

***Title.*** Beginner teachers and classroom communities; a thematic analysis of UK beginner teachers' experiences in initial teacher education and beyond.

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## Abstract

This research explores the perspectives of beginner teachers in England, both on their Initial Teacher Education courses and their first year of teaching, to see if and how teacher educators might support them better. We carried out semi-structured interviews with 11 beginner teachers. They highlighted the joy they experienced in their daily work, the overwhelming workload and the significance of self-reliance in the classroom. The findings suggest that the circumstances for fruitful support by colleagues are severely hampered in the first year of teaching, where teachers' learning is largely driven by their classroom communities.

**Keywords:** Teacher education, beginner teachers, early career teachers, situated learning, communities of practice

## Introduction

In September 1999 newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in England were required to 'pass' an induction year before their qualified teacher status would be confirmed; this applied to all state schools, with the exception of Academies and Free Schools (DfEE, 1999). The induction period has recently been increased to two years, and those undertaking it are now referred to as early career teachers (ECTs) (DfE, 2021). Internationally, such induction years are now well established (Helms-Lorenz et al., 2016). For the induction year in England schools were required to give the new

teachers a reduced teaching timetable and to appoint an induction tutor to provide ‘day-to-day monitoring and support, and coordination of assessment [through] effective coaching and mentoring’ (DfE, 2018, p. 16-17).

Until relatively recently, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers in England had minimal involvement in the induction year, and their formal duties were considered over once their trainees had left the ITE. However, amended inspection criteria from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2014) now encompass the progress of trainees beyond the ITE programmes into their teaching in schools, and in its guidance on inspection, Ofsted (2014) noted:

Inspectors must spend as much time as possible gathering first-hand evidence about the quality of NQTs’/former trainees’ teaching and how well prepared they are for employment as a result of their training. (p. 14)

The research described in this paper is part of a project which was set up by a London-based ITE provider in response to Ofsted’s enhanced inspections. The project aimed to explore how ITE providers might improve the quality of the support they offered to student teachers, during both their ITE and induction years. The findings are explored under three main headings which reflect this focus: experiences on the ITE programme; experiences on the induction year; University support during the induction year.

For the overarching project, both the new teachers and their mentors were interviewed during the induction year. Key findings arising from the interviews with mentors have been discussed elsewhere (Bettaney et al., 2018). The research described in this

current paper draws on the findings arising from the interviews with the beginner teachers. Its aim was to address the following research questions:

- How do beginner teachers talk about key positive and negative aspects of their ITE programme and their induction year?
- What does this tell us about how they might be further supported by the ITE providers, both during their time at the ITE, and the induction year?

In this paper we draw on literature on the theory-practice gap, situated learning and communities of practice to explore the experiences of our interviewees.

### *Teacher attrition*

In 2011, Ingersoll noted:

For decades researchers and commentators have called attention to the difficulties encountered by newcomers to elementary and secondary teaching, the lack of support provided to struggling novices, and their high levels of attrition during the first few years on the job. (p. 225)

Such concerns are echoed across a variety of countries (OECD, 2011), including Australia (Gallant & Riley, 2017), Canada (Schaefer, 2013), Chile (Ávalos & Valenzuela, 2016), China (Zhu et al., 2020), England (Sims & Allen, 2018), Finland (Lanas, 2017), Kenya (Ndege et al., 2019), Sweden (Lindqvist et al., 2014), the USA (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2013) and the UK (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006). The induction, or beginning year, is seen as particularly significant in teacher attrition (O’Sullivan & Conway, 2016).

Research has tended to attribute the initial difficulties of beginning teachers both to inadequate preparation of students at the ITE phase and to the inherent challenges faced by new teachers in schools (Murshidi et al., 2006). In a systematic review on this topic carried out over 35 years ago, Veenman (1984) described the ‘shock’ new teachers often experienced because of the ‘harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life’ (p. 143). The key problems they faced included:

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 problems of individual students (p. 143).

It was notable that workload per se did not feature strongly here, but is regularly cited in more recent literature as a key problem for new teachers. For example, a substantial survey of graduates from the Institute for Education in London noted that, for teachers who left the profession within five years, ‘despite claiming to be aware of the challenges of workload before entering teaching, workload was the most frequently cited reason for having left’ (Perryman & Calvert, 2020, p. 3).

Veenman (1984) observed that many authors blamed ITE institutions for the difficulties new teachers were experiencing. He suggested this was an ‘unjustified accusation’ (p. 167), however, more recent research often still draws the same conclusion. Sometimes the gap between idealism and reality is identified as the key problem. For example, Barrett Kutcy and Schulz (2006) interviewed second year teachers who felt that they had been ‘sold a false bill of goods’ (p. 80) by ITE programmes, because these had taken an idealistic view of education and ignored the realities of reluctant students, unsupportive parents and unhelpful administration.

More commonly, researchers in this area highlight the gap between theoretical learning (on teacher education programmes) and practical learning (as teachers in classrooms), or between ‘university knowledge versus school knowledge’ (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 8). For example, Korthagen (2017) observes that teacher education has had a ‘disappointing’ impact on classroom practice, because of ‘the traditional approach to teacher education, which [is] based on the assumption that theory can be taught to (student) teachers with the effect that they apply this theory within the school context’ (p. 529). Darling-Hammond (2006) provides an exploration of the problematic issues associated with ‘traditional’ ITE in this respect; she particularly emphasises the difficulties caused by the ‘structural and conceptual fragmentation’ of many undergraduate ITE programmes and highlights the need for

extensive and intensely supervised clinical work—tightly integrated with course work— that allows candidates to learn from expert practice in schools that serve diverse students. (p. 306).

Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) similarly note that when theory and practice are closely integrated in teacher education, this strengthens new teachers’ ‘innovative

teaching competence’ (p. 156). The gap between educational theory and practice is explored by a number of researchers, both with respect to the education of new teachers (e.g. Cheng et al., 2010) and with respect to ongoing teacher professional development (e.g. Kennedy, 2016).

Veenman (1984) suggested, instead, that the primary difficulty new teachers faced was because of the nature of the teaching profession, where ‘learning while doing’ was seen as the most important source of their developing professionalism, and where beginning teachers tended to be ‘thrown in at the deep end’ (p. 167). This shifts the main focus of how new teachers can be supported from the ITE phase to the teaching phase. There is a considerable body of literature on the important role their colleagues can play in supporting new teachers. This support can be in the shape of an assigned mentor or a broader range of colleagues. Much more rarely, authors also include the potential ongoing role played by the new teachers’ former ITE institutions (e.g. Fu & Rankie Shelton, 2002; Dicke et al., 2015; Tammets et al., 2013), which is an area of particular interest to us.

### *New teacher support*

As noted earlier, many induction programmes emphasise the importance of one key person, a mentor, in providing support to new teachers; however, mentoring is not without its complexities (Kardos & Moore Johnson, 2010). Difficulties with mentoring may arise when mentor and mentee have conflicting archetypes of what mentoring is actually for (Kemmis et al., 2014) and there are conflicting views about how far trustworthy relationships can develop when mentors are also participating in assessment and evaluation of mentees (Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2008; Pillen et al 2013). Practical issues around mentoring have also come in for investigation,



including issues to do with training (Aspfors & Fransson 2015), or the personal characteristics of the mentor (Popescu-Mitroi & Mazilescu, 2014), and the difficulties educational establishments encounter in trying to resource mentoring (Moyle et al., 1999).

Other commentators focus on the supportive role that can be played by the broader community of teachers. In particular Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice (CoP) model has been useful in this respect, and has been used to explore the experiences of student teachers on placement (Johnston, 2016; Correa et al., 2014) and beginner teachers (Moretti & Alessandrini, 2015), as well as the ongoing learning of more established teachers (Mayer, 2019). However, some have pointed out that Lave and Wenger's exclusive focus on situated learning is problematic (Tennant, 1997), particularly with respect to the role of formal educational settings in career preparation (Emad & Roth, 2016; Fuller & Unwin, 2003). And Brouwer et al.'s (2012) research casts doubt on the extent to which CoPs exist in schools at all,

The CoP model draws on the concept of situated learning. This concept seems to be particularly relevant in exploring the 'on the job' learning in which new teachers engage, and therefore also in exploring how they might be further supported to navigate the theory-practice gap (Mayer, 2019; Korthagen, 2017). In their seminal paper, *Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning*, Brown et al. (1989) insisted that a traditional teaching approach which focuses on abstracted knowledge 'denies students the access to either the activity or culture that they need in order to develop an active understanding of a particular concept' (p. 6). Thus, for example, student teachers cannot gain a good grasp of pedagogical theories unless these are understood within the context of the classroom, or other teaching situation.

By extension, this leads away from the focus on abstracted knowledge to ‘a view of knowing as activity by specific people in specific circumstances’ (Lave & Wenger 1991 p. 52) and a view of learning as a lifelong process (Lave, 1993), rather than an activity which is tied to formal schooling. Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed their social model of learning through analysis of the developing skills and knowledge of apprentices in a variety of cultures. From this they developed the concept of CoPs, more recently defined as:

groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1).

Within education CoPs have been described as applying at the level of the department, the school, the wider community of teachers, online communities, etc, with most authors suggesting that experienced teachers are likely to belong to a number of different CoPs.

Lave and Wenger (1991) described newcomers to a CoP as engaging in legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). This was a central concept in their 1991 publication, though the CoP concept has become more prominent subsequently, particularly in Wenger’s work. Lave and Wenger (1991) used the concept of LPP to describe the process by which newcomers could become part of the CoP, moving from peripheral to full participation by ‘being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities’ (Wenger 1998, p. 4). We draw on these concepts in the rest of this paper.

## **Methodology and methods**

The research was carried out by a team of three researchers working for a London based ITE/University.

As an active ITE provider the University has contacts with a range of schools which employ its graduates as teachers. Following ethical clearance, an email containing details of the project was sent to the head teachers of these schools, along with a request that we be allowed to interview their staff, subject to the latter's agreement. The new teachers and their mentors were then contacted with full details of the project, prior to giving their informed consent. We particularly noted that we would not be asking them to comment on each other's performance, and highlighted issues of ethical concern, such as their right to withdraw.

Eleven new teachers agreed to take part. Those who were interviewed may well have been particularly motivated and successful new teachers, since the process required that the head teacher, the mentor and the new teacher themselves all had to give informed consent for the interviews to go ahead. We were aware of this possibility throughout the interviews and analysis.

The interviews were held at the new teachers' places of work and lasted between 40-90 minutes. Most were carried out on an individual basis, however, in one case three teachers were interviewed together, and in another case two.

The research team took an interpretive stance, aiming to ‘understand the subjective world of human experience’ (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 17), in this case, the experiences of the new teachers. The research interviews were semi-structured, allowing all three interviewers to follow the same wording for questions (see Table 1) but also giving them flexibility in the sequencing of the questions and how they followed up on the interviewees’ answers. (Brinkmann, 2014). The aim of this was to encourage a free-ranging exploration of the participants’ experiences so that issues of personal and professional significance could emerge in a relatively naturalistic way.

Following transcription the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Themes were identified which were relevant to the research questions and demonstrated ‘some level of *patterned* response or meaning’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). We were particularly interested in identifying themes which captured aspects of interviewees’ experiences that appeared to be significant to them. Our initial analysis focused on semantic themes, i.e. those which reflected the ‘obvious meanings expressed’ in the texts (Braun et al., 2016, p. 791); subsequent analysis focused on latent themes, or ‘more implicit ideas or concepts that underpin what’s explicitly expressed’ (p. 792) (see Table 1).

In keeping with our interpretive stance, our analysis was primarily inductive, i.e. shaped by the content of the interview (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, it became clear that the concepts of CoPs and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) could be useful in informing the analysis; so subsequent analysis also took on a deductive stance, i.e. it was shaped by theory. Peer review by the three members of the research

team and close adherence to the wording of the interviews enhanced the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Table 1 – Questions asked and themes identified

Questions asked	Themes identified
<p>Questions about the interviewees' general background:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What motivated you to become a teacher?</li> <li>• Where do you see yourself in five years' time?</li> </ul>	
<p>Questions about their ITE year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the most inspiring thing you learnt/did on your ITE course?</li> <li>• Is there anything you use in the classroom which you got from the ITE course?</li> <li>• Are there things you wish we'd covered at the University?</li> </ul>	<p>Overarching theme: future classroom practice</p> <p>Semantic themes: underpinning theory, pedagogical modelling, school placements</p> <p>Latent themes: theory-practice connection, schools as complex and varied workplaces.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Was this school one of your Teaching Practice schools? If it was, what difference did it make?</li> </ul>	
<p>Questions about their first year of teaching:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is teaching how you imagined it would be?</li> <li>What is the most satisfying thing about being a teacher?</li> <li>In general terms, how did the first term/year go?</li> <li>What went well and why?</li> <li>What did you find particularly challenging?</li> </ul>	<p>Overarching themes: positive experiences in the classroom, negative experiences in the classroom</p> <p>Semantic themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>children's progress, positive relationships, the enjoyable variability of the job</li> <li>workload, classroom planning and management, negative relationships.</li> </ul> <p>Latent themes: agency and professionalism, schools as complex and varied workplaces</p>
<p>Questions about their links with their teacher training institution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have you ever thought about contacting the University for support?</li> </ul>	<p>Semantic theme: redundancy of the ITE provider in the induction year</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you think the University could help you now?</li> </ul>	
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All the respondents have been given new names in the account to conceal identities.

## Results

Ten of the 11 interviewees were employed in primary schools in South East England, and one was employed in a secondary school. Roughly half had been employed in other contexts before coming into teaching, though these contexts were often within the education sector (e.g. as teaching assistants). Seven had graduated from an undergraduate degree in Primary education and four had graduated from a postgraduate teacher education programme (three in Primary and one in Secondary education). All the group anticipated that they would still be involved in education in five years' time, as teachers, managers, subject leads and Early Years coordinators.

The findings of the interviews are explored under three main categories, focussing on

1. Experiences on the ITE programme
2. Experiences on the induction year
3. University support during the induction year

## 1. Experiences on the ITE programme

### Positive experiences

We identified one overarching theme in the way the interviewees spoke about their positive experiences, which was that they were all directed towards helping them develop their own *future classroom practice*. The other themes identified in Table One are shown in bold below.

The *underpinning theory* the interviewees valued included both general pedagogy and formal learning theory, and throughout the interviews, most participants made strong connections between theory and their classroom practice (*theory-practice connection*). For example, here the interviewees are responding to the question ‘Is there anything you particularly use in the classroom which you got from the ITE course?’

- I always remember [the tutor] taking the fear out of Maths ... She said if anyone says they are not good at maths, tell them they are not good yet, because you need to practise it; and tell parents not tell their children that they are not good at maths, because it just breeds that endless cycle, the fear, it being OK not to be good at it. *Rashida*
- [The ITE tutors] let us have freedom with what we wanted from an Early Years point of view ... they gave us all the theory about Reggio [Emelia]...



and Montessori ... and I took [my classroom approach] away from learning all about the different theorists and ... picking apart the bits I liked and bringing that into my classroom environment, and that gets praised a lot. *Nell*

For some, the ***theory-practice connection*** appeared to grow stronger with experience

(Interviewer - What was the most inspiring thing you learnt on your ITE year?)

- I'll see things and I'll just think - Oh, that's Vygotsky in practice, or - Oh wow, that's actually, that's what Bruner said ... I'm finding now I'm making links back, and yes, it fascinates me. *Graham*

]Eight of the 11 interviewees referred to the impact of specific lecturers in their identification of positive ITE experiences. This was evident throughout the interviews, but particularly when they spoke about the value of the ***pedagogical modelling*** they had seen, and the connection they made to what they themselves could do as future teachers, both in terms of the ideas they could use and the excitement they could engender.

(Interviewer – What was the most inspiring thing you learnt or experienced on the ITE course?)

- I remember sitting in a lecture, just thinking, yes, that's something I would like to do ... Just make a book come alive ... it's not so much a thing that I learnt, it's more a thing I, sort of, opened my eyes to. *Graham*
- The way [the lecturer] presented that story ... it was a big high and I will always remember that ... and honestly when I have got the Horrid Henry book open at the moment ... I AM Horrid Henry ... and they love it. *Cara*

(Interviewer – Is there anything you do now in your classroom that you got from the ITE course?)

- When you are watching other people, you think ‘Oh yeah, I could use that’ and like with maths especially, when people do things, I am like, oh fantastic, I could do that. *Cara*
- The Maths course I really, really enjoyed ... and the university is really good at always putting things into context ... and always relating it back to school ... that really opened up my eyes to the different things I could do in school.

*Susan*

There was a strong impression of observation here (‘watching’, ‘sitting in a lecture’), but it’s clear the experience was far from passive and the students were connecting strongly to the pedagogy they were seeing being modelled, both in the moment, and in anticipation of their own futures (‘opened my eyes’, ‘come alive’, ‘big high’).

The third key theme identified here was to do with the **school placements**, with all the interviewees stressing the importance of the placements in preparing for teaching.

(Interviewer - How well do you think the programme prepared you for teaching?)

- The placements are brilliant ... they really do give an insight of what teaching is. *Susan*

(Interviewer - What was the most inspiring thing you learnt in your ITE year?)

- I did enjoy ... being at university, but ... I didn’t learn anywhere near as much as I did when I was out on placements *Joseph*

An additional latent theme was identified from the interviewees’ comments on their placements. Schools were portrayed as ***complex and varied workplaces*** which needed to be ‘learnt’. It was evident that this learning was highly dependent on context

(Interviewer – Was there anything you learnt on the ITE which was particularly useful?)

- I think getting to know so many differences [through placements in] different schools - that teaches you the adaptability - to learn the new schools, new classes and different people. *Rosie*

In the same vein, seven of the beginner teachers had been to their current school on one of their placements and clearly felt this was a key advantage in getting to grips with the variability of the workplace,

(Interviewer – Did it make a difference, having your placement here?)

- I had good relationships with all the other staff already ... So [starting here as a beginner teacher] didn't feel like it was a big jump. *Joseph*
- I already knew the worst that could be in this school ... I was already prepared, whereas, going to a new school you don't know exactly all the [special educational] needs or the gifted and talented, how much your subject knowledge needs to be able to push them. *Jacob*

Several of the beginner teachers also emphasised how well the placements worked alongside the ITE-based activities, and appeared, again, to be acutely aware of the ***theory-practice connection***, rather than a theory-practice gap

- That's where the [ITE] course comes in into its own because of that blend of theory and practical. *Cara*
- I always felt like the balance between theory and practice was just at the right time as well, just when you think it's been too much theory and then you go into school and you are like 'oh, hang on, this is why I am doing it'. And the

other way round as well, when you are in a placement and on your knees, and then you are back in Uni, like ‘ooh, adults’. *Rashida*

## Negative experiences

In contrast to the certainty with which the beginner teachers spoke about their positive experiences, they were more diffident about their negative experiences, and there was little consensus in their ideas about how the University could better support them. A couple of the students noted the difficulty in predicting what the problem areas would be

(Interviewer - Are there things you wish we’d covered at university?)

- Obviously, at university, you don’t know what situations you’re going to come across, [for example] I’ve got quite a few children in my class that do not get on [with each other], and you wouldn’t really expect that. *Susan*

Others observed that material they had covered in the undergraduate first year (e.g. educational technology) had changed by the time they graduated and that updates might be helpful. More commonly, however, the beginner teachers observed

(Interviewer - Are there things you wish we’d covered at university?)

- You could be at university for 20 years and still, you know, there’s only so much time. *Graham*
- [The ITE providers] give you basics, but every school has their own approach. ... so I think you, kind of, get a level of professionalism to, kind of, adapt.

*Cara*

Again, many of the responses were underpinned by the notion of *schools as complex and varied workplaces* where it was not possible to fully predict what the key difficulties might be; in Rosie's words, that new schools, new classes and different people needed to be 'learnt'.

## **2. Experiences on the NQT year**

### **What went well**

Most of the interviewees' positive commentary about their NQT year centred around an overarching theme of *positive experiences in the classroom*, and as the quotes in this section show, they clearly were aware of their impact here, and spoke about their work with a sense of *agency and responsibility*.

The strongest theme, identified by the majority of the interviewees, was to do with their pleasure in the *children's progress*. Their awareness of this generally came from direct contact with the children themselves in the classrooms, e.g.

(Interviewer – What is the most satisfying thing about being a teacher?)

- It's just when children get that light bulb moment, when you've been working with a child that doesn't understand something... There is one child in particular ... it was just amazing to watch [his progress] and just to know that I'd helped him. *Susan*
- The children's learning - I love it. Like today we were writing about the self-evaluation that they have to do at the end of each term, that we were brain

storming. I stood there thinking the board is full of ideas, that must be everything we have done, and they are still like buzzing with all these ideas of everything we have done in year four and kind of randomising. I like that energy. *Rosie*

Significantly, at other times the motivating feedback came via the parents.

(Interviewer - What went particularly well this year?)

- It's the progress, and then the comments that you get from parents at parents' evening [such as] 'I can't believe how much my child has progressed this year' ... Oh, that's sweet. *Tom*
- [My pupils] are six and seven and they are very chatty, they talk all the time. And that's what makes them strong cohesively but it also drives me crazy and I think they are not listening ... That's a challenge, but then you are hearing [from parents] what I am saying to them is making them want to learn at home. *Rashida*

The second theme was to do with the ***positive relationships*** the beginner teachers had developed; these were mainly with the children, but here again the parents were important

(Interviewer – what went well this year?)

- I've made some lovely relationships with parents of children in older year groups and they'll come to me now and say 'Do you mind just keeping an eye on so-and-so today? They're having a bad day' ... that's nice for me to, to know that I made an impact' *Nell*

As with the children's progress, the positive relationships were a marker of success for the interviewee.

- [Working with one particular child] was a really good challenge, and as I say, the relationship I've now built with that pupil is unbreakable. ... and that's what I came into [teaching] for. *Graham*
- It's like a little community, isn't it? I think my *yes* moment, was after the parent-teacher interviews, and I thought - I have done it! *Rashida*

It was striking that the sense of community was with the parents and the children. We return to this point later.

The third theme was to do with the *enjoyable variability* of the job, which echoed the earlier theme of *schools as complex and variable workplaces*.

(Interviewer – Is teaching actually how you imagined it to be?)

- It's been really good. It's been exciting, every day is different, no two days are the same. *Neha*
- Every day is changeable, I think the morning will be different from the afternoon but it's always, as much as possible, kind of led by [the children].  
*Rashida*

## **What was challenging**

Most of the interviewees were able to identify several difficult experiences, and Joseph probably spoke for many when he noted:

- Was anything challenging? It's all challenging, that's the thing. *Joseph*

As might be expected, **workload**, both in and out of the classroom, was clearly the key issue the beginner teachers had faced, and can, perhaps, be argued to be partially the flip side of the **enjoyable variability** theme. Four of the interviewees felt fairly well prepared for the workload they encountered during their first year of teaching, three of whom were on the postgraduate programme, which may be because the postgraduate programme itself was particularly intense. However, most noted that the workload was a huge challenge

(Interviewer - Is teaching as you imagined it to be?)

- It's a very, very heavy workload ... you could literally just work every hour of the day ... It feels like you're just above water all the time. *John*
- The teaching side of things is what I expected and the workload is probably a lot more than I expected, 'cause of the marking, the planning and especially in Reception [classes], you've got cutting and sticking coming out of your earholes! *Nell*

As with Perryman and Calvert's (2020) respondents, it seems as though the interviewees mistakenly thought they were prepared for the workload.

- [From the different placements] I got the idea of what I would be expected to do. [But] the workload - I don't think you can ever really imagine what it would be like. *Susan*

Beyond workload the range of responses indicated the variability, again, of induction year experiences, although they can mostly be grouped under **classroom planning and management** and include difficulties with achieving progress, behaviour management, planning, assessing and teaching new subjects:



(Interviewer – is there anything that's been particularly challenging?)

- Teaching literacy ... their progress is, you know, very slow to start with, you just feel like you're banging your head against a brick wall. *Joseph*
- My challenges in the first term were behaviour ... someone really laughed at me on one of my training days ... she offered me a light up pen and I went - this is far too exciting, I can't distract them! *Rashida*
- I had a particularly needy child with lots of different issues. And I think I found it really hard to plan for everybody else ... I found it very hard to know what to do for him. *Tom*
- I think for me it's now assessing ... Are you stretching high ones enough? Are you doing enough support for the lowest to bring them up? *Cara*
- Trying to reach everyone's needs is really difficult [but my major challenge has been] knowing how to teach the subjects I've never taught before. *Neha*

As already noted, most of the interviewees focussed on what was happening in their classrooms, however, some comments were made about difficulties which lay outside the classroom, particularly with *relationships*. Sometimes this was with children's parents

- The biggest challenge? Dealing with parents [has been difficult] ... I've got ... quite a few challenging parents, and it's just knowing how to talk to them about situations, and just trying to keep them calm ... Erm - had quite a few incidents! *Susan*

More commonly it was with other, more experienced members of staff

(Interviewer – so what were the biggest challenges?)

- Working with other people ... that aren't on the same page, or maybe don't value the job as much as you do. You have to fight other people. *John*
- [Working] relationships with the other year two teachers ... I want to try out new things and I want to experiment with different ideas ... So things that I have learnt last year that I would have been confident to implement in the beginning of the year, in our planning forum I was made to feel like it was a very bad way to teach it ... so that has been challenging because after I teach a lesson I go 'Oh I knew a better way to do that'. *Rashida*

The way in which the interviewees spoke about their induction year emphasised again that schools were seen as ***complex and varied workplaces***. It also highlighted that most of them were experiencing considerable challenge, but also considerable job satisfaction, ***agency and professionalism***. They were not being passively buffeted within this complex environment, but were active individuals who had a strong sense of themselves as professionals in context. Sometimes this was focussed on the individual beginner teacher and their classroom

(Interviewer - In general terms, how did the first year go?)

- I think I'm kind of proactive and organised as a person, so I think those things allow me to keep on top of everything [and] I went in with this, like, vision, of what I wanted my classroom to be like and the expectation was set from day one, and I, kind of, kept it above that. And it's worked. *John*

(Interviewer - as there anything which you learnt on your ITE that is helping you to teach well?)

- Luckily for me, my behaviour management skills are really good ... I'm good with routines ... I'm good with setting my expectations. *Jacob*

In one rare example the context was the interviewee's shift from an individual perspective to a shared community perspective

(Interviewer - So you felt you'd developed professionally?)

- Yes, I've found [it] hard with working with other members of staff, cause I've always, sort of, been a lone ranger ... I like to do things my way and on my terms and it's been an eye-opener for me to see actually, there are different ways of doing things and, yeah, we could combine our ideas and it works so much better. *Nell*

And sometimes the context was the beginner teacher within the supportive broader school

(Interviewer - Is teaching how you imagined it would be?)

- I am perfectionist, when it comes to paperwork ... and I think in the school they are very accommodating. They want you to be who you are, they kind of like to nurture you. *Cara*

(Interviewer - So would it have affected your year if you'd had your placement in this school?)

- I'm a very dedicated person anyway. You know, I always like to think I give 110%, but [you've got to] be in a place where you can flourish, and I think that here in particular is a place I can flourish. *Graham*

### 3. University support during the induction year

Our final broad area of enquiry was into how the ITE provider might be able to support new teachers during their first year of teaching and the key semantic theme which emerged here was to do with the **redundancy of the ITE provider in the induction year.**

Four of the interviewees were still in regular email contact with their University tutors, but more typically, they hadn't maintained contact, noting

- It hasn't really crossed my mind. *Rosie*

Several noted that this was because of the level of support they were experiencing at their school

(Interviewer – Have you thought of contacting the university for support?)

- Honestly, no... not that there's anything wrong with the university, but because I'm in a school now where I've got so much support everywhere.

*Susan*

Although some suggested they might make more regular contact in future, from others, it seemed as though they had experienced an identity shift from trainee to teacher, and no longer saw themselves as part of the University community. John summed this up as follows

(Interviewer - Have you been in contact with the University since you've left?)

- *John*: I don't feel I've had the need, really ... in my case, because I feel I'm really supported here ... No. You, kind of, feel like that's it, you're done. You don't feel like being overlapped, as such.

When we asked if there were ways in which the University could support them during their induction year, they came up with a range of suggestions, including further use of the library facilities for research projects, access to the online platform for a further year, ideas for lessons, forums for meeting with their tutors and other beginner teachers, but there tended to be a fairly tepid, conditional feel to most of these responses.

(Interviewer - How do you think the University might be able to help you now?)

- I think ... I'd be interested [in support] cause the campus is quite close ... If I felt there was an area of need or something and there was a course running, I could probably go. *Joseph*

The majority of the interviewees were theoretically willing to engage with the University, but could not readily see what it could provide that would make their attendance (in a busy schedule) a high priority

- *Rashida*: But you know actually it's not bad idea if there are evening lectures [at the University] and they are on something (pause) I don't know
- *Interviewer*: Would you really go?
- *Rashida*: [Well], I would **want** to go.

Only one of the interviewees explored the notion of an additional role for the University in providing one-to-one and group support, but again, this exploration was expressed in highly conditional language

(Interviewer - Have you considered having contact with the University, for support?)

- If I needed support, I think, if I was someone that was really struggling with my NQT year, and I maybe didn't feel as though I was getting support from my school, I would think that it would help me, if I had extra support from the university ... Maybe talking with the NQT, looking at it from a different perspective, conversation etcetera. ... Listening to other NQTs and knowing that you're not the only one ... That would be good, maybe, sharing ideas.

*Susan*

Throughout their responses, again, their ***agency and professionalism*** was evident, and it was clear that the majority saw themselves as having the prime responsibility for their progress and knowing what they needed to do to improve. These comments provide an interesting juxtaposition to the interviewees' comments on working in a supportive environment.

(Interviewer - is teaching how you imagined it to be?)

- [My] subject knowledge in topics that we do isn't great. But then I do it in my own time ... I don't really think anyone can really provide for that because it's kind of down to me. *Rosie*

- You have to learn the skills as you go along and that's what I found ...  
challenging, in a sense that, oh, I have to do it myself, but otherwise, yeah, it's  
been really good. *Neha*

(Interviewer – what went well this year?)

- I think we were all like a rollercoaster ... [you have to] do the hard bit of  
putting in the structure to make it work then actually things work lot more  
easily for the next new thing that you have to learn. *Rashida*
- I'm actually excited to start the year again, next year, in Year four, but  
knowing what I did last year, and how I can improve on it. *Susan*

Through their commentary on the induction year, the key drivers for the interviewees' learning came through strongly as primarily themselves and the children, and more peripherally, the parents and other teachers.

(Interviewer - How has this first year gone?)

- Over time I'm reflecting more and ... the children are very honest as well  
cause they'll tell me sometimes 'Oh, I like Miss better, she does this, she does  
that'. And then, I'll realise why they're liking Miss better and I can try and get  
feedback from that ... I don't take things personally ... I can see what Miss is  
doing better and [I know that] Miss has been doing it for 20 years [and] I've  
only been doing it for this term. *Jacob*

## **Discussion and conclusions**

### **The ITE year**

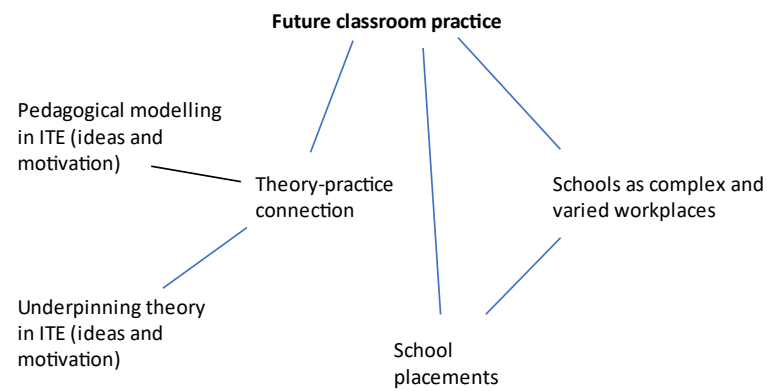
*How do beginner teachers talk about key positive and negative aspects of their ITE programme?*

*What does this tell us about how they might be further supported by the ITE providers during their time at the ITE?*

Gorard's (2017) analysis of a survey of nearly 8 000 beginner teachers in England found a 'high level of reported overall satisfaction with ITE' (p. 17). Broadly speaking, this was reflected in the way our interviewees talked about their ITE programmes. Figure 1 summarises the findings from the research and shows that the interviewees particularly valued the pedagogical modelling and underpinning theory they came across which would support their future classroom practice, and that the connection between theory and practice was strong. However, the school placements were the most valued part of the ITE year, and contributed to the interviewees' future classroom practice directly, while also allowing them to develop their understanding of the complex nature of schools, within which their classroom practice took place.



Figure 1 – How the interviewees talked about their experiences on the ITE year



The way the interviewees spoke about the placement revealed the situation-specific complexity of the learning they had to engage in on the ground, and highlighted, by contrast, the relative stability of the learning they were engaging in at their ITE.

Lave noted (1993, p. 17) that formal education institutions prioritise knowledge which is seen as universal and constant, but that, in practice ‘Knowledgeability is routinely in a state of change rather than stasis, in the medium of socially, culturally, and historically ongoing systems of activity, involving people who are related in multiple and heterogenous ways’. This certainly seems to be a good description of the situated learning our interviewees were engaging in during their placements. However, from the way they spoke about their experiences it became apparent that they continued to draw on the theory they encountered during the ITE year throughout the placements (‘Just when you think it’s been too much theory and then you go into school and you are like ‘oh, hang on, this is why I am doing it’) and into the induction year, and that in some cases the connection was becoming stronger the more experienced they became (‘I’m finding now I’m making links back, and yes, it fascinates me’).

Establishing good theory-practice links is a perennial problem for ITE institutions (Korthagen, 2017) and seen as highly desirable in the training of future teachers (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005), so it was encouraging that these interviewees clearly valued the theory-practice connection and its impact in their own teaching. It was also clear that the pedagogy which they saw modelled was powerful teaching/learning for many of them, though not necessarily perceived as such (‘it’s not so much a thing that I learnt, it’s more a thing I, sort of, opened my eyes to’), possibly because it did not fit their expectation of formal ITE learning. Instead, in some respects it was more

akin to Lave and Wenger's (1991) apprenticeship learning, as aspiring educationalists were watching experienced educationalists and learning as much about the pedagogy as about the content.

As we noted earlier, other researchers have pointed out that Lave and Wenger's perspective on formal learning can be problematic (e.g. Emad & Roth, 2016) and our interviews with these beginner teachers clearly highlighted the value of the connection between ITE and school contexts. However, the ways the interviewees spoke about what the ITE could do to support them further during the ITE year revealed that they thought this was limited. The interviewees came up with a range of minor aspects which could be addressed (such as refresher courses to keep up with changing technologies), but beyond this, there was the impression that the ITEs were limited in being able to prepare beginner teachers further for the variable and complex nature of schools, or the 'complex structure of persons-acting-in-settings' (Lave, 1993, p 9).

**In conclusion**, our findings on the ITE phase highlight the blurred lines between situated and formal learning. The key messages for ITE providers are about the importance of framing the ITE experiences in terms of the students' future classroom practice, valuing the impact of individual tutors, explicitly modelling pedagogy and being clear on the nature of the learning involved here, constantly supporting the connection between theory and practice, and, particularly, supporting students' intense and complex learning on the placement.

## **The induction year**

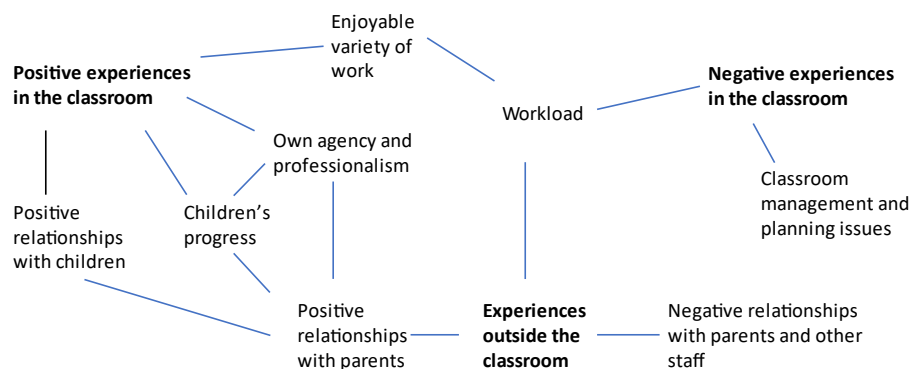
*How do beginner teachers talk about key positive and negative aspects of their induction year?*

*What does this tell us about how they might be further supported by the ITE providers during their induction year?*

When the interviewees spoke about their induction year, the impression of emotional engagement came through powerfully. It was clear that they experienced pride and pleasure in their work, and that this was primarily motivated by the children's progress and the part they had played in that progress (their agency and professionalism). Alongside this, there was enjoyment from most in the positive relationships they had established, both with children and with parents, and enjoyment in the variability of their role.

However, the other side of this coin was that the workload could be overwhelming. As might be expected from other recent research in this area (e.g. Perryman & Calvert, 2020) this was the key negative the beginner teachers identified, despite the fact that the workload would have been reduced in their induction year to, at most, 90 percent of a full teaching load (DfE, 2018). Beyond the workload, the challenges were mostly to do with classroom practice, again highlighting the central role of the classroom in their induction year. The range of problematic issues they raised bore strong similarities to those summarised by Veenman (1984), showing that little had changed in this respect, other than, significantly, the increased workload. Figure 2 summarises these findings.

Figure 2 How the interviewees talked about their experiences on the induction year



When they spoke about how the ITE/University might be able to support them further during the challenging induction year, it became clear that the interviewees saw the ITE's role as giving them a theoretical, emotional and practical foundation, but once that was done, they had moved on to a different world, where the weight of the workload, the focus of the job and the complexity of the specific context in which they were working meant that they could not see much value in additional generalised support. It was striking that the areas where they thought the ITE *might* support them did not match any of the areas where they had been experiencing difficulties; and although they generally did not dismiss additional support out of hand, it clearly had limited relevance for them in this intense first year of teaching.

About a third of the interviewees were still in contact with their lecturers and, of course, many experienced teachers return to Universities for postgraduate study and

other staff development. However, for most of these interviewees there was a clear break in their relationship with the ITE pre and post graduation, whether this was primarily because of their perception of its limited usefulness in their pressurised schedules, or whether it was more to do with a fundamental shift of identity ('You, kind of, feel like that's it, you're done').

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of CoPs is useful here. The interviewees have left behind their largely observational roles as students (although these students were far from passive in these observational roles) and have moved to active roles as new practitioners who are 'active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). There are also striking similarities in the way in which the interviewees spoke about their experiences on the induction year and Wenger et al.'s (2002) comment that

What makes [CoPs] successful over time is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members. Although many factors, such as management support or an urgent problem, can inspire a community, nothing can substitute for this sense of *aliveness*. (p. 50)

This description of *aliveness* certainly has resonance with the ways the interviewees spoke about their teaching. The CoP model may well also be useful, therefore, in explaining why the interviewees struggled to see the relevance of ongoing ITE support, coming from outside their CoP(s), and therefore at odd with them, both in terms of their identities as professionals and in terms of the formal knowledge with which they associate the ITE's provision.

However, the CoP model raises an additional complexity here to do with the role of colleagues. We did not ask the interviewees direct questions about other staff, and in

particular we said we would not ask them to comment on their mentors, but most of the interviewees referred obliquely to helpful and extensive support they were experiencing at their schools. Despite this, there was no real sense of their colleagues when the interviewees talked about what had gone well, and they were only briefly mentioned when they talked about what had been challenging. With respect to the latter, Lave and Wenger have been criticised for underplaying the complexities of power relations within CoPs and instead focusing on examples which are 'rather stable, cohesive and even welcoming' (Fuller et al. 2005 p. 53), though it is fair to note that they warn that 'Connotations of peaceful co-existence [within CoPs], mutual support and inter-personal allegiance are not assumed' (Wenger, 1998, p. 77). However, it is the relative *absence* of colleagues in these new teachers' everyday lives which is more striking.

It seemed that self-reliance was more significant in their professional development and was an inevitable part of a teacher's job ('it's down to me', 'you just have to find your feet, don't you'). Cara used the same words as Veenman (1984) when she spoke about being 'thrown in at the deep end from the start', but tellingly, she prefaced this with 'you kind of need to be', which certainly wasn't Veenman's interpretation. Much of this can be attributed to longstanding culture in schools where the classroom is a place where the individual teacher is relatively isolated from their colleagues and fully responsible for what goes on (Pomson, 2005). Nell reflected this sense of ownership and personal responsibility when she said

- When you get hold of your own [class] it's like Ah, what do I do? So you just have to find your feet, don't you? *Nell*

The same issue might explain why there was no sense of Legitimate Peripheral Participation in these interviews, i.e. the process by which newcomers move from peripheral to full participation in the CoP. These beginner teachers were operating as full professionals, at the centre of their working worlds, and when they spoke about direct interactions with their colleagues it tended to be with a sense of equality or with the sense of resentment that their professionalism was not being recognised ('you have to fight other people', 'I knew a better way to do that'). The strength with which they identified their own agency and professionalism made it understandable why they struggled to see how the ITE, which supported them as trainees, might have a further role to play in their work.

Overall it was evident that the excitement and aliveness the interviewees experienced in their induction year *was* to do with community, but not Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice. It was more engendered by the community of the classroom, the place where most of their attention was focused, that is, for the most part, the interviewee themselves the children, and much more peripherally the parents and colleagues.

**In conclusion** then, the ways in which the interviewees spoke about their induction year highlighted the significance of joy and pleasure they experienced in their daily work, the overwhelming workload, and the significance of self-reliance. They have, for the most part left the University behind (the community of lecturers and students), but they are not embedded in a whole school context (the community of practitioners). The significant learning happens, for them, in the community of the classroom. This seems almost inevitable, bearing in mind their workloads; the classroom is their most pressing concern and there is little space for much else ('You could literally just work every hour of the day ... It feels like you're just above water



all the time’). However, although it may be inevitable, it’s far from ideal, even for particularly capable beginner teachers.

There is a wealth of material which points to the significance of school teachers collaborating with each other (e.g. Shah, 2012), and to a lesser extent collaborating with higher education institutions (e.g. Tammets et al., 2013); and although Lave and Wenger’s CoP model has attracted criticism, it is hugely significant in describing the acquisition of skills and knowledge by individuals, and the subsequent development of professionals (Mayer, 2019), so the fact that it seems to apply in such a limited way for beginner teachers is a source of concern.

Superficially it would appear from these interviews that the support the ITE provider can give in new teachers’ first year of teaching is very limited and might best be confined to providing an open connection to respond to those who are struggling. Perhaps this will always be the case, bearing in mind the identity shift experienced by several of our interviewees, but perhaps there should still be room for further professional collaboration here. However, the deeper significance of these findings is that the punishing workload, and hence narrow classroom focus of the new teacher, mean that their capacity for interaction and collaboration with other education professionals (including those from their previous ITE institution) is severely impaired. For the wellbeing and development of both new teachers and the teaching profession as a whole there need to be greater changes in the system. While, in England, the addition of an extra year in the induction period for early career teachers (DfE, 2021) is welcome, it is also only tinkering at the edges of this problem.

## Limitations

This in-depth qualitative work was carried out with a small sample of new teachers, all of whom attended the same ITE institution in England. It does not tell us how far these experiences might be echoed in other institutions and other countries. Our study suggested that those who had undertaken postgraduate ITE found the subsequent teaching workload less problematic than those who had undertaken undergraduate ITE. However, we had too few postgraduate interviewees to be able to explore this in detail. Similarly, a differently focused study might be able to tell us about differences in the training of Secondary and Primary teachers. Finally, interpretive research can underplay the influences of external factors on the subject matter being explored, and mixed methods research, would provide a useful further perspective in this area, where external factors are increasingly powerful.

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