

Title

Reframing Novice Teachers' Experiences: Vulnerability, Identity, and Recognition in Early-Career Teaching

Research Overview (50 words)

This study examines novice teachers' experiences in U.S. schools, focusing on vulnerability, professional identity, and recognition. Using qualitative narrative inquiry, it explores how working conditions and institutional contexts shape teachers' sense of belonging, agency, and retention, highlighting the factors that support or hinder early-career teachers' decisions to remain in the profession.

Purpose of Study

Teacher attrition remains a critical issue in the United States and globally. A survey conducted by the National Education Association found that nearly 55% of educators were considering leaving the profession (Walker, 2022), contributing to ongoing concerns about teacher shortages (Garcia et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022). At a global level, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2016) estimates that 69 million new teachers will be needed by 2030. In the United States, approximately 30% of novice teachers leave the profession within their first five years, underscoring the urgency of understanding early-career experiences.

Although this study is situated in the United States, it addresses broader international concerns regarding teacher retention and the sustainability of the teaching workforce.

A substantial body of research shows that novice teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession are shaped by a complex interplay of systemic, institutional, relational, and individual factors. However, less attention has been paid to how teachers themselves interpret these conditions and how their lived experiences shape their professional identities and decisions.

Drawing on the concept of Figured Worlds, this study examines how novice teachers navigate socially constructed educational environments in which certain roles, practices, and forms of expertise are recognized as legitimate while others may be constrained. By linking figured worlds to processes of recognition, this study conceptualizes how teachers' positioning within institutional contexts may shape their professional identities and contribute to experiences of marginalization or professional dehumanization.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how novice teachers experience early-career teaching and how these experiences influence their decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What supports novice teachers in staying in the profession from their perspectives?
2. What challenges or constraints influence their decisions to leave?

3. How do working conditions shape the development of their professional identities?

By centering teachers' lived experiences, this study seeks to deepen understanding of the factors shaping early-career trajectories, with implications for teacher education, school leadership, and retention policies.

Research Methods

Findings indicate that novice teachers navigate multiple, and at times conflicting, figured worlds that shape how they understand teaching, themselves, and their place within the profession. These worlds—formed through prior experiences, teacher education, and institutional contexts—often promote competing expectations, producing tensions between teachers' ideals and the realities of practice.

Central to these dynamics are processes of recognition and misrecognition. Teachers who experience trust, support, and validation from administrators and colleagues report stronger senses of belonging and professional legitimacy. In contrast, misrecognition—manifested through lack of trust, unfair evaluations, or limited support—undermines confidence and constrains participation.

These conditions directly shape identity construction and access to agency. Rather than being individual attributes, identity and agency emerge as relational and context-dependent processes, unevenly distributed across institutional settings. Emotional strain and disengagement arise when teachers are unable to enact their vision of good teaching or feel persistently undervalued.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher attrition is not simply an individual decision, but a trajectory shaped by cumulative experiences of positioning within figured worlds. This reframing highlights the importance of recognition, relational support, and institutional conditions in sustaining novice teachers' engagement in the profession.

Keywords

Novice Teachers; Teacher Identity; Vulnerability; Figured Worlds; Teacher Attrition

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