

Teacher emotions and professional development: A case study of three first-year EFL teachers

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This case study explored the emotions, narrations, and actions of three first-year English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers to identify the factors that influenced their adaptation and how their emotions reflected their needs for professional development. Data were collected from teacher participants' reflective journals and two semi-structured interviews (at the beginning and the end of a school year). Findings foregrounded some major problems that first-year EFL teachers experienced, including the need for guidance on teaching low-performing students and dealing with student diversity, reconciling their initial education with practical classroom realities, and teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion. Close analysis of the findings led to the assumptions that need-oriented induction and mentoring schemes, integrating personal and professional development are contributory factors for novice teachers' professional development. Implications of the findings are examined in relation to the induction mechanism and the school and professional community.

Introduction

In a global context of teacher shortages and growing teacher attrition (Doherty, 2020), how to help new qualified teachers (NQTs) make smooth and easy transitions have drawn unprecedented attention in research and practice (Gallant & Ripley, 2014; Symeonidis et al., 2023). In the past two decades or so, there has been a dramatic increase of interest in beginning teachers and factors that influence their negotiating teacher identities and conceptualising professional development. Drawing on Ryan's (1986) outline of novice teachers' development, Bullough (1989) defined three stages of first-year teacher development: *fantasy stage*, *survival stage*, and *mastery stage*. Each stage is respectively characterised by imagination and anticipation of the teaching scenarios, coping with common problems of beginning teachers, and grasping the craft of teaching. Needless to say, not all first-year teachers are able to attain the mastery stage within such a period; rather, teacher development is 'inevitably idiosyncratic and must be viewed in relationship to the unfolding of a life – life-history – and in context.' (Bullough & Baughman, 1993, p. 93). That being the case, teacher induction is confronted with growing challenges. For example, how to provide NQTs with a comprehensive support system, covering personal, social, and professional aspects of teacher development (European Commission, 2010). Mentoring, as the leading form and most important aspect of teacher induction, has naturally been given increased attention in empirical studies. Still, discussion and dissension about mentoring remain central topics regarding beginning teachers and their professional development (Alhija & Fresko, 2010; Han, 2013; Harju & Niemi, 2016; Scherff, 2008; Symeonidis et al., 2023; Whalen et al., 2019).

Examining teacher emotions is a route to unravelling the problems that early career teachers are confronted with and the formation of their professional identities (Zembylas, 2005). As a common emotional experience, praxis shock reflects the confrontation between NQTs' initial teacher education and complicated and demanding classroom realities (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020). Among all the factors that influence teacher emotions and the consequent teacher attrition or retention, some are frequently cited by novice teachers, including teacher burnout (Doherty, 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2008), health and wellbeing (Nichols et al., 2017), salary, and career prospects (Buchanan, 2009). In addition to these factors, the alignment between professional development and personal future prospects also influences NQTs' job satisfaction, engagement in the teaching profession, and career decisions (Anctil et al., 2012).

Since emotions are part of 'dynamic, continuously fluctuating system of meaningful experiences' (Zembylas, 2007, p. 61), a narrative approach was suggested to study intentions and motives involved in emotional experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Journals or diaries are ideal forms to capture teacher emotions and make sense of their emotional changes (Nichols et al., 2017). In the current study, teacher participants produced narratives in their reflective journals and two semi-structured interviews, based on which analyses of their emotional changes and implications for teacher professional development were carried out.

Literature review

Teacher induction and teacher emotions

Teacher induction is generally perceived as a phase of teachers' career when NQTs receive support to transform from student teachers to self-directing professionals, which bridges the gap between initial teacher education and continuing professional development (Symeonidis et al., 2023; Vonk, 1995). Broadly speaking, teacher induction entails *personal support* (to help NQTs develop teacher identity through the help of mentors and colleagues), *social support* (to enable NQTs to become a member of the school and professional community), and *professional support* (to equip NQTs with relevant content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and classroom discipline or behaviour management) (European Commission, 2010). While induction is multi-faceted and multi-layered, e.g., including school-levelled programs and district-based trainings (Scherff, 2008), support from the mentoring system is commonly cited as the most significant factor influencing the effect of teacher induction (Harju & Niemi, 2016; Symeonidis et al., 2023; Whalen et al., 2019). On the one hand, mentoring has a great impact on novice teachers' assimilation (Alhija & Fresko, 2010) and addresses their various concerns (Olsen, Bjerkholt & Heikkinen 2020); on the other hand, it might cause 'arrested development' – NQTs' blocked growth or obstructed progress (Gallant & Ripley 2014, p. 575). For instance, research conducted in a Chinese context found that novice teachers were expected to follow veteran teachers at the cost of reconciling what they had learned in their university education (Han, 2013). Moreover, effective mentoring combines observing, evaluating, and advising (Rippon & Martin, 2006), and the element of evaluation may be translated as a source of pressure for new teachers on probation, in

addition to the added workload resulting from irregular meetings with mentors (Symeonidis et al., 2023).

During the induction period, NQTs more often than not experience *praxis shock*, or transition shock (Corcoran, 1981), the surprise or frustration that beginning teachers experience when dealing with the conflicts between what they have learned in universities and classroom realities and challenges (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020; Whalen et al., 2019). Praxis shock is also related to socialisation in the new working environment, and any other issues arising from the interactive and interpretative process that novice teachers go through in their working contexts (Kuzmic, 1994; Tran, 2021). Praxis shock commonly results in a state of reconciliation, or *satisficing* as Simon (1957) termed it – novice teachers find solutions which suffice for the requirements of the situation while somewhat fulfilling their personal satisfaction (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010).

In addition to praxis shock, understanding novice teachers' emotions serves as a lens for research-based teacher education, since emotions have been increasingly recognised as a crucial dimension and reflection of teachers' professional conduct and wellbeing (Lassila et al., 2017). Teacher emotions shape and define teacher identities and steer professional development, and in turn teacher identities and professionalism guide teachers in the process of negotiating and channelling emotions (Shapiro, 2010). Not merely being personal psychological and private experiences, emotions are sociocultural experiences and constructions (Zembylas, 2007), reflecting how individuals interact with and respond to the professional environment and institutional norms and culture (Lassila et al., 2017). This interaction is an ongoing and multidirectional process, in which teachers act as active agencies and the strategies they apply to channelling emotions are reflective of their interpretation of the working context and challenges (Nichols et al., 2017).

Teacher professional development

Teacher professional development is widely regarded as teachers' learning – how they learn to learn and apply what they have learned to promoting students' learning (Avalos, 2011; Postholm, 2012). In Sims and Fletcher-Wood's (2021) review, six characteristics of effective professional development (PD) were outlined, based on several influential (meta-) reviews (e.g., Dunst et al., 2015). Although Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021, p. 47) critically scrutinised the methodological weaknesses in reaching the consensus views, these six characteristics have been 'incorporated in government policy and official guidance', thus reflecting key drivers and fundamental elements in teacher professional development and meriting the attention of teacher educators and school leaders. First, sustained and continuous PD, often organised in a cycle or rhythm, has better chances of being effective (Walter & Briggs, 2012). Second, teacher collaboration, or working in groups, helps avoid misunderstanding and achieve clarification in communication (Wei et al., 2009). Third, voluntary participation in training programs, or buy-in from teachers, could enhance the effectiveness of PD (Timperley et al., 2007). Fourth, the combination of general pedagogical techniques and subject knowledge is conducive to effective PD training (Blank & de las Alas, 2009). Fifth, involvement of external expertise brings in fresh input, therefore bettering the effect of PD programs (Wei et al., 2009). Sixth, providing chances

for teachers to apply what they have learned to practise may increase the efficacy of PD projects and schemes (Walter & Briggs, 2012).

Teacher professional development is inextricably linked to teacher burnout and mental health. Needless to say, studying in parallel to working adds to the already heavy workload, thus novice teachers experience burnout at higher levels than experienced teachers (Symeonidis et al., 2023). Also, the *audit culture* in schools, especially for novice teachers, most of whom work on a probation contract, gives rise to a stronger possibility of burnout and mental health problems (Doherty, 2020). To alleviate teacher burnout, school climate (Gray et al., 2017) or school culture (Whalen et al., 2019) plays a vital role. Specifically, with ‘a sense of community, family, and team membership’, novice teachers are more likely to gain help and achieve solutions (Barkley, 2013, p. 10). Empirical studies (e.g., Thapa et al., 2013) have also found the correlation between a positive school climate and teachers’ mental and physical health.

It is worth noting that teacher professional development should be carried out in tandem with personal development (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). While professional development is centred on academic and career advancement, teachers’ personal and social needs, as well as their own future prospects merit no less consideration (Ancil et al., 2012). The combination of all these aspects contributes to higher job satisfaction and professional engagement (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Salary is not directly related to professional development, but influences some teachers’ career decisions (Buchanan, 2009). Other teachers, according to the findings of some studies (e.g., Bamford & Worth, 2017) do not regard salary as a significant factor for making career choices; rather, they prioritise the overall compensation, including working conditions, development opportunities, and salary, etc.

Methods

Research questions

Our study focuses on individual beginning teachers, their emotions and how they use narratives to interpret their emotions. It attempts to fill the gap of linking teacher emotions to their professional development needs. Specifically, through scrutinising three first-year EFL teachers’ narratives of their teaching practice and their emotional experiences in and outside classrooms, the study intends to answer the following two questions:

1. What emotions do the three EFL teachers experience during their first-year teaching?
2. What professional development needs do the emotionally intensive situations reflect?

Participants

Three participants took their one-year Masters degree at the same university in the UK, but from different programs: two from Master of Science (MSc) TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) and one from MSc Education. As the names of

the programs indicate, MSc TESOL focuses on teaching English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL), which is practice-oriented and methodology-focused. In contrast, MSc Education centres on general principles of education, such as education policies and philosophy of education, but providing limited guidance on pedagogical approaches.

After taking the one-year program in the UK, the three participants found jobs in three different cities in China as EFL teachers (Table 1). Amy worked in a vocational high school in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, Betty in a public secondary school in downtown Shanghai, and Cindy in a public secondary school in Shenzhen, Guangdong province. Betty's students were mostly from middle-class families, where education tended to be given greater emphasis, while a large proportion of Cindy's students were offspring of migrant workers; thus, cultural capital for education was less prominent in these families. Due to the nature of Amy's school (students' major concern was to find a job after completing vocational education), students did not bear as much exam pressure as students in the other two schools.

Table 1: Participant demographic information (N=3)

Pseudonym	Pre-service education	School type	Location of school	Age of students
Amy	MSc TESOL	Vocational	Hangzhou	15-16
Betty	MSc Education	Secondary	Shanghai	14-15
Cindy	MSc TESOL	Secondary	Shenzhen	12-13

Data collection

From the beginning to the end of the first-year teaching, the participants kept a reflective journal, reporting their emotions and reflections on their teaching practice and work-related issues. Each month, we collected one electronic journal entry from the teachers. In addition, we conducted two semi-structured interviews with each individual teacher, respectively at the beginning and the end of the school year. The initial interview focused on teachers' feelings and expectations of the teaching profession (Appendix A). In the last interview, participants recalled their pains and gains in the first-year teaching, and their interpretations of these experiences in relation to professional development (Appendix B). The two interviews were conducted in Chinese, transcribed and translated by us. We employed member checking to enable the participants to 'see themselves' in our account and our interpretations of the data, and rectify the discrepancies of understanding if there were any (Hammond & Wellington 2012, p. 57).

Data analysis

Adhering to the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), we analysed the narratives collected from the two sources. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by doing the interview transcriptions ourselves and reading the journal entries several times to achieve an evolving understanding of participants' narratives. Second, we took extensive notes and generated initial codes from the data through highlighting interesting

information which we thought contributed to answering the research questions. Third, we searched for themes from the long list of initial codes. We built a *coding hierarchy* (Table 2) at the end of this stage to demonstrate the formation of emergent themes (Gibbs, 2007). Fourth, we refined the themes by removing some inadequately supported ones and combining some overlapped ones. For instance, we identified the overlap between ‘assistance from peers’ and ‘mentoring’; thus, we combined them into ‘the mentoring system’. Fifth, we finalised the themes into three categories: *pedagogical issues* (including teaching, students, and parents); *professional development and personal prospects* (including the mentoring system and personal issues); *socialisation and working conditions* (including colleagues, leaders, and educational environment). Sixth, upon completion of the final themes, we commenced producing the outcomes of the study.

Table 2: A coding hierarchy with initial codes and emergent themes from the data

Emergent themes	Initial codes
Teaching	Mentoring; career choice; professional development; improvement; success; failure; in-service training; moral education; administrative work; burnout; discrepancy between educational theory and practice; disciplining; pedagogy; practicum; time management; teaching innovation; influence of personal learning experience.
Students	Competence diversity; family background; teacher-student relationship; student feedback; student autonomy; lack of motivation; learn from students; low-performing students
Parents	Communication with them; criticism from them; lack of help with parental contact.
Personal issues	Emotions; self-reflection; personal growth; adaptation; reconciliation; emotional exhaustion; health concern; shift of identity; life and spare time; social life; future prospect.
Socialisation	Colleagues; leaders; assistance from peers; pressure.
Educational environment	Exam-driven; accountability; pay cut.

Findings

Amy: How can I apply what I’ve learned to classroom teaching?

Stage I: Expectations and worries

When Amy learned that she would teach only one class, Grade One level, with three English lessons to deliver each week, she foresaw a somewhat easy job, though she had a concern that since English was not a major subject for the students, they might make little effort in their English studies.

Prior to the start of the school year, Amy was a bit excited: ‘I think vocational school students have more free time compared with secondary school students, so I’ll be able to carry out some teaching projects or activities’ (Amy, Interview 1). However, after chatting with some in-service teachers working in the school, Amy learned that finishing the

syllabus *per se* was challenging, let alone having some ‘fancy’ activities. Thus, before the actual teaching, she fearfully envisioned a ‘self-directing and self-acting’ scenario – she talked all the time in class with no response or cooperation from students (Amy, Interview 1). Another concern from Amy was that she could not gain adequate help from experienced teachers, whose guidance, in Amy’s opinion, would be extremely helpful for her improvement in class management, for example, how to attract and maintain students’ attention.

I’ve heard my students major in electrical control, all boys... I’m a bit panicked, but I will learn something new from them, which is quite interesting... I’ve done some research about teaching English for specific purposes (ESP)... thinking about what aspects of English could be useful for them. (Amy, Interview 1).

Professional development was something Amy attached great importance to even before she started her teaching career.

I don’t know whether I can get help to participate in some teaching competitions, for instance, Teachers’ Basic Skills Competition. I hope experienced teachers can help us *muoke* (my translation: to improve the lesson design by observing the lesson and giving guidance and advice) because such competitions help us fulfil professional title requirements. (Amy, Interview 1).

Amy exhibited a strong fear of being marginalised as a subject teacher:

How is English positioned in vocational school education? How are English teachers positioned among all the teachers in such working conditions?... I don’t know. (Amy, Interview 1)

Stage II: Disappointment and surprise

After Amy started teaching, she had frequent discussions with colleagues about all the teaching issues. However, Amy’s enthusiasm for teaching did not last long, mainly due to students’ low proficiency in English and their lack of motivation in English studies. Adding to it, Amy found her job featuring constant repetition, which led to her boredom and disappointment: ‘Recently, in the listening class, students listened to the recording once, did some exercises... then listened again, did more exercises, followed by the analysis of each sentence... it’s boring, but it seems to be all I can do.’ (Amy, Journal 1) Amy feared that this type of teaching would bore her students as well, which gradually made her doubt her ability to design and deliver lessons

I tried to include some activities in my class but almost no students responded... I began to ask myself are these activities indeed boring or... I’m losing confidence in myself as a language teacher. To avoid the embarrassment of getting no response from them, I occupied the class with all my talking... students just took notes...it seemed they liked it... (Amy, Journal 6)

Such teacher-centred methodology directly contradicted what she had learned in her post-graduate program: ‘Students seem to like being told what to do, what’s right and what’s wrong, how to use the words, and all the grammar translation stuff, but these contradict

what I have learned, e.g., task-based learning (TBL), or communicative approach.’ (Amy, Journal 2)

Alongside all the frustrations, Amy was sometimes surprised by students’ encouraging words and deeds. One day after school, a student came to her office and voluntarily recited a passage from the textbook to her, which made Amy feel ‘totally surprised and touched’ (Amy, Journal 2). Students’ heart-warming messages made her even more moved and soothed. One said: ‘You are the most conscientious teacher we’ve ever met. We all feel sorry for you because you meet us in your first-year teaching – an energetic and enthusiastic teacher confronted with a group of lifeless students’ (Amy, Journal 4).

Stage III: ‘I gained nothing’

Regarding the mentoring system, Amy expressed her disappointment and perplexity. She recorded one mentoring experience that rendered her quite confused and doubtful about what she had learned:

Some experienced teachers observed my lesson today. Their comments made me feel extremely frustrated: they belittled my lesson design, from the teaching objectives to how much input I included... all the excitement of applying methodological approaches I’ve learned to the lesson was removed by their negative comments. (Amy, Journal 2)

In the last interview, Amy conveyed her disappointment with the first-year teaching on the whole: ‘I’m sorry to say but I feel I gained nothing this year.’ (Amy, Interview 2) She provided some details to elaborate on this unpleasant feeling. In terms of teaching, Amy felt the textbook was too easy and uninteresting for her and the students alike. She tried to include some activities to intrigue students, but they did not show much interest or make much response. This triggered a vicious cycle: no response from students made her lacking in confidence in teaching; insecurity about teaching engendered even less interactive and engaging lessons. Amy also pointed out lack of guidance on dealing with student diversity. Consequently, although she tried to differentiate her teaching materials and methodologies, she did not see much visible effect.

To make things worse, administrative work occupied much of Amy’s working time and the time after school. Quite often, she could not finish her work until 10 pm, mostly doing administrative work. When addressing this problem, she manifested helplessness and confusion: ‘I only want to teach, but the leaders want me to do the administrative work and said there were chances of getting promoted. I really don’t know what I should do.’ (Amy, Journal 7)

Betty: Emotional exhaustion – how did I suffer and come out of it?

Stage I: Uneasiness and panic

There were nine grades in Betty’s school: Grades One to Five (primary); Grades Six to Nine (secondary). Betty taught two classes of Grade Six, and she was in charge of one of the classes.

For fear of disappointing her future students and their parents, Betty was quite demanding about herself. During the summer holiday before she started teaching, Betty made various preparations. She prepared lessons, although she could not do it in an 'efficient' way: 'I think the only way of relieving my panic was to make whatever preparations I'm capable of.' (Betty, Interview 1) With all the efforts she was making, she seemed unable to extricate herself from the deep-rooted panic. Particularly, she lacked confidence in her English competence:

I've always been panicked about speaking English. I'm worried I can't speak well or fluently... I may make mistakes... this is something I have always been trying to improve. This summer, I spent about one hour each day practising my spoken English...my pronunciation is not good... my grammar is shaky... (Betty, Interview 1)

Lack of confidence in subject knowledge deepened her fear in other aspects. For example, when talking about the mentoring system, Betty expressed her complicated feelings. On the one hand, she perceived it as a way of improving her teaching competence. On the other hand, she had the fear that mentors' observance of her class might result in criticism or dissatisfaction, which could have a negative effect on her professional development:

I'm worried when some experts observe my lessons, and my performance is not satisfactory, then I will leave a bad impression on them. Worse still, the bad impression may have a negative influence on my future career development. This's something I'm really worried about. (Betty, Interview 1)

Stage II: Emotional exhaustion

It turned out that Betty's worries before her actual teaching had their true elements in reality. The beginning of Betty's teaching job was somewhat painful:

This first month has been gruelling. I often burst out crying, in the office, on the subway, or in my room. I had to deal with all sorts of problems: students' lack of motivation, classroom management, parent complaints, and the frustrating teaching of English: my poor-designed lesson plans, students' repeated mistakes... fatigue, depression, eating disorder... (Betty, Journal 1)

Betty did not purposefully seek help, but her emotional fatigue was soon discovered by her colleagues and some leaders. They gave her some help and consolation, but this in turn burdened Betty with deeper concern and worries. In her journal, she talked to herself: 'You can't be always like this! Others can comfort you once or twice, but if you keep doing so, others will think you are useless...' (Betty, Journal 1).

In the next two months, Betty's work involved a significant amount of emotional labour. She had occasional feelings of recovery from the depressing situations, but more often than not, she was overwhelmed by her mental problems:

Last week I was again in a very bad state. I had too much homework to check, demonstration lessons to prepare... I spent so long a time fighting against the eating disorder but in vain; bulimia harasses me again and again... I have been painful for a whole week... (Betty, Journal 3)

In addition to all these worries from work, Betty suffered from appearance anxiety – she constantly worried about getting fat or being ugly. The combination of pressures from work and appearance anxiety resulted in a strong sense of inferiority. While Betty felt the need to seek help from sources outside the school, she thought she did not have the time for it.

Stage III: Bouncing back

At the end of the school year, Betty contacted us and said she had been much better and ‘kind of come out of the breakdown’. In delight, she told us she had made some achievements in work. Then, with her assent, we had our second interview. When we asked her how she came out of the mental disorder, she revealed the following. First, change of attitudes was the fundamental reason. Above all, her attitudes towards students changed dramatically:

I think I underestimated the autonomy and creativity of my students. I didn’t expect much surprise from them. Now I’ve realised each of them could surprise me in a unique way, not only in studies, but also in other aspects such as their abilities to organise various activities... as Six Graders, their overall performance is impressive... sometimes I can even learn from them. (Betty, Interview 2)

Likewise, Betty’s attitudes towards colleagues changed for the better:

At the beginning, I thought every teacher taught well, so I must learn from everyone and imitate their approaches to teaching... Now I’m capable of differentiating what is suitable for me and what is not. I will not blindly follow others. I need to have my own thinking and my own way of teaching. (Betty, Interview 2)

After hearing this, we were still confused why, almost without external help, Betty was able to make such great changes. To our question, she listed three factors that she regarded as crucial. First and foremost, teachers of all levels, including some senior leaders, showed their understanding and empathy for Betty’s difficulties and emotional suffering. They facilitated her making adjustments in the process of dealing with mental health challenges. All the support was transformed into emotional strength for Betty to carry on. Second, Betty attributed the quick recovery to the ‘friendly teaching environment’: peer teachers did not exert extra pressure to each other, and the relatively relaxing atmosphere enabled Betty to grow and develop at her own pace. Third, the advanced educational system in Shanghai enhanced Betty’s confidence in teaching. As part of the in-service training, the school organised teachers to observe expert teachers’ lessons and equip them with the cutting-edge theories in teaching methodologies, e.g., project-based learning. These training activities, according to Betty, opened her mind and promoted her thinking of what worked for her as a language teacher.

Cindy: Why is my salary cut down?

Stage I: Praxis shock

Similar to Betty, Cindy taught two classes and was in charge of one of them. During the two-month practicum in the school before her actual teaching, Cindy realised that being a junior high teacher was the most challenging teaching job in Shenzhen: only 40% of the

students were able to continue to have senior high schooling; the other 60% either attended vocational schools or started working. In other words, Cindy's future students were mostly low-performing students. The great gap between what Cindy had expected of students' English competence and the reality made her suffer from praxis shock even before she formally started her job.

I was shocked: I got my Masters degree in the UK and a Bachelors degree in a normal university. I have learned a lot but I can't use it in my job: students even have difficulty remembering very basic words. How can I apply the teaching methodologies I've learned, for example, task-based approach, to my teaching? (Cindy, Interview 1)

Student diversity in English competence was another challenge that Cindy needed to deal with. While the majority of the class could not pass exams, one or two of them were able to get 90+. In light of this, during the two-month practicum, Cindy experimented with differentiated teaching materials and assignments. In particular, she encountered difficulties in helping those who could only get a mark between 30 to 40 out of 100. She had the feeling that the approaches and theories she learned in the university could not be appropriately applied to these students.

Stage II: Reconciliation

When the school year started, Cindy soon sensed the clash between what she had learned in the university and the prevailing teaching mode in the school – cramming. At the very beginning, she ignored what other teachers were doing, practising what she regarded as scientific and advanced, including communicative teaching approach and task-based language teaching (TBLT). She also used English (L2) rather than Chinese (L1) to give instructions in class, with the belief that if she kept doing so for three years, she would make a difference on her students. In addition, she played some inspirational movies, recommended several original English books, and organised interesting activities in her class.

However, the pressure of raising students' marks pushed Cindy to reconcile with the professional requirements. Cindy was getting 'harsher' towards her students with the reasons she came up with: 'When I saw them laugh less in class, I felt painful, but maybe this is the hardship of growing up, something that everyone needs to experience. As a student, I once experienced something similar. As a teacher, I must do the same.' (Cindy, Journal 2). The rhetoric was not quite convincing to her, though; Cindy was still struggling with her conscience: 'Do I really only care about their marks? If I turn into such a teacher, does it mean I am a teacher that I would hate as a student?' (Cindy, Journal 2).

When Cindy was preparing for a demonstration lesson to end her probational period, she exhibited a stronger awareness of reconciliation:

Two teaching researchers observed my lesson today to help me with the demonstration lesson. While taking some of their suggestions, I stuck to some of my ideas as well. I didn't want to take all their suggestions but was afraid this would affect the evaluation of the lesson... finally, I kind of combined my ideas and some of their suggestions. (Cindy, Journal 4)

In the mid-term exams, the marks of her two classes ranked top two among all the parallel classes in Grade Seven. When hearing the news, she did not feel the happiness she had imagined, but was overwhelmed by the complicated relationship with her colleagues: 'The problem is I've begun to worry about the final exams – I must maintain the good results, otherwise, my colleagues' envy and gossip about my excellence in teaching could really make me feel bad.' (Cindy, Journal 3)

Stage III: Sadness and aimlessness

When Cindy got her first salary, she was quite delighted. With a sense of financial security, Cindy once had the idea of moving into a bigger apartment and raising a pet dog (Cindy, Journal 5). Six months after she started the job, however, Cindy underwent a pay cut: almost all the teachers in Shenzhen had one third of their salaries cut down. 'With such high housing prices, how could they cut down our salaries?' (Cindy, Journal 6). Cindy raised this question in her journal together with some angry and disappointed remarks. To make her feel even worse, Cindy found considerable differences between teachers' salaries: newly qualified teachers were paid much less than experienced teachers, and nobody gave any explanations about it.

Despite the pay cut, Cindy's workload was not reduced at all. In effect, demoralisation was a problem Cindy needed to deal with continuously. She often prepared lessons late into the night, sometimes one o'clock in the morning. Administrative work made the burden almost unbearable. To complete all the 'trivial stuff', Cindy must sacrifice her rest time. She complained in her journal: 'Sometimes, it felt like I was bearing a 500-kilo weight, and I am walking all by myself into the darkness.' (Cindy, Journal 7)

When talking about professional development, Cindy expressed her confusion and disorientation. On the one hand, Cindy did not see a bright future in the current job; on the other hand, she did not know any alternative career paths. 'I've heard that transferring to another school is rather difficult, almost impossible.' (Cindy, Journal 3) In the final interview, Cindy once again expressed her confusion about the future of this teaching job: 'I don't know what I want, which is dreadful. Sometimes, I feel lost, having no idea which way to take into the future.' (Cindy, Interview 2)

Discussion

Needs-oriented induction and personalised mentoring system

The three teachers' first-year experiences and frustrations demonstrated that their needs for guidance regarding subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge markedly varied. Since Cindy took Education rather than the TESOL program in her postgraduate education, she lacked confidence in both English as a subject and teaching methodologies. While Amy and Betty graduated from the same postgraduate program, TESOL, due to the differences in their students and requirements of the teaching contexts, their professional needs differed as well: Amy was thirsty for pedagogical advice on helping low-performing students, while Cindy struggled with complicated relationships with colleagues. Differences also occurred in their needs for guidance in coping with parents. These

findings corroborate Gaikhorst et al.'s (2017) study: for beginning urban teachers, extreme involvement of some highly educated wealthy parents and the diversity of parents' backgrounds were thorny issues. Betty, who worked in a public school in downtown Shanghai, reported similar problems as a source of her fear and worries. In comparison, Amy and Cindy reported little concern in this regard partly because parents of their students devoted less time and attention to children's schooling. These findings are aligned with the currently prevailing rhetoric that the combination of subject matter knowledge and general pedagogic techniques is necessary for NQTs to meet the teaching challenges (Blank & de las Alas, 2009; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Adding to the existing literature, findings of our study indicate that the sensitivity and flexibility of teacher induction merit attention. To be specific, it is advisable that NQTs have chances to express their personalised needs with respect to subject knowledge and methodological approaches. Accordingly, the mentoring system, as the leading part of teacher induction (Scherff, 2008), has to design and conduct a tailored supervising mechanism.

Regarding praxis shock, the three teachers also manifested differences in their feelings and reactions. For Amy, the shock mainly arose from the difficulty of applying what she had learned to actual classroom teaching (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020). For Cindy, teaching challenges were resolved without much difficulty, but relationships with peer teachers were stressful. Mirroring Tran's (2021) findings, Cindy's experience highlights the importance of equipping NQTs with the strategies and skills to deal with social problems. Meanwhile, novice teachers' contribution to school culture and teaching assets should be recognised and valued. For Betty, the praxis shock was unluckily transformed into emotional exhaustion, in part due to the accumulated pressures and prolonged burnout. Once again, this finding restates the significance of paying heed to staff burnout, which is inextricably related to an audit culture in schools (Doherty, 2020) and accountability pressures from wider contexts (Frank et al., 2020). Adhering to the extant literature that the experience of praxis shock often results in novice teachers' reconciliation, or *satisficing* (Simon, 1957), the three first-year teachers were able to live with their less than perfect solutions at the end of the school year. However, Betty's mental issues raised the caveat that not all NQTs could smoothly 'come to terms with the common problems of beginning teachers' (Bullough & Baughman, 1993, p. 86). Thus, timely interventions are necessary once traces of mental problems are spotted among NQTs.

In short, a personalised mentoring system and induction mechanism, one that is subject and sensitive to teacher needs, may help beginning teachers take effective action and combat personal, professional, and social problems.

Professional development in tandem with personal development

When addressing the issue of teacher professional development, almost all the attention is given to teachers' learning, application of their knowledge to teaching practice, and how they help students learn (Avalos, 2011; Postholm, 2012). Indeed, these are important issues, especially for novice teachers whose main concerns are developing a professional identity and negotiating a satisfying role (Bullough & Baughman, 1993). That said, teacher's personal development, their future prospects, including personal and

professional blueprints or long-term plans, should also be taken into consideration. In the current study, Amy and Cindy both expressed more than once about their confusion as to how to choose between teaching and administrative work: the former fulfilled their professional roles while the latter offered the possibility of a wider career path. In both cases, teachers received no relevant guidance that helped them see the future possibilities or potential problems of the career choice they would make, which mirrors the finding of a study carried out in Canada in which teacher participants received 'limited mentorship and support with either no professional development or irrelevant professional development' (Whalen et al., 2019, p. 596).

Aligned with previous findings (e.g., Buchanan, 2009), this study also collected evidence showing that financial security and income equality more or less influence novice teachers' career decisions. When Cindy experienced a pay cut and learned about the inequality among teachers' salaries, she was devastatingly shocked. The pay cut not only gave rise to her financial insecurity, but also forced her to think about changing her career path if an opportunity emerged.

Similar to another study carried out in Chinese secondary schools (Han, 2013), findings of our study reveal that inappropriate professional development schemes may result in *arrested development* (Gallant & Ripley, 2014). To be specific, in Amy's situation, the guidance she received from her mentors somewhat contradicted her initial teacher education, which led to her self-doubt and insecurity about her teaching capabilities. Her remark 'I gained nothing' (Amy, Interview 2) after one year of teaching conclusively demonstrated her blocked professional growth. Dissatisfaction in this aspect intensified her struggle about her career choice – whether or not she should take the administrative work as a compensation for the halted development of teaching. Cindy had a similar confusion about the direction of her professional development. These findings bolster the proposition that giving guidance on teacher career planning could be incorporated into professional development programs.

Teacher burnout and mental health maintenance

Betty's story once again foregrounds the vulnerability of teachers' wellbeing, a prolonged period of burnout and the consequent emotional labour (Martínez-Irigo et al., 2007; Morris & Feldman, 1996) acting as key factors in her emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Cindy reported she was on the verge of breakdown when she had not taken a good rest in the previous three weeks. There has been a wealth of literature addressing teacher burnout and its relationship with teacher attrition (e.g., Ballantyne & Retell, 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Correspondingly, strategies have been recommended to deal with teacher burnout and consequent mental problems, for example, through adding befriending and counselling elements to the mentoring scheme (Rippon & Martin, 2006). Also, a three-levelled socialisation network in school could be beneficial, that is, ecological support from mentor, help from the principal, and assistance from other colleagues (Alhija & Fresko, 2010). Adding to the literature, the present study found that when Cindy had symptoms of emotional fatigue, she chose to hide it from others at work, especially leaders (although unsuccessfully), for fear of causing them trouble or leaving a bad

impression on them, which in the long run might negatively influence her career development. In light of phenomena like this, it is sensible to propose that an independent sector be provided to teachers, which could help them overcome emotional fatigue and other mental problems, with awareness of protecting teachers' privacy.

The root of the problem, as some scholars have pointed out, is the increased emphasis on teacher accountability and the consequent high workload and pressures that NQTs need to deal with (Bullough & Baughman, 1993; Frank et al., 2020; Gaikhorst et al., 2017; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Symeonidis et al., 2023). There being no easy solutions to this problem; it could be helpful to encompass training in teacher induction, which helps them cope with pressure and challenges in the teaching context. Betty's recovery process confirmed the importance of an accommodating and nurturing environment (Doherty, 2020): understanding and support from colleagues and leaders, as well as a working environment without fierce competition between peer teachers, contributed to Betty's recuperation. Then it is fair to say that novice teachers need mental and emotional support from their mentors or colleagues alongside the guidance on their professional development (Harju & Niemi, 2016).

Conclusion

Through examining three first-year teachers' narratives of their emotional and teaching practice, this study collected evidence that espouses the following suppositions. First, novice teachers' needs markedly vary in terms of guidance on subject knowledge and pedagogical approaches. Regarding subject matter knowledge, two of the three teachers found a contradiction between what they had learned in the university and classroom actual teaching. With respect to teaching methodologies, the teachers expressed needs in different aspects such as teaching low-performing students, dealing with student diversity, and contact with parents. Second, teacher burnout and mental health maintenance should be given adequate attention. Burnout was a problem that confronted two of the participants one of whom suffered from emotional exhaustion in the middle of the first-year teaching. This raises the alarm about the correlation between burnout and mental and physical problems. Third, seeing students as a source of teacher satisfaction and efficacy merits attention and recognition. In this study, students' encouraging and reassuring remarks, impressive academic and related performances, and heart-felt acknowledgment provided the three teachers with growing strength to carry on teaching in the face of various frustrations and setbacks.

There are some transferable implications based on the aforementioned findings. For schools and teacher training organisations, designing and delivering personalised mentoring and induction schemes deserve urgent and serious consideration. Only in this way can varied teachers' needs have better chances of being met. Regarding teacher professional development, visions should be developed around the integration of personal and professional development. One possible approach to achieving it is incorporating career planning into beginning teachers' in-service training.

Limitations of this study, like any other qualitative study, lie in its context-specific transferability. Although the three first-year teachers came from different cities in China, they shared a similar education background – one-year UK postgraduate study. While this may limit the transferability of the study, further research could expand the research scale or deepen the discussion of teacher induction and NQTs' professional development.

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Appendix A: Interview 1 schedule

1. What is your teacher education background?
2. What is your students’ background? (e.g., their academic performance, family background, English competence, etc.)
3. What do you expect to happen in the first-year teaching?
4. What challenges do you think you might face?
5. What assistance do you expect to gain for professional development?
6. How would you like to describe your feelings before the start of the first-year teaching, and why?

Appendix B: Interview 2 schedule

1. What have you gained from the first-year teaching?
2. What difficulties/confusions have you encountered?
3. What assistance have you gained?
4. How do you perceive the assistance you have obtained? (Was it helpful or not? And in what way?)
5. What other help/guidance do you expect to obtain for your future professional development?
6. How do you envision your second-year teaching?

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