



Post-modern reality shock: Beginning teachers as sojourners in communities of practice



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H I G H L I G H T S

- We break with the traditional gaze of beginning teachers as “deficient” professionals.
- The concept of “reality shock” is deconstructed by teachers’ voices telling of their initial professional experiences.
- Socio-economic circumstances help forge a post-modern identity linked to teachers’ limited commitment.
- An imagined identity linked to educational change and empowerment emerges in teachers’ narratives.

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This study’s aims are twofold: identify the tensions and dilemmas that beginning teachers in Early Childhood Education face and their impact on the construction of their professional identity, and compare these difficulties with the ones discussed under the umbrella term “reality shock” (Veenman, 1984) in order to see whether these problems arise from the contemporary teaching context. Through narrative inquiry and with the help of Communities of Practice and Positioning Theory, we argue that the construct of reality shock is based on a simplified dichotomy between the novice and the expert, neutralizing opportunities for innovation that novices bring to schools.

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1. Introduction

In a previous study we discussed the conflicts and dilemmas that student teachers experience in reconciling the pressure they feel to conform to the teaching practices and become a full member of their corresponding community of practice with their desire to implement new ideas or approaches (Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz, & Gutierrez, 2014). Through narrative research we observed that student teachers mention the value of an imagined utopian school, but at the same time they also feel the pressure to align themselves to already established and legitimized practices (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). This is a dilemma that they must confront individually. If they stick to their drive to innovate, student teachers and probably beginning teachers will facilitate transformation and change in their

corresponding communities. Research by Woodgate-Jones (2012) suggests that experienced teachers look favorably upon this cooperation, but Ulvik and Langørgen (2012) observed that in Norwegian schools, very qualified new teachers “are not used as resources in their workplaces” (p. 51) and speculated on the reasons why newcomers’ fresh perspective and initiatives are not usually embraced by their more experienced colleagues. They posit that beginning teachers’ proposals are not heeded due to time pressure, the individualistic school culture and experienced teachers’ underlying belief that newcomers have nothing to offer them.

In the present article¹ we readdress the tensions and dilemmas that arise in a new teaching environment, but instead of focusing on

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the student teacher population we open the dialog to Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT from now on) who have full responsibility for a group of students. Specifically we want to address the following two research questions: What dilemmas, problems and tensions do NQTs have in classrooms and schools? Are the difficulties they face similar to the ones mentioned by Veenman in his account of reality shock, or do new problems emerge as the result of the uncertain context of ongoing change in which education takes place today?

These questions emerged from an extension of our previous research on student teachers. One of the main differences between student teachers and NQTs, besides being paid, is that NQTs are fully responsible for a group of students and do not have to conform to the teaching plans of another teacher, the practicum instructor. In addition, one may think that the period of time that beginning teachers are at their school is longer than the internship period. But the differences between the two groups blur when we delve into the current teaching experiences of NQTs in our particular context, as will be described later. NQTs may not feel they have the freedom to organize experiences outside the official curriculum, which undermines their teaching autonomy (cf., Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006) for the British context and the present paper for the Spanish context). Teachers' autonomy, at least as it has been documented in England, has been eroded by the phenomenon of performativity in schoolings, which encourages standardization and regulation (Wilkins, Busher, Kakos, Mohamed and Smith, 2012). The second difference, the length of time spent at the school, does not hold in many cases, either. Given the economic crisis² we are experiencing in the Basque Autonomous Community and in Spain in general, schools tend to offer very short appointments to beginning teachers. Very often these appointments are shorter than the 4–5 week internship that the School of Education requires student teachers to complete for their degree. Thus, new teachers usually establish a very ephemeral relationship with several schools during the first years of their professional development. This means that NQTs become part of different communities for a very short period of time, making them sojourners in the different schools. This new situation can be a trigger for oppositional positionings relative to the old timers, either empowering the beginning teacher or depriving her of agency, as we will see later.

2. Deconstructing “reality shock”

Deconstructing the concept of “reality shock” requires proposing an alternative and updated postmodern account (Sumsion, 2005) of this construct in order to build a more accurate representation of the dilemmas, doubts, tensions and emotions teachers experience in their first years of teaching. To the best of our knowledge, there is no attempt to elucidate how modern precarious job conditions, at least in the context we are familiar with, may reshape the heterogeneous phenomena gathered under the umbrella term “reality shock”. We believe there is need to update our conception of how NQTs see themselves as teachers and what their ideals and feelings regarding the profession are, which should be more attuned with the contemporary job conditions in what Johansen (2007) called a VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous—world (as cited in Berliner, 2009: 5). In a volatile world nothing is constant, not even information. It is uncertain because

we cannot know what will happen tomorrow. It is complex because any domain consists of multiple connections, configurations, interpretations and meanings. And finally, it is an ambiguous world because as change rate increases, the time we need to assimilate new information also increases. The volatility of information, uncertainty about the future and the complexities of education increase the ambiguity in teaching situations in significant ways.

This ambiguity generates feelings of uneasiness among teachers, particularly among NQTs. In fact, a wealth of research documents the rollercoaster of emotions new teachers experience when assigned to their first “real” job (Flores & Day, 2006; Hargreaves, 1998; Morrison, 2013; Nias, 1996). Veenman (1984), summarizing research conducted in the sixties, seventies and early eighties, popularized the term “reality shock”, defined as “the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training as a result of the confrontation with the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life” (p. 143). This definition implies that general teacher education is not adequate because it does not provide a vivid picture of what teachers will find in the classrooms. According to this author, one possible explanation for reality shock is the unrealistic optimism of student teachers during training, but other studies remark on the gap between theory and practice in NQTs' experience (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ganser, 2002; Hegstad, 1999). These two features point to the need to redesign and rethink teacher education programs, which could offer a more realistic and less idealized picture of what being a teacher entails.

According to Veenman's study, the eight problems that new teachers face are the following: classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students' work, relationships with parents, organization of class work, insufficient and/or inadequate teaching materials and supplies, and dealing with the problems of individual students. Although these problems are familiar both to old and new teachers, they cause feelings of demotivation and insecurity among the latter group of teachers; thus in this article we propose that the traditional concept of reality shock reproduces and legitimizes the division between the one who knows and the one who does not, between the experienced expert and the newcomer who lacks professional knowledge. The concept of reality shock describes certain performance difficulties or challenges new teachers experience, but it fails to shed light on the processes of change and transformation, thus contributing to the neutralization of the innovative power of new members. Reality shock, and particularly the processes of resistance or opposition in the schools, hides the professional capacity of beginning teachers to trigger educational innovation.

It is true that NQTs usually experience the gap between their university educational experience and their professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005), in addition to didactic problems (Flores, 2009) and, in some cases, lack of institutional support (Huberman, 1993). Similarly, Avalos (2009) highlights some difficulties reported by teachers, such as work overload, tiredness, lack of time to guarantee adequate preparation and attention to children with special needs. In a similar vein, Ulvik, Smith, and Helleve (2009) underline that “novice teachers are found to experience heavy workloads and poor working conditions (Achinstein, 2006; Day, Stobarr, Sammons, & Kington, 2006), and they lack sufficient and suitable support to keep them in the profession (Achinstein, 2006; Day, Stobarr, Sammons, & Kington, 2006)” (p. 835) and they conclude that novice teachers find their university education relevant to their work as teachers, but they had little time to reflect on their experiences. “They feel they have sufficient ballast, but in day-to-day life in school, their focus is on survival. It seems that newly qualified teachers need a space which serves as a bridge between pre-service education and working as teachers, a space where they can reflect and not only act. When just barely managing

² Spain's National Statistics Institute reports that the total number of unemployed has fallen to just below six million in the second half of the year 2013. The current unemployment rate is 26.3%, only second to Greece as the highest in the EU. Youth unemployment also remains extremely high, with more than 56% of Spain's 15–24 year olds out of work.

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