interviews. Additionally, BTs involved in the Gent University and UFS research but not the induction trial were excluded.

The larger project consisted of an exploratory field test of the induction model, which comprised mentorship, peer support, training sessions, and a personal development plan. Out of 47 participants, 5 completed the survey in Bethlehem (February 2020) and 42 in QwaQwa (October 2020), with a focus on variables such as self-efficacy, sense of belonging, job satisfaction, and motivation—critical components for understanding novice teachers' professional identity (Flores, 2017). The survey aimed to identify essential elements of the model and was carried out manually to avoid technical difficulties. However, the qualitative study used baseline survey data to investigate aspects related to novice teachers' professional identities.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, providing flexibility and depth in understanding participants' experiences (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). These interviews, guided by pre-determined yet open-ended questions, allowed for rich, nuanced responses and follow-up questions (Evans & Lewis, 2018; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). The study aimed to explore beginner teachers' challenges and the induction model's impact on their professional identity.

Interviews were conducted telephonically for 15 minutes due to COVID-19, followed by 30-minute in-person sessions, accommodating social distancing guidelines and participants' availability. A professional language editor recorded and transcribed all interviews to ensure accurate data collection. The interviews were conducted in English, with questions repeated as necessary for clarity. The data

gathered were sufficient to address the research questions effectively.

Data analysis

Data analysis employed thematic analysis to categorise data into themes, patterns, and key phrases (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and a baseline survey, with transcriptions double-checked for clarity. Semi-structured interviews are essential in qualitative research for exploring new themes and experiences (Henriksen, Englander & Nordgaard, 2021). Thematic analysis extracts the core of participants' experiences, emphasising meaningful phrases and statements (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019; Alase, 2017).

Social Network Theory (SNT) was used to analyse participants' teaching networks and their influence on learning opportunities (Makovec, 2018). Understanding these connections is crucial as they evolve and impact beginner teachers' perspectives and job retention (Liu et al., 2017). Analysing social relationships helps determine the level of collaboration and support within educational environments.

The analysis began with organizing data into themes and subthemes to ensure thorough understanding (Nieuwenhuis, 2017). All aspects of the interviews, including non-verbal cues, were transcribed to avoid bias, and participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. I reviewed the transcripts and kept a reflection journal to capture insights.

Key terms and recurring patterns were identified during data coding (Elliott, 2018). This approach facilitated a deeper exploration of themes related to participants' professional identities. As I organised the codes into categories, I aimed to identify overarching concepts that could clarify how the experiences of beginner teachers shape their professional identity. The analysis focused on the diverse challenges faced by novice educators during their initial years (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

According to Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research is the study of various methods for assessing participants' views and making sense of their lives to understand a phenomenon better. Despite the importance of qualitative research, researchers must establish techniques and protocols to verify their studies' reliability (Mohajan, 2018). The term "trustworthiness" describes the faith one can have in the research methods used to ensure the quality of a study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In this regard, I adhered to three requirements: transferability, dependability, and conformability (Mncadi, 2017). According to Nowell et al. (2017), transferability refers to the extent to which a study's conclusions and findings may be used across multiple contexts. According to Smith (2018), transferability allows readers to connect the research findings with their own experiences. It also concerns how individuals evaluate the connections between what is being done in a study and their own lives.

Several variables were considered to ensure transferability throughout the participant selection process in this qualitative study. Participants came from various schools, reflecting their varying levels of teaching experience (teachers in their first years of teaching). Males and females were among those who volunteered to take part in the study.

Even though participants came from different schools, they were all located in the QwaQwa and Bethlehem regions of the Thabo Mofutsanyana district, limiting generalisation (Smith, 2018). Thus, I cannot promise that my research methods will apply in all circumstances. Nonetheless, I aimed to offer readers a comprehensive description of the research framework, study design, study participants, and the entire research process to determine whether the findings applied to their situations. The research worked with co-researchers on the same data set to ensure dependability. This allowed me to analyse the consistency and validity of my findings by cross verifying my data from numerous sources (Mohajan, 2018). This ensured consistency between the study findings and the acquired data, and the researcher kept a notebook reflecting on the findings I reached during the study. This study ensured the reduction of prejudice by acknowledging her

preconceptions. This helped build an audit trail so that observers could track the study's progress from beginning to end.

Ethical considerations

Before data collection, ethical clearance was granted by the University of the Free Ethics Committee (UFSHSD2019/1371/2110). The Free State Department of Education sought permission to conduct research in the school, and approval from principals was obtained to access the schools. Informed consent forms were signed by participants, showing their permission to participate in this study. The research explained to participants their involvement and participation in this study. The researcher explained the study's aims, objectives, and relevance. Participants were informed in advance that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. This study emphasised that whatever information they disclosed to me was strictly confidential and would be treated as such. Under the supervision of my supervisor, the data were safely preserved on a password-protected laptop.

IV. RESULTS

Factors improving the beginner teachers' professional identity in induction

Peer support

The results found that peer support could improve beginner teachers' professional identity in the induction programme. Peer support is described as reflective practices, a collaboration between beginner and experienced teachers, and social support in which teachers discuss work-related issues (informal support: feedback, teaching strategies, lesson observations) (Aarts, Kools & Schildwacht, 2020). The significance of including peer support in the induction programme is that support from other teachers has positively affected beginner teachers' satisfaction and commitment to their jobs. Most participants indicated that they received peer support in 2020, as shown in the next excerpts:

"I did get the support, I will say, it was adequate" (T1: Participant 4).

Most of the support they reported was from other BTs and experienced teachers in their schools.

"Ja, I got peer support, I can say, from the new teachers who were also, ja, entering the field" (T1: Participant 3).

"There was a new teacher that I was working closely with" (T1: Participant 5)

"I had one experienced teacher, so he helped me with lesson planning, using the CAPS documents, and all those things, and we had what we call peer support. Ja, where we have all the teachers teaching the same subjects, we had quarterly meetings and discussed all those things. So, for peer mentoring, I would say it did work for me" (T2: Participant 14)

The findings indicate that peer support is prevalent among beginner teachers, specifically between beginner teachers and peer beginner teachers and seniors.

School-based mentoring

The results showed that school-based mentoring could improve the beginner teachers' professional identity in the induction preprogramme. This is a relationship between a beginner teacher and a senior teacher (mentor), whereby they are jointly engaged in reflection and discussions regarding learning and teaching (Beutel et al., 2017). Mentorship is essential at the school for beginner teachers to assist them in developing their professional identity and improving their teaching expertise. Most participants who received school-based mentorship mentioned the following.

"I had to go to my HOD's class for about three months, for the first quarter, for the whole quarter. I was in her class, and she showed me how to plan and how to implement the curriculum and how to interact with my colleagues and the learners as well as the faculty staff" (T1: Participant 1)

"I got mentorship at school from my HOD, colleagues, and the teachers there" (T1: Participant 2)

While some participants reported positive experiences and benefited from mentors,

Others reported inconsistencies with their mentors. This is because mentors could not properly execute their duties and provide the participants with subject-specific needs:

"We have a mentor, but then the thing is that our mentor is teaching different subjects, not the same subjects as mine, so I cannot say I have a mentor who is allocated to me according to my subjects" (T2: Participant 5).

On the other hand, some participants reported not receiving any school-based mentorship and being left to do everything for themselves. The following abstract said these.

"I did not get much of the mentoring, you know, ja. Like, okay, when I came to school, I was told, "Okay, you have arrived, here is a contract, okay, these are the classes that you are going to teach" (T1: Participant 4).

"Mentorship was not available; guidance was not available. I had to do everything by myself. So, I learned everything from some of the experiences I had to learn very hard because I did not have any guidance, mentorship, or support from management or the HOD. So, it was a bit hard. There is still no support, just that now I am used to everything" (T2: Participant 1).

The results are highlighted as follows. First, if effectively conducted, school-based mentorship can assist beginner teachers in developing their professional identity and improving their teaching practices.

Second, there are discrepancies with some mentors not adequately performing their roles and duties in meeting the specific needs of beginner teachers because they are poorly trained or lack knowledge in the subjects assigned to the beginner teachers, they mentor. According to Christie and Monyokolo (2018), this is attributable to one of two factors. The first is that in most schools, mentoring is done by the Head of the Department (HOD) rather than mentors meant to be trained to mentor beginner teachers. In most South African schools, HODs mainly mentor beginner teachers. Yet, they are not provided with training programmes to mentor beginner teachers, which is a flaw in their roles to induct beginner teachers. The second factor is that HODs and experienced teachers are burdened with their workload, leaving little to no time to mentor beginner teachers (Daniels, 2019).

The third component of the induction programme included training sessions for teachers, beginner teachers, mentors, principals, and district officials. As discussed in the next section, not all mentors were adequately equipped to mentor and train beginner teachers.

Training sessions

The results revealed that training sessions could improve the beginner teachers' professional identity in the induction programme. External experts, notably the Department of Basic Education, the Free State Department of Education, and the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance planned regular training sessions and workshops to identify beginner teacher needs as part of the induction programme. The training sessions also aim to improve the quality of trainers and mentors and reflect on the induction approach (based on these reflections, adaptations to the model can be made accordingly). However, since the induction model's inception, beginner teachers have only attended two face-to-face training sessions in Bethlehem and QwaQwa in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in 2020 due to COVID-19 and social distancing regulations.

Most participants stated in their narratives that they attended training sessions at the beginning of the year before the COVID-19 pandemic, which some felt were beneficial:

"Yes, we did have workshops; it was on ATPs, because the curriculum had to be, you know, changed a little bit because of COVID, but it was good because our LF (learning area facilitator, also known as subject advisor) explained, we read things through, we were able to, we were given chances to ask questions if we did not understand, so it was beneficial, perfect" (T1: Participant 2).

"I think yes; I think I did. Yes, earlier last year, the start-up workshops" (T1: Participant 3).

Some participants mentioned the impact of unions at their schools, which prevented them from hosting face-to-face seminars. Due to COVID-19 and social gathering restrictions, training sessions were moved online through virtual workshops that their subject advisors mostly piloted.

"Yes, they did, at the beginning of the year. The business studies subject advisor did an online workshop due to COVID. SATU said no meetings, so we had a workshop on Zoom. The subject advisor mostly held the workshops" (T2: Participant 5).

However, other participants indicated that the only training sessions they attended and received were the introductory sessions:

"It was last held in 2019, and that was that. In 2020, nothing; in 2021, still nothing. We only had it once. We only went once in 2019 before COVID-19, so there is nothing I can say" (T2: Participant 1).

Even though regular training sessions were scheduled to identify and assist beginner teachers' needs during the induction programme, few beginner teachers benefited. Many participants just attended the introductory training sessions provided at the onset of the induction programme. When asked about the training sessions, most participants had little to say. On the other hand, the few who attended visual training workshops recognised their benefits and stated that their subject advisors typically hosted them.

Aside from training, another component of beginner teacher mentorship was the development of a personal development plan for BTs as an additional tool of learning, which comprises the fourth component of the induction model. The findings are reported in the following section.

Personal development plan

The results indicated that a personal development plan could improve the beginner teachers' professional identity in the induction programme. As part of the induction model, BTs were required to create a personal development plan to monitor and structure their learning goals, needs, and plans of action to assist them in developing their professional identity. This is considered a continuing process of growth (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019). Most participants reported that they had developed a personal development plan from the first training session of the induction model in 2019 and that it was linked to the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS):

"Yes, I did. At the end of 2019, I had my personal development plan" (T1: Participant 2).

"Yes, we did IQMS, but for last year, it was just self-evaluation only...due to COVID. They said we should only do self-evaluation" (T1: Participant 4).

"Yes, I did. I developed it through IQMS because we must do IQMS every year. So, there is this part (development programme), so I had to sit down and identify my weak areas, and I also had to come up with intervention strategies. So, I identified them and tried to develop strategies to improve" (T2: Participant 1).

While some participants said that they created their personal development plans using the IQMS model, others stated that they had other developmental opportunities in their schools that helped them in developing their personal development plans:

"There is now a new ... I think it is a new programme about coding and robotics. And we were selected that we should join, and ... it was something like a short course. And we were selected and doing it. And the workshops that we go to, that we attend" (T2: Participant 8).

However, a few participants stated that they did not create a personal development plan since they were not provided with any mentorship in their schools:

"No, we did not get any chance to develop a personal plan" (T1: Participant 11).

"School-based mentoring, I do not have any, as well as peer support. I did not develop any plan yet" (T2: Participant 4).

Although not all participants created a personal development plan, those demonstrating its advantages allowed them to reflect on their practices, especially their strengths and flaws (what they struggled with more or needed assistance with). This component of the induction approach is crucial because it identifies the specific needs of beginner teachers, enabling mentors to support them better as they construct their professional identity.

Among the pre-existing challenges, the impact of COVID-19 on beginner teachers' experiences was probed, specifically beginner

teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section discusses these results.

The global transition from traditional teaching to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges for educators on a vast scale. This section discusses some of the prevalent challenges experienced by beginner teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most participants in the study widely characterised the pandemic as an extremely demanding period. The transition significantly affected instructional approaches, media utilisation, time management, teaching techniques, and the social and psychological aspects that influence a teacher's motivation to continue teaching (Aliyyah et al., 2020).

Among the myriad challenges, one notable concern reported by many participants was the issue of overcrowded classrooms. In response to class size constraints and the need to adhere to social distancing guidelines, participants were compelled to split their classes into smaller groups. Despite these efforts, some educators faced substantial class sizes, making it difficult to maintain adequate social distancing in compliance with COVID-19 regulations.

These findings align with those of Meier and West (2020), who also emphasised classroom overcrowding as a significant issue within the South African educational system.

The overcrowding in classrooms leads to disciplinary issues, leading to additional challenges such as lack of student engagement, inadequate teacher assessment and evaluation, and noise disruptions, as emphasised by most participants in overcrowded classrooms (Obadire & Sinthumule, 2021). These challenges create a challenging classroom environment for teachers to maintain control. For novice teachers, who often lack adequate training and induction, coping with overcrowded classrooms becomes particularly overwhelming, intensifying the risk of burnout (Köhler, 2020; Nkuna, 2017).

In addition to the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings underscored the prevalent stress, depression, and anxiety experienced by teachers as they endeavoured to continue teaching amid a global health crisis. Santamaria, Mondragon, Santxo, and Ozamiz-Etxebarria (2021) reported a high percentage of teachers exhibiting symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, with those having chronic pathology displaying more pronounced anxiousness, stress, and depression. These results align with the current study's findings, where some participants demonstrated heightened anxiety and stress associated with teaching during the pandemic. The contributing factors to this heightened stress included concerns about contracting COVID-19 on the job, instances where some participants did fall ill, dealing with overcrowded classrooms, the increased workload of repeating lessons for different groups due to class division for social distancing, administrative issues, and inadequate adherence to social distancing protocols.

One participant notably demonstrated the mental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as she articulated the challenges of being a novice teacher amid the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a negative impact on her mental health. Having previously experienced depression in her first year of teaching, she expressed fear of a recurrence. It is crucial to highlight that this participant was readmitted to the hospital for depression for the second time in 2021, just a few months after the interview was conducted. These findings align with the research of Baker et al. (2021), who emphasised that teachers already grappling with depression faced greater difficulties in coping and effectively teaching, underscoring the necessity for novice teacher induction in this study.

Despite the myriad challenges encountered by novice teachers, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic—including issues such as crowded classrooms, heavy workloads, teaching-related anxiety, and depression—a minority of participants illuminated certain opportunities. Rapanta et al. (2020) highlighted that the shift from traditional classroom teaching to online instruction allowed teachers to

enhance their technological proficiency and source and integrate effective educational materials into their teaching practices. This facet was reflected in the research findings, where one participant, despite being a beginner teacher, perceived the transition as a chance to showcase her technological skills to her more experienced colleagues, particularly in navigating online platforms.

Beyond technological advancement, some teachers saw the division of their classes as an opportunity to provide more targeted support to struggling learners. This undertaking would have been impractical with the large class sizes they typically manage. These findings align with the research of Pietro et al. (2020), who asserted that online platforms break down social barriers between teachers and learners, offering opportunities for class-based interaction, including individualised contact group projects, accessible to both teachers and learners (Hyseni & Hoxha, 2020). Therefore, implementing well-structured and formalised induction programmes offers novice teachers avenues for exploration and learning. This enhances the overall quality of education and mitigates social isolation, fostering beginner teachers' professional development through online learning platforms (Hawkes, 2018). Such initiatives contribute to preparing and equipping teachers of all experience levels with blended and online learning pedagogies (Pietro et al., 2020).

V. CONCLUSION

The goal was to understand beginner teachers' professional identity and explore how it could be developed during an induction programme. Data analysis revealed a strong link between beginner teachers' professional identity and job satisfaction, motivation, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging. These findings, evident in interview data, showed that participants' professional identities were shaped by interactions with peers and experienced teachers, supported by professional development opportunities like workshops and the IQMS.

Peer support and professional development were crucial for developing professional identity and overcoming contextual challenges. The first round of interviews (T1) identified difficulties, while the second round (T2) showed positive progress. Participants reported increased confidence in teaching and improved teaching approaches, resulting in better learner performance despite challenges like overcrowded classrooms, learner disciplinary issues, administrative workload, and the impact of COVID-19.

The New Teacher Induction Programme, encompassing peer support, school-based mentoring, training sessions, and personal development plans, was instrumental in preparing and supporting participants. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and late rollout of the induction model meant not all participants had mentors. This added to the complexities of the teaching profession, causing anxiety, distress, and increased workload due to smaller class sizes.

Participants' professional identity development was influenced by their emotions and attitudes, questioning their teacher identity during the pandemic. Despite challenges, they maintained positive attitudes, adapting their teaching methods in response to COVID-19. Peer support emerged as a significant benefit, although school-based mentoring was inconsistent. Participants suggested that training Heads of Department (HODs) as mentors would be more effective, given that HODs often provided mentorship without formal training.

Some participants, particularly those affected by the postponed training sessions, voiced dissatisfaction with the support provided by unskilled mentors such as HODs. Despite this, they recognised the value of school-based mentoring and advocated for mandatory mentoring by qualified professionals. They stressed the need for trained and experienced mentors to support their professional identity development effectively.

VI. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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