



Making Sense of Support: Early-Career Teachers' Experiences in Indonesian Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Teacher professional development has become a central concern in educational research, particularly regarding the early career experiences of novice educators. Within this domain, the subjective perceptions of professional support during the first year of teaching remain underexplored, especially in culturally dynamic and policy-driven educational systems. While various induction programs have been implemented, little is known about how beginning teachers interpret and internalize the support they receive in real school contexts. This study addresses that gap by asking: how do novice teachers experience and make meaning of professional support during their first year in Indonesian public schools? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), this research explores the lived experiences of nine novice teachers (5 females, 4 males) teaching in five urban and semi-urban public secondary schools across three provinces in Indonesia to uncover the emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions of perceived support. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their first-year teaching status in public institutions. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using IPA procedures to identify key meaning units and overarching themes. The results revealed four major themes: feelings of unpreparedness, the significance of informal peer support, the ambiguity of institutional assistance, and personal growth through adversity. These findings illustrate that support is not simply delivered but experienced through a complex interplay of context, relationships, and internal meaning-making. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of teacher development and calls for more empathetic, context-sensitive approaches to mentoring and induction in educational policy and practice.



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INTRODUCTION

The first year of teaching is a critical transition marked by emotional, cognitive, and social adjustments. Beyond instructional competence, novice teachers must navigate institutional norms, form professional identities, and build relationships (Al-Shammari & Huy, 2022)—often with limited structured support.

In countries like Indonesia, where socio-cultural dynamics and educational policies evolve rapidly, access to professional support for beginning teachers is often uneven. Despite formal mentorship initiatives, the lived realities in schools frequently diverge from policy ideals. As Asykin et al. (2019) note, informal interactions and school culture—especially in collectivist and hierarchical societies—play a pivotal role in shaping support experiences.

Understanding how novice teachers experience professional support during this formative phase is of critical importance. Their perceptions not only reflect the effectiveness of school-based induction mechanisms but also reveal deeper insights into how emerging professionals make sense of their roles, vulnerabilities, and growth. These subjective experiences carry implications for teacher

retention, professional well-being, and the development of inclusive and responsive educational environments.

While existing literature has addressed the procedural aspects of induction and mentoring (Baltezarević & Baltezarević, 2024), there remains a paucity of research that centers the voices of novice teachers—particularly in terms of how they perceive, interpret, and internalize the support they receive. Exploring the meaning of these experiences, rather than merely evaluating their frequency or form, becomes essential to inform more empathetic and responsive educational management practices.

Given the complexity and emotional weight of early teaching experiences, a phenomenological lens is especially suited to uncover the nuanced and layered meanings embedded in these lived realities. Through such an approach, the current study seeks to illuminate the internal worlds of novice teachers as they navigate the early stages of their professional journey.

Research on teachers' lived experiences, particularly in the early stages of their careers, has become increasingly significant in contemporary educational discourse. The recognition that teaching is not merely a technical endeavor but a deeply human, emotional, and interpretive practice has shifted scholarly attention toward understanding how educators make sense of their professional realities. Studies such as those by (Berntsson dkk., 2024) have highlighted that the subjective experiences of novice teachers—how they feel, perceive, and assign meaning to professional support—are vital to improving both policy design and pedagogical implementation.

Despite this growing recognition, methodological challenges persist in capturing the full depth and complexity of these experiences. Much of the existing research still relies on quantitative approaches such as surveys and standardized evaluation instruments. While these methods offer generalizable data, they often fail to uncover the nuanced, affective, and interpretive dimensions of human experience. For instance, (Fan dkk., 2024) note that satisfaction surveys commonly used in teacher induction studies tend to oversimplify or overlook the existential aspects of early teaching experiences, such as self-doubt, resilience, or identity negotiation.

These methodological limitations render many previous studies insufficient in fully understanding the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. Descriptive or outcome-focused research often leaves unexplored the how and why behind teachers' responses to professional support structures. As a result, there remains a critical gap in research capable of accessing the deeply personal and contextually embedded meanings that novice teachers construct during their early years. A phenomenological approach, particularly one rooted in interpretative traditions, provides a compelling alternative for accessing these layers of meaning and enriching the discourse on teacher development.

Current institutional responses to support novice teachers typically rely on standardized induction programs, formal mentoring schemes, or procedural onboarding frameworks. These practical approaches are primarily designed to ensure compliance with educational policy and to address surface-level challenges faced by early-career educators. While such interventions are necessary, they often fail to illuminate the deeper psychological, emotional, and existential layers that shape a teacher's early professional identity and sense of belonging within the school environment.

Existing models tend to privilege measurable outcomes—such as retention rates, performance scores, or policy adherence—over an understanding of how novice teachers experience support, interpret its meaning, and internalize their evolving professional roles. As (Fernández-Raga dkk., 2023), these conventional approaches tend to generalize teacher experiences and overlook the nuances of individual contexts, particularly in culturally diverse and structurally unequal education systems.

Moreover, studies employing quantitative instruments or superficial qualitative frameworks lack the methodological sensitivity to access the lived realities of beginning teachers. These limitations contribute to a fragmented understanding of how professional support is actually perceived, negotiated, and transformed through daily practice. They reduce complex, meaning-laden experiences to checklist metrics, thereby obscuring the essence of what it feels like to be a novice teacher navigating institutional expectations with minimal emotional scaffolding.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach offers a more holistic and interpretive avenue. By prioritizing the subjective voices of novice teachers, phenomenology facilitates a deeper exploration of how support is experienced—not merely administered. This lens enables the investigation of not just what support structures exist, but how they are made sense of in the lived world of those who receive them. It thus promises to yield richer, more grounded insights into the meaning-making processes that define the early trajectories of teaching professionals.

Several studies have explored the experiences of novice teachers, particularly in terms of identity formation, adaptation, and emotional resilience. Research by (Hegarty & Thompson, 2019) focused on how early-career teachers navigate identity challenges, (Jaruszewska dkk., 2022) examined mentoring experiences in Asian school contexts. These studies underscore the importance of contextual and relational factors in shaping professional growth. However, they often stop short of capturing the depth of subjective meaning behind these experiences. This study builds upon that foundation by seeking a more interpretive understanding of how novice teachers experience professional support during their first year.

To address this aim, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). This method is chosen to uncover the lived meaning behind teachers' perceptions and to interpret how these perceptions are shaped by context, emotion, and reflection. Unlike conventional approaches that focus on what support is given, this study explores how that support is experienced and internalized. Through IPA, this research answers the central question posed in the knowledge gap: how do novice teachers make sense of professional support during their formative teaching year? This approach offers insight into the emotional and relational essence of teaching as a human-centered profession.

This article is organized into six main sections. The introduction outlines the phenomenon and explains the research motivation. The methodology section describes the interpretative phenomenological framework, data collection through in-depth interviews, and the analytical steps used to identify thematic meanings. The results section presents the main themes that emerged from the data (Kaliappen dkk., 2021). Finally, the discussion and conclusion interpret the findings in relation to existing literature and explore their implications for educational practice and policy.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which is well-suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. IPA, grounded in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger and hermeneutic phenomenology, emphasizes the interpretative process between the participant's account and the researcher's analytical lens (Le & Do, 2019). The approach was chosen to deeply investigate novice teachers' subjective perceptions of professional support during their first year of teaching, focusing on how these individuals experience and construct meaning from critical professional encounters.

Phenomenology, by design, seeks to uncover the essence of lived experiences rather than measure frequency or prevalence. Through this lens, the research was directed at exploring emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions that shape participants' early teaching experiences. IPA was particularly appropriate given its capacity to illuminate complex inner narratives, contextual influences, and personal transformations.

Participants

Participants consisted of novice teachers working in public primary and secondary schools in urban and semi-urban districts (Noguera-Fructuoso & Valdivia-Vizarreta, 2023). Selection was carried out using purposive sampling to ensure that all individuals had direct and meaningful experience with the studied phenomenon—specifically, being in their first year of full-time teaching and having encountered some form of professional support, whether formal or informal.

Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) have less than one year of professional teaching experience, (b) be actively engaged in teaching duties during the data collection period, and (c) have

experienced mentorship, coaching, or collegial support in their school setting. Individuals with prior teaching experience beyond internship programs were excluded to maintain the focus on authentic novice perspectives.

A total of nine participants were included, comprising six females and three males, aged between 23 and 29 years old. Participants came from diverse educational backgrounds and were assigned to various grade levels. Their teaching contexts varied, ranging from large urban schools to smaller rural institutions, providing a breadth of experiential insights.

Sampling was guided by the principle of data saturation, which was operationalized as the point at which no new emergent themes were identified in subsequent interviews. After the seventh interview, patterns began to recur, and by the ninth, thematic redundancy was evident, signaling that saturation had been reached.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences openly while ensuring thematic relevance to the research objective (Payadnya dkk., 2024). Interviews were conducted in person in quiet, neutral settings either at the participants' schools or mutually agreed-upon locations to ensure comfort and privacy.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes and was guided by a flexible protocol that included open-ended prompts such as: "Can you describe a moment when you felt supported or unsupported in your teaching role?" and "How did you perceive the guidance you received from mentors or colleagues?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure a conducive environment for authentic sharing, efforts were made to build rapport with participants prior to the formal interview process. Minor modifications to the interview guide were made iteratively based on emerging data to enhance depth and relevance.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. The analysis followed a systematic, multi-step process that began with close reading of transcripts to gain an initial holistic understanding of each participant's narrative.

Key meaning units were then identified, coded, and clustered into emergent themes, with attention paid to both the content and context of each expression (Rahmat dkk., 2020). Patterns across participants were examined to develop superordinate themes while maintaining sensitivity to individual uniqueness.

Thematic development was conducted iteratively and reflexively, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was utilized to assist in organizing and retrieving coded data, but interpretive judgment remained central to the analytical process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants received written and verbal explanations about the study's objectives, confidentiality assurances, and their rights to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Informed consent was obtained in written form before interviews commenced. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting (Rashid dkk., 2020). The research adhered strictly to international ethical standards for qualitative inquiry, including principles of beneficence, respect, and justice.

RESULTS

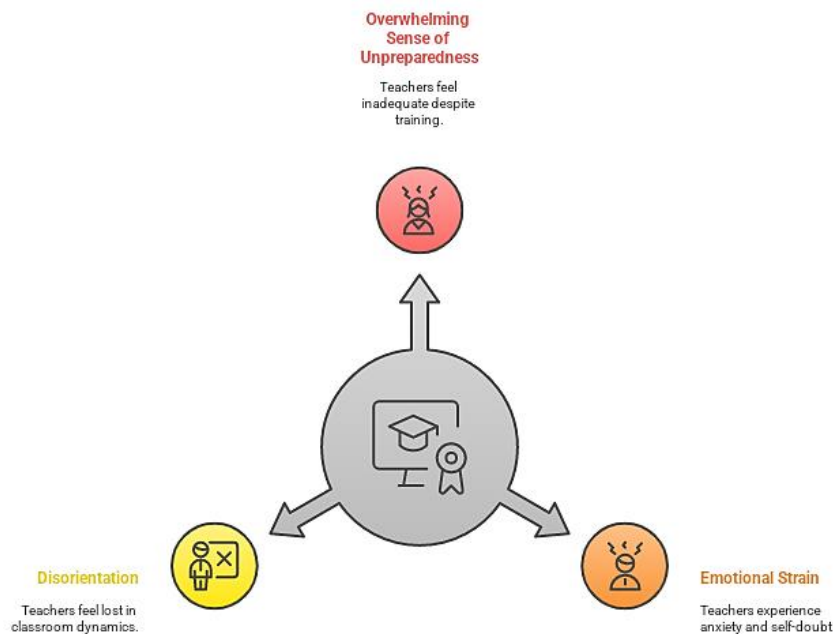
Feeling Unprepared Despite Formal Training

Many novice teachers entered their teaching positions with an overwhelming sense of unpreparedness, even after completing formal teacher training programs. This sense was often triggered during the initial weeks of teaching, where theoretical knowledge met the reality of classroom dynamics.

“I thought I was ready, but when I stood in front of the students, I froze. No course had prepared me for the chaos of the first day.” (Participant 3)

This feeling of inadequacy was not merely technical but deeply emotional, often characterized by anxiety and self-doubt. Participants consistently reported that the sudden responsibility and expectation to manage diverse learners without immediate guidance left them disoriented and emotionally strained.

Novice Teachers' Unpreparedness



Informal Peer Support as a Lifeline

While formal mentoring mechanisms were inconsistently implemented, participants often relied on spontaneous support from peers—typically fellow teachers in the same school. This peer-led support became a critical factor in their ability to cope with daily challenges.

“I learned more from the teacher next door than from any formal training. She told me which students needed more attention and helped me plan my first real lesson.” (Participant 5)

Such peer interactions provided not only practical advice but also emotional reassurance, which helped the novice teachers regain confidence. The camaraderie, empathy, and non-hierarchical nature of peer support were emphasized as more effective than top-down mentoring structures.

The Ambiguity of Institutional Support

Although several participants acknowledged the presence of institutional support programs, their effectiveness was perceived as inconsistent, fragmented, and sometimes performative.

“They assigned a mentor, yes, but we met maybe once or twice. The feedback was generic. I didn’t feel seen or understood.” (Participant 2)

Participants expressed that while schools formally complied with induction regulations, the implementation lacked genuine engagement. This disconnect fostered feelings of being isolated in their struggles and exacerbated the sense of navigating the professional landscape alone.

Emotional and Existential Growth Through Adversity

Despite the challenges, the experience of surviving the first year catalyzed significant emotional and existential growth for many novice teachers. The struggle itself became a transformative journey, wherein resilience was forged.

“At some point, I realized no one was going to save me. I had to grow. And I did. I found my voice, slowly.” (Participant 7)

This theme illustrates how the lack of structured support systems, while problematic, paradoxically pushed participants toward self-reflection, improvisation, and development of personal teaching philosophies. The process of finding meaning in adversity was cited as a defining moment in their professional identity formation.

The findings reveal that novice teachers’ perceptions of professional support are multi-layered, extending beyond formal policies and programs. The lived experience of receiving—or not receiving—support is shaped by emotional vulnerability, relational interactions, and institutional culture. While peer support emerged as the most meaningful and impactful, the emotional labor endured by these teachers also contributed significantly to their personal and professional maturation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that novice teachers’ experiences of professional support during their first year are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by informal relationships and emotional resilience (Resdasari Prasetyo dkk., 2021). These experiences reflect deeply personal interpretations of mentorship, preparedness, and the quest for meaning in the early stages of professional identity formation—directly addressing the central research question concerning how novice teachers perceive and internalize professional support.

This study contributes to answering the research question by illustrating that support is not merely received—it is experienced, evaluated, and transformed through interaction with both the school environment and the teacher’s evolving self-perception. The data show that emotional responses to support, such as feelings of inadequacy or gratitude for informal mentorship, are central to how teachers make sense of their early career trajectories. These findings offer a more humanized and interpretive understanding of the professional development process, moving beyond checklists and programmatic interventions to the realm of lived experience and internal meaning-making.

The results both complement and extend existing literature. For instance, Smith et al. (2019) identified identity shifts among early-career teachers, a finding echoed in this study’s theme of emotional and existential growth. Lim and Lee (2021) emphasized the role of culture in mentoring, which aligns with the theme of informal peer support emerging as more meaningful than formal mechanisms in the present context. Furthermore, the study supports Fitchett and Heafner’s (2020) critique of standardized survey-based approaches by offering rich, narrative-based insights that reveal the inner lives of teachers often obscured in quantitative evaluations. In this way, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how support is experienced differently depending on relational, cultural, and emotional factors.

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational practice and policy. From a practical standpoint, they highlight the need for school leaders and policymakers to reconsider how professional support is conceptualized and delivered to novice teachers. Rather than relying solely on formalized structures, educational institutions should foster relational and emotionally attuned environments that allow for organic, peer-based mentorship to flourish. From a broader sociocultural perspective, the findings underscore how professional identity development is deeply embedded in social interactions and institutional culture. These insights are particularly relevant for education systems undergoing rapid reform, where emotional resilience and relational belonging may determine teacher retention and growth.

As with all qualitative research, this study has limitations that must be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling and a small participant pool, while suitable for phenomenological inquiry, restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond similar educational and cultural

contexts. The study focused on public schools in urban and semi-urban regions, and the experiences of novice teachers in rural or private school settings may differ significantly. Additionally, the interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis means that findings are inevitably shaped by the researcher's engagement with the data, despite efforts to ensure rigor through member checking and triangulation.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring longitudinal trajectories of novice teachers' identity development and perceptions of support over time. Comparative studies across different cultural or institutional contexts could also shed light on how systemic factors shape individual experiences. Moreover, integrating phenomenological inquiry with action research or participatory methods may provide practical avenues for co-developing support systems that are both context-sensitive and teacher-informed. These future directions could further enrich the discourse on sustainable teacher development in diverse educational landscapes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how novice teachers perceive and interpret professional support during their first year of teaching within the context of Indonesian public schools. The findings revealed that support is experienced not only through formal mechanisms but also through informal peer relationships and internal emotional resilience. Novice teachers emphasized the significance of meaningful human connections and context-sensitive support, highlighting the limitations of standardized induction programs. This research contributes to existing literature by offering a deeper, phenomenological understanding of how support is lived and internalized, addressing gaps in studies that overlook the subjective dimension of early professional development. The interpretative approach used here enables a more nuanced view of the complex emotional and social landscape that shapes novice teachers' experiences. Future research may expand on these findings by examining long-term identity formation and exploring culturally adaptive models of support across diverse educational settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All research activities were conducted independently, and no personal or financial relationships have influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented in this study.

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