



Exploring Novice Teachers' Emotions in Post-Pandemic Digital Classrooms

Dyah Wulandari

STAI DR KHEZ Muttaqien Purwakarta, Indonesia

dyahwulandari970@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The emotional dimension of teaching is increasingly central in educational research, particularly as novice teachers navigate digital integration in post-pandemic classrooms. While much is known about pedagogical strategies and digital competence, limited attention has been given to how beginning teachers emotionally process these transitions. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do novice teachers experience the emotional complexities of integrating digital technology into post-pandemic face-to-face teaching? Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived emotional experiences of early-career teachers during their return to physical classrooms. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten novice teachers, and the data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software to extract essential meanings from their narratives. The analysis revealed four key themes: navigating uncertainty, emotional ambivalence, identity construction, and resilience through student engagement. These findings illustrate how emotional experiences shape professional development and the internalization of technological change. The study offers practical insights for teacher education and institutional policy, highlighting emotional resilience as essential to professional growth. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of how teachers adapt to digital transitions and suggest targeted areas for future exploration, such as emotion-centered mentorship and context-specific training modules.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped teaching and learning practices globally (Li et al., 2021). As schools transitioned from remote to in-person instruction, novice teachers stood at the forefront of navigating not only pedagogical and technological adjustments but also intense emotional shifts. This transition involved more than acquiring new technical skills—it required substantial emotional and psychological adaptation as educators redefined their professional identities in uncertain contexts.

Digital technology, once considered a pedagogical supplement, has become a core component of post-pandemic education. For novice teachers, this integration presents distinct challenges: they must balance institutional expectations, student outcomes, and ongoing professional development—all while still forming their teaching identities (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). These pressures often generate emotionally charged situations, shaped by broader sociocultural narratives about technology's role in education.

Although technology adoption in education has been widely studied, the emotional experiences of novice teachers remain comparatively neglected (Zheng et al., 2021). Emotions play a central role in how teachers engage, persist, and evolve; they influence instructional choices, adaptability, and motivation. Addressing this overlooked emotional dimension is essential for building comprehensive support systems and responsive teacher education programs.

Given the growing complexity of modern classrooms and the pressures placed on early-career educators, there is a compelling need to explore how these individuals experience, interpret, and emotionally respond to the demands of digital integration (Amory & Johnson, 2023). Phenomenological inquiry offers a meaningful pathway to investigate these lived experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of how novice teachers construct meaning within the context of their evolving professional realities.

In recent years, research on teachers lived experiences has gained increased attention as scholars seek to understand how educators navigate the emotional, cognitive, and relational aspects of their professional lives. Within this domain, novice teachers represent a particularly critical group, as they often face intense emotional challenges while simultaneously building their pedagogical identities and adapting to institutional expectations (Nazari et al., 2023). Their responses to new technologies in the classroom especially in the aftermath of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic are deeply personal and context-dependent, reflecting not only institutional realities but also internal processes of meaning-making.

Despite this growing interest, the methodological approaches traditionally employed in educational research often fall short in capturing the complexity of such subjective experiences. Quantitative methods, while valuable for identifying general trends, tend to overlook the nuanced emotional and experiential dimensions that define how novice teachers engage with educational innovations (Khammat, 2022). Standardized instruments frequently reduce complex emotional processes into measurable variables, thereby failing to illuminate the deeper meanings embedded within those experiences.

This methodological gap has resulted in a limited understanding of the emotional landscape experienced by early-career teachers during technological transitions (L. J. Zhang et al., 2021). Much of the existing literature has focused on observable outcomes such as teacher efficacy or technological competency, with insufficient attention given to how teachers themselves interpret, internalize, and emotionally process these changes. Consequently, many prior studies have offered fragmented or surface-level insights into phenomena that are, in essence, profoundly human and interpretive.

Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, offers a robust framework to address these limitations by foregrounding participants lived experiences and emphasizing the exploration of meaning as it emerges from those experiences. By focusing on the emotional journeys of novice teachers in post-pandemic classrooms, this study seeks to provide a richer, more authentic understanding of the human dimension of educational change.

Existing efforts to support novice teachers in adapting to digital technologies have predominantly relied on structured training programs, competency-based assessments, and the implementation of standardized teaching frameworks (Liu et al., 2024). These practical solutions, while useful in building technical skills, are largely informed by instrumentalist perspectives that emphasize observable performance and measurable outcomes. As such, they often prioritize functionality over the emotional and experiential complexities that define the actual teaching experience, particularly during transitional phases such as the return to physical classrooms post-pandemic.

However, these conventional approaches fall short in capturing the deeper emotional and psychological processes that novice teachers undergo while negotiating new technological demands (Hanin & Van Nieuwenhoven, 2020). The emphasis on surface-level indicators has led to a narrow understanding of how these educators truly experience change how they internalize technological shifts, respond to institutional pressures, and construct meaning from the challenges and breakthroughs they encounter. This has resulted in a fragmented picture of the phenomenon, limiting our ability to fully comprehend the human dimension of technological integration in educational practice.

What remains insufficiently explored is the subjective, emotionally charged nature of these experiences how early-career teachers live through moments of doubt, resilience, and transformation as they engage with technology in the classroom. These elements are critical not only to teacher

development but also to the long-term sustainability of educational innovations. Addressing this gap requires a shift from technocentric to human-centric inquiry, one that privileges personal narratives and lived experiences.

A phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative by enabling a holistic exploration of the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences. Through this lens, it becomes possible to access the essence of how novice teachers emotionally navigate digital integration an area that remains underrepresented in current scholarship. This study aims to respond to that need by adopting a descriptive phenomenological method to uncover the fundamental structures of experience that shape early-career teachers' engagement with post-pandemic technological change.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of teacher adaptation to technological change, particularly focusing on pedagogical strategies, digital competencies, and instructional outcomes. Some have examined how experienced teachers integrate learning management systems, while others addressed student engagement in hybrid settings. However, few studies have centered on the emotional experiences of novice teachers during the transition back to physical classrooms. Existing literature often lacks depth in understanding how early-career educators perceive, feel, and assign meaning to this transformation. This gap highlights the need for research grounded in first-person experiences and interpretive understanding.

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the emotional experiences of novice teachers integrating digital technologies into post-pandemic classrooms. This method allows for a deeper investigation into the essence of their experiences without imposing theoretical assumptions. By focusing on how participants describe their emotional journeys, the study aims to uncover meanings that are not easily captured by traditional methodologies. The phenomenological lens provides a way to respond to the knowledge gap by prioritizing voice, context, and human subjectivity. Through this approach, the study offers insights into how novice teachers construct professional meaning during times of technological transition.

The article is structured as follows: The introduction presents the background, the research context, and the rationale for a phenomenological inquiry. The methodology section explains the study design, participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis procedures. The results section presents the main themes that emerged from participant narratives, supported by direct quotes. The discussion elaborates on the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical insights. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key contributions and suggests implications for educational policy, teacher development, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in Husserlian philosophy, to explore the emotional experiences of novice teachers integrating digital technology into post-pandemic face-to-face classrooms. This approach was selected for its capacity to capture the essence of lived experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the meanings attributed to emotional responses in a transitional educational context. Descriptive phenomenology emphasizes the direct description of phenomena as experienced by individuals, without interpretive overlay. To ensure this, the researcher employed bracketing (*epoché*) by consciously suspending prior assumptions and experiences related to digital pedagogy and novice teaching (Johnson, 2014). This process involved maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research to document preconceptions and actively set them aside during data collection and analysis.

Participants

Participants consisted of novice teachers with less than three years of teaching experience in primary or secondary schools who had returned to physical classrooms following prolonged periods of online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Inclusion criteria required participants to have actively utilized digital technology in their in-person teaching practices during the transition phase. Individuals with prior formal training in educational technology were excluded to maintain the focus

on organic, lived emotional responses. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through professional teaching networks and school-based referrals. Initial contact was made via email and follow-up calls, during which the study's purpose and inclusion criteria were explained. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached—that is, no new themes or emotional dimensions emerged during subsequent interviews, which was observed after the tenth participant. A total of ten participants (6 females and 4 males), aged between 24 and 30 years, were included in the study. All participants were employed in public schools within urban and semi-urban regions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' emotional experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, private settings within the participants' school environments to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was adapted from existing literature and revised based on feedback from qualitative research experts to enhance relevance and clarity. To strengthen data credibility, participants were invited to review summary transcripts and confirm the accuracy of their accounts (member-checking).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within the framework of descriptive phenomenology. The analysis followed a systematic process that included initial immersion in the transcripts, identification of meaning units, categorization into thematic clusters, and reduction to essential themes. NVivo software was used to organize and code data efficiently. To enhance analytical trustworthiness, two independent coders analyzed the transcripts, and intercoder reliability was established through consensus-building discussions and iterative refinement of the coding framework. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through dialogue, ensuring consistency and transparency. This process allowed for the distillation of essential emotional experiences shared across participants, while preserving the depth and nuance of individual narratives. The final themes were derived through iterative comparison, ensuring they accurately represented the shared essence of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants after they received detailed explanations about the study's aims, procedures, and confidentiality assurances. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed during transcription. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This study explored the emotional experiences of novice teachers integrating digital technology into face-to-face classrooms during the post-pandemic transition period. Through thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, four essential themes emerged that reflect the participants' lived experiences.

Navigating Uncertainty in the Return to Physical Classrooms

Participants described the initial phase of returning to face-to-face teaching as a period marked by emotional turbulence. The shift from online to hybrid and then fully in-person instruction required rapid adaptation, and many novice teachers expressed feelings of anxiety and self-doubt.

“I felt completely unprepared. Just when I got used to online platforms, suddenly I had to use the smart board in class while managing students physically. It was overwhelming” (Participant 3).

These emotions stemmed not only from technological unfamiliarity but also from the broader context of transitioning educational policies, institutional expectations, and changing student behaviors post-lockdown.

Emotional Ambivalence Toward Technology Integration

The participants revealed a duality in their emotional responses to technology. On one hand, they recognized digital tools as powerful aids in engaging students; on the other, these tools induced stress due to lack of training and institutional support.

“I loved how excited my students got when I used interactive quizzes, but at the same time, I constantly worried about technical failures. I was scared the tech would fail and I’d lose control of the class” (Participant 1).

This ambivalence highlights a recurring pattern: technology was both an enabler and a source of emotional strain, shaping how novice teachers perceived their competence.

Building Professional Identity Through Digital Struggles

Despite initial discomfort, many participants described how overcoming technological challenges became formative in developing their teaching identity. The effort to integrate technology successfully led to a growing sense of accomplishment and resilience.

“There was this day when I created my own lesson videos, and my students actually said they liked them more than the textbook. That was the first time I felt like a real teacher” (Participant 5).

These reflections underscore how emotional highs and lows in digital integration were central to participants' evolving sense of self as educators.

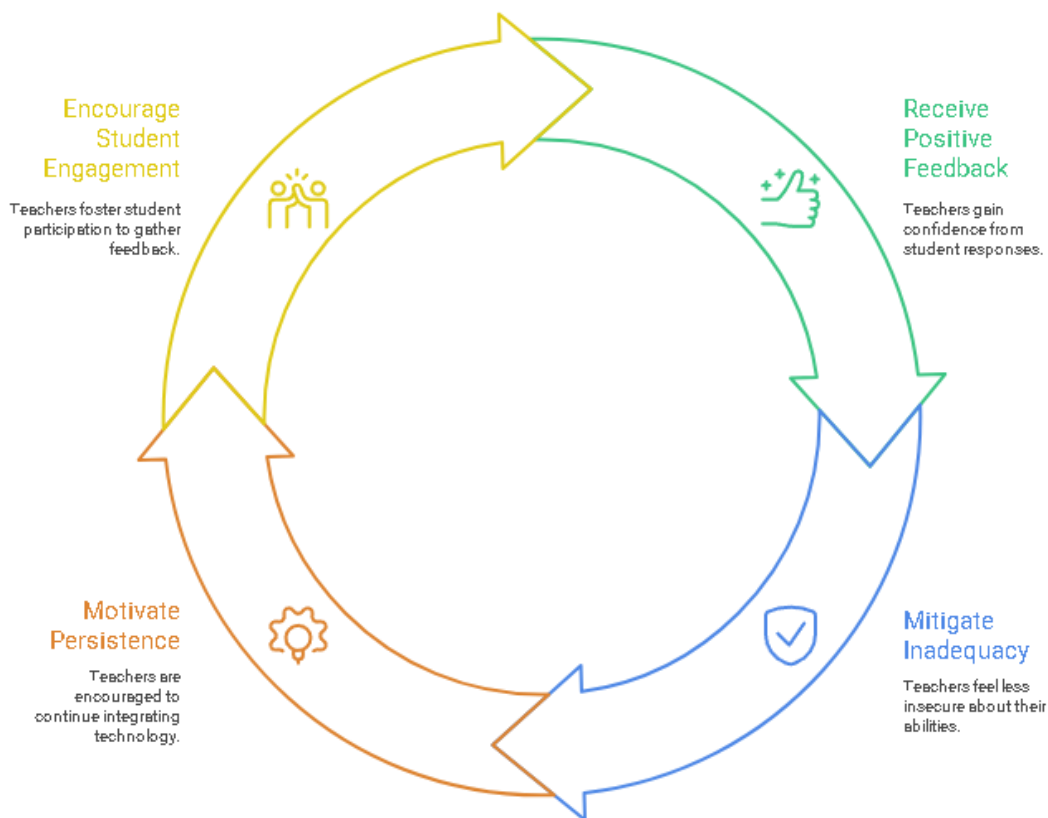
Emotional Resilience Fostered by Student Engagement

Encouraging feedback and engagement from students often served as emotional reinforcement for novice teachers. Positive student responses helped mitigate feelings of inadequacy and motivated teachers to persist with technology integration.

“I was unsure about using the school’s learning app, but when I saw students submitting creative assignments, it gave me confidence. Their enthusiasm pushed me to keep exploring” (Participant 2).

This theme highlights how emotional resilience in novice teachers was not solely internal but was shaped by interpersonal dynamics and perceived student outcomes.

Cycle of Emotional Resilience in Teachers



Essential Meaning: Emotion as the Lens of Technological Transition

Across all themes, the participants' emotional experiences were not peripheral but central to how they navigated and made sense of their technological journey. Emotion served as a lens through which teachers interpreted challenges, evaluated their progress, and constructed their professional identity. Rather than being an obstacle, emotional vulnerability became a catalyst for growth.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that novice teachers experience a complex emotional landscape when integrating digital technology into post-pandemic face-to-face classrooms (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023). These experiences, marked by uncertainty, ambivalence, and resilience, reflect the deep psychological and professional adjustments required to navigate educational change. This conclusion directly addresses the central research question concerning how novice teachers emotionally experience and make meaning of digital integration in a transitional context.

By uncovering four core themes navigating uncertainty, emotional ambivalence, identity formation, and resilience through student engagement this study offers an in-depth understanding of the emotional journeys' novice teachers undergo (Y. Zhang & Zhang, 2024). The insights provided here go beyond technical competencies and highlight how emotional responses shape the way teachers internalize new pedagogical tools. These findings contribute a novel perspective by illuminating the subjective processes that influence early-career teachers' ability to adapt and grow in technologically evolving educational environments.

The results of this study are consistent with and extend the work of Nazari & Alizadeh Oghyanous (2021), who explored teachers' emotional responses to EdTech, though their focus remained on online learning. Unlike prior research that primarily emphasized efficacy or access, this study provides an experiential lens on emotional vulnerability and growth. The theme of identity construction aligns with Derakhshan & Nazari (2024) observations on early-career teacher

development but adds a critical emotional dimension grounded in phenomenological exploration. Additionally, the findings support Farrell (2021) argument that teacher learning involves more than skill acquisition it is deeply rooted in emotional and existential dimensions that are often neglected in policy and training discourses.

Implications of the Findings

The emotional experiences of novice teachers during technological integration are not isolated events but reflect broader professional, cultural, and institutional dynamics in education. The findings suggest that emotional uncertainty and identity reconstruction are inherent parts of adapting to digital pedagogies, particularly in the wake of systemic disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights carry practical implications for teacher education programs, which must prioritize emotional preparedness and reflective practices alongside technical training. Culturally, the findings call for greater institutional awareness of the emotional labor involved in teaching and the importance of fostering emotionally supportive school environments. The themes identified in this study can inform policies that aim to retain early-career teachers by acknowledging and addressing their lived emotional realities.

Limitations of the Study

As with any qualitative research, this study is bounded by several limitations. The sample was limited to a specific geographical and institutional context, which may influence the transferability of findings to other educational systems or cultural settings. The focus on novice teachers within the early post-pandemic period further narrows the scope, making the emotional experiences discussed here time- and context-sensitive. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews, while rich in depth, may be influenced by participants' selective recall or desire to present their experiences in a particular light. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but highlight the importance of cautious interpretation and contextual understanding.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies could explore emotional experiences across a more diverse range of educational contexts, including rural schools, different cultural backgrounds, or varying levels of teaching experience. Longitudinal phenomenological studies may offer deeper insights into how emotional responses evolve as teachers become more accustomed to digital environments. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate phenomenology with educational psychology or sociology could expand the theoretical lens through which these experiences are understood. Ultimately, continued research in this area can contribute to a more holistic understanding of teacher development in the digital age and support the design of emotionally responsive educational systems.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the emotional experiences of novice teachers as they integrated digital technology into post-pandemic face-to-face classrooms. The findings revealed a spectrum of emotional responses—uncertainty, ambivalence, and resilience—as participants adapted to evolving technological and institutional expectations. Through a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study illuminated how emotional meaning-making influenced the formation of professional identity, moving beyond prevailing discourses that center on technical competence alone. Rather than merely identifying emotional states, the study critically foregrounds the affective labor inherent in early-career teaching during periods of rapid change. These contributions offer a more holistic understanding of teacher adaptation, emphasizing that emotional experiences are not incidental but integral to pedagogical engagement and innovation. Nonetheless, several limitations warrant reflection. The study relied on self-reported narratives, which may be subject to selective memory or social desirability bias. Additionally, the sample was limited to urban and semi-urban public school contexts, which may not reflect the full diversity of novice teacher experiences in rural or private educational settings. Future research could benefit from comparative studies across regions and school types, or from longitudinal designs that examine how emotional trajectories evolve over multiple years of teaching. Further, incorporating observational methods or emotion-tracking tools may

enhance the depth and validity of emotional data. By acknowledging these limitations and proposing concrete pathways for further inquiry, this study contributes both empirically and methodologically to the field of teacher emotion research in digitally mediated post-crisis education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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