Post-modern reality shock: Beginning teachers as sojourners in communities of practice

José Miguel Correa, Asunción Martínez-Arbelaitz, Estibaliz Aberasturi-Apraiz

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Onati Plaza 3, 20018 San Sebastián, Spain
University Studies Abroad Consortium, Plaza Elhuyar 1, 20018 San Sebastián, Spain

HIGHLIGHTS

- We break with the traditional gaze of beginning teachers as “deficient” professionals.
- The concept of “reality shock” is deconstructed by teachers’ voices telling of their initial professional experiences.
- Socio-economic circumstances help forge a post-modern identity linked to teachers’ limited commitment.
- An imagined identity linked to educational change and empowerment emerges in teachers’ narratives.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 20 February 2014
Received in revised form 11 February 2015
Accepted 11 February 2015
Available online

Keywords:
Reality shock
Narrative inquiry
Early childhood education
Professional identity
Beginning teachers

ABSTRACT

This study’s aims are twofold: identify the tensions and dilemmas that beginning teachers in Early Childhood Education face and their impact on the construction of their professional identity, and compare these difficulties with the ones discussed under the umbrella term “reality shock” (Veenman, 1984) in order to see whether these problems arise from the contemporary teaching context. Through narrative inquiry and with the help of Communities of Practice and Positioning Theory, we argue that the construct of reality shock is based on a simplified dichotomy between the novice and the expert, neutralizing opportunities for innovation that novices bring to schools.

1. Introduction

In a previous study we discussed the conflicts and dilemmas that student teachers experience in reconciling the pressure they feel to conform to the teaching practices and become a full member of their corresponding community of practice with their desire to implement new ideas or approaches (Correa, Martínez-Arbelaitz, & Gutierrez, 2014). Through narrative research we observed that student teachers mention the value of an imagined utopian school, but at the same time they also feel the pressure to align themselves to already established and legitimized practices (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). This is a dilemma that they must confront individually. If they stick to their drive to innovate, student teachers and probably beginning teachers will facilitate transformation and change in their corresponding communities. Research by Woodgate-Jones (2012) suggests that experienced teachers look favorably upon this cooperation, but Ulvik and Langørgen (2012) observed that in Norwegian schools, very qualified new teachers “are not used as resources in their workplaces” (p. 51) and speculated on the reasons why newcomers’ fresh perspective and initiatives are not usually embraced by their more experienced colleagues. They posit that beginning teachers’ proposals are not heeded due to time pressure, the individualistic school culture and experienced teachers’ underlying belief that newcomers have nothing to offer them.

In the present article we readdress the tensions and dilemmas that arise in a new teaching environment, but instead of focusing on corresponding communities. Research by Woodgate-Jones (2012) suggests that experienced teachers look favorably upon this cooperation, but Ulvik and Langørgen (2012) observed that in Norwegian schools, very qualified new teachers “are not used as resources in their workplaces” (p. 51) and speculated on the reasons why newcomers’ fresh perspective and initiatives are not usually embraced by their more experienced colleagues. They posit that beginning teachers’ proposals are not heeded due to time pressure, the individualistic school culture and experienced teachers’ underlying belief that newcomers have nothing to offer them.

1 This article was funded and is part of the research project, funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain. EDU2010-20852-C02-02 (2010–2013) entitled “Building the identity of pre-school and primary education teachers during initial training and the first years of work”, funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain.
the student teacher population we open the dialog to Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT from now on) who have full responsibility for a group of students. Specifically we want to address the following two research questions: What dilemmas, problems and tensions do NQTs have in classrooms and schools? Are the difficulties they face similar to the ones mentioned by Veenman in his account of reality shock, or do new problems emerge as the result of the uncertain context of ongoing change in which education takes place today?

These questions emerged from an extension of our previous research on student teachers. One of the main differences between student teachers and NQTs, besides being paid, is that is that NQTs are fully responsible for a group of students and do not have to conform to the teaching plans of another teacher, the practicum instructor. In addition, one may think that the period of time that beginning teachers are at their school is longer than the internship period. But the differences between the two groups blur when we delve into the current teaching experiences of NQTs in our particular context, as will be described later. NQTs may not feel they have the freedom to organize experiences outside the official curriculum, which undermines their teaching autonomy (cf., Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006) for the British context and the present paper for the Spanish context). Teachers’ autonomy, at least as it has been documented in England, has been eroded by the phenomenon of performativity in schoolings, which encourages standardization and regulation (Wilkins, Busher, Kakos, Mohamed and Smith, 2012). The second difference, the length of time spent at the school, does not hold in many cases, either. Given the economic crisis\(^2\) we are experiencing in the Basque Autonomous Community and in Spain in general, schools tend to offer very short appointments to beginning teachers. Very often these appointments are shorter than the 4–5 week internship that the School of Education requires student teachers to complete for their degree. Thus, new teachers usually establish a very ephemeral relationship with several schools during the first years of their professional development. This means that NQTs become part of different communities for a very short period of time, making them sojourners in the different schools. This new situation can be a trigger for oppositional positionings relative to the old timers, either empowering the beginning teacher or depriving her of agency, as we will see later.

2 Deconstructing “reality shock”

Deconstructing the concept of “reality shock” requires proposing an alternative and updated postmodern account (Sumison, 2005) of this construct in order to build a more accurate representation of the dilemmas, doubts, tensions and emotions teachers experience in their first year of teaching. To the best of our knowledge, there is no attempt to elucidate how modern precariously job conditions, at least in the context we are familiar with, may reshape the heterogeneous phenomena gathered under the umbrella term “reality shock”. We believe there is need to update our conception of how NQTs see themselves as teachers and what their ideals and feelings regarding the profession are, which should be more attuned with the contemporary job conditions in what Johansen (2007) called a VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous—world (as cited in Berliner, 2009: 5). In a volatile world nothing is constant, not even information. It is uncertain because we cannot know what will happen tomorrow. It is complex because any domain consists of multiple connections, configurations, interpretations and meanings. And finally, it is an ambiguous world because as change rate increases, the time we need to assimilate new information also increases. The volatility of information, uncertainty about the future and the complexities of education increase the ambiguity in teaching situations in significant ways.

This ambiguity generates feelings of uneasiness among teachers, particularly among NQTs. In fact, a wealth of research documents the rollercoaster of emotions new teachers experience when assigned to their first “real” job (Flores & Day, 2006; Hargreaves, 1998; Morrison, 2013; Nias, 1996), Veenman (1984), summarizing research conducted in the sixties, seventies and early eighties, popularized the term “reality shock”, defined as “the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training as a result of the confrontation with the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life” (p. 143). This definition implies that general teacher education is not adequate because it does not provide a vivid picture of what teachers will find in the classrooms. According to this author, one possible explanation for reality shock is the unrealistic optimism of student teachers during training, but other studies remark on the gap between theory and practice in NQTs’ experience (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ganser, 2002; Hegstad, 1999). These two features point to the need to redesign and rethink teacher education programs, which could offer a more realistic and less idealized picture of what being a teacher entails.

According to Veenman’s study, the eight problems that new teachers face are the following: classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students’ work, relationships with parents, organization of class work, insufficient and/or inadequate teaching materials and supplies, and dealing with the problems of individual students. Although these problems are familiar both to old and new teachers, they cause feelings of demotivation and insecurity among the latter group of teachers; thus in this article we propose that the traditional concept of reality shock reproduces and legitimizes the division between the one who knows and the one who does not, between the experienced expert and the newcomer who lacks professional knowledge. The concept of reality shock describes certain performance difficulties or challenges new teachers experience, but it fails to shed light on the processes of change and transformation, thus contributing to the neutralization of the innovative power of new members. Reality shock, and particularly the processes of resistance or opposition in the schools, hides the professional capacity of beginning teachers to trigger educational innovation.

It is true that NQTs usually experience the gap between their university educational experience and their professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005), in addition to didactic problems (Flores, 2009) and, in some cases, lack of institutional support (Huberman, 1993). Similarly, Avalos (2009) highlights some difficulties reported by teachers, such as work overload, tiredness, lack of time to guarantee adequate preparation and attention to children with special needs. In a similar vein, Ulvik, Smith, and Hellevé (2009) underline that “novice teachers are found to experience heavy workloads and poor working conditions (Achinstein, 2006; Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kingston, 2006), and they lack sufficient and suitable support to keep them in the profession (Achinstein, 2006; Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kingston, 2006)” (p. 835) and they conclude that novice teachers find their university education relevant to their work as teachers, but they had little time to reflect on their experiences. “They feel they have sufficient ballast, but in day-to-day life in school, their focus is on survival. It seems that newly qualified teachers need a space which serves as a bridge between pre-service education and working as teachers, a space where they can reflect and not only act. When just barely managing

\(^2\) Spain’s National Statistics Institute reports that the total number of unemployed has fallen to just below six million in the second half of the year 2013. The current unemployment rate is 26.3%, only second to Greece as the highest in the EU. Youth unemployment also remains extremely high, with more than 56% of Spain’s 15–24 year olds out of work.
their time to fulfill the responsibilities as teachers, it is understand-able that novices choose to imitate what other teachers in school do without having to seek solutions grounded in the theory from teacher education” (p. 841).

This last observation needs to be further explored. It is not clear whether NQTs feel free to implement their own way of teaching or whether, as Ulvik et al. (2009) point out, they choose to imitate what they observe the more experienced teachers doing. In other words, the degree of agency novice teachers feel during their first years of practice remains to be seen.

We define postmodern reality shock as the effect that this context of transformation and constant change has on the teaching identity, characterized by instability and uncertainty (Castells, 1996; Eisenhardt, 1989; Handy, 1996). This on-going change generates different forms of social, economical, political and cultural relationships, making postmodernism a social condition (Hargreaves, 1994) and also a research stance that challenges “universality, generalization, simplification, permanence, stability, wholeness, rationality, regularity, homogeneity, and sufficiency” (Clarke, 2003: 555). Change is inherent to education (Fullan, 1991, 1993, 1997; Goodson, 2003; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001): change occurs in the production and distribution of knowledge, in the expectations and demands from schools and teachers and in the complexities and in the growing diversity of school contexts. There is also change in the way teachers are hired, resulting in the precariousness and flexible contracts that are typical of the contemporary economic system.

What must be taught in schools no longer fits within a profession that can be learned at university, where teachers work in idealized schools that are secure, controlled and predictable, with (linguistically, ethnically or geographically) homogenous groups of students that learn the basic skills of reading, writing, arithmetic by memorizing well-defined content. These changes have triggered work intensification and overload, which entails the comprehensive, emotional and ethical education of children, as well as their digital literacy. Thus, teachers are continuously required to adapt to new policies and apply new teaching methods and approaches. The basic curriculum is becoming more complex (Hargreaves, 2003; Scott, 2000a, 2000b). Changes in the teaching context and in the demands made by schools affect all teachers, but they are experienced with special intensity during the first years of the teaching career (Fantielli & McDougall, 2009; Flores & Day, 2006; Morrison, 2013).

Spain, like France, Germany, Portugal (Stoel & Thant, 2002) and Hong Kong (Choi & Tang, 2011), has low teacher attrition rates (Schleicher, 2012), particularly in comparison with developed countries like the U.K. and the U.S.A., where, it ranges from 30 to 50% among teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience (Cooper and Alvarado; 2006). This low attrition rate among NQTs in Spain may seem surprising given the job conditions described previously. But the issue is complex and multiple factors come into play. That teachers’ salaries are higher in Spain than in countries that place a high value on education (like Finland) and the profession’s positive social reputation are not trivial. As Watt et al. (2012) suggest, however, money and social prestige do not fully explain retention in the profession. Their study on the teachers’ motivations and perceptions regarding teaching in various countries (Australia, the U.S.A., Norway and Germany) show that in some cases the growing complexity of the curriculum and the relentless social changes that were described above can act as an attractive challenge for teachers who may perceive school to be the great equalizer which gives all children an equal chance to grow and succeed academically and socially (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

In this article, however, we do not inquire into the motives that make the teaching profession attractive; rather, we want to delve into the experiences NQTs go through in their very first encounters with the students for whom they feel responsible, with their students’ parents and with their colleagues. Thus, taking into account the current context in which teaching takes place, we aim to counter the preponderant “problem-loaded” view of the first years of teaching, as popularized by the term “reality shock”, by adding some texture to the existing simplified view that NQTs are in a survival phase in their professional career. In order to unveil the agency that these newcomers can display in order to alter different aspects of school functioning in substantial ways, we adopt and combine two theoretical frameworks: Communities of Practice and Positioning Theory.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Identity and communities of practice

Chris Weedon (1997), in her studies on gender, “deconstructed” the concept of identity in a truly postmodern manner, proposing “a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Weedon’s view of subjectivity or identity implies that it is in constant change and going through multiple—and sometimes painful—contradictions. Another key concept in this definition is “discourse”, which is used by Gee (2000, p. 21) to mean “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity”.

Communities of practice (COPs) were originally conceived by Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998) to provide an account of how in different working domains (insurance claims processors, midwives, tailors, etc.) the newcomers, novices or beginners gradually become members of their communities of practice through Legitimate Peripheral Participation, a period of apprenticeship that allows these members to observe the main responsibility of the task at hand without having to adopt it. In the field of education, the period of the teaching practice or practicum is equated with the Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Usually, once the teachers get their first appointment they become full members of the corresponding COP, although there are voices that claim that this transition is too abrupt (e.g., Yandell & Turvey, 2007). From the perspective of the COP, learning is inextricably linked with the process of developing a teaching or professional identity, which requires mutual engagement, joint enterprise and the development of a shared repertoire. When there is mutual engagement, the members share ideas through discussion and dialog. The second feature, joint enterprise, implies that the community has convergent goals and similar interests. Finally, a shared repertoire suggests that members develop their own narratives, metaphors, stories or physical artifacts to fit the COP’s needs. This entails moving from the periphery to the core of a given community.

Developing a teaching identity requires that new teachers engage in the practices of the school, in collaboration with other members of their community of practice and to share the common repertoire. Nevertheless, these relations are not always harmonious, and in some cases new teachers resist the preponderant practices, values and beliefs. Such resistance—or even rebellion—can reveal a greater commitment than passive conformity does (Wenger, 1998, p. 77).

3.2. Positioning Theory

Positioning Theory (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1991; 1999) is, to the best of our knowledge, an
appropriate theoretical lens for capturing two crucial aspects of identity, including teaching identity: its fragmentation and its ambivalence. In Positioning Theory, a given person’s identity is equated to her discursive positioning. Thus, positioning is defined as “the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37). These observably discursive acts of positioning can either be performed reflexively (self-positioning) or they can be performed by others (other-positioning), but they always occur within the frame of a constructed storyline. Central to Positioning Theory is the idea that the resulting positions are limited and thus defined by the perceived rights, duties and obligations that the subjects attach to the positions in question. Crucially, the meaning of acts and words uttered is delimited by the different positionings the actors adopt in each discourse segment. In this sense, besides capturing the moment-to-moment identity-enactment, Positioning Theory acts as a complement to the Communities of Practice theory, since as Linehan and McCarthy (2000) remind us, “Positioning Theory offers a useful complement to community of practice (given the practice focus on the re-production of social structure) by highlighting the manner in which individuals’ positionings are mutually emergent from particular discursive spaces. Through the lens of positioning theory, the dynamic and sometimes conflictive nature of these initial practices can be examined”. (p. 449).

3.3. The methodology: narrative inquiry

The methodology adopted in this research is narrative inquiry, which delves into lived experiences (Cladnin, 2007; Cladnin & Connelly, 2000; Trahar, 2009) through the narratives or stories teachers compose about who they are and how they have become who they are. First, we gathered data through interviews, in-class observations and memories of their experience as students. Second, we composed interim research texts that were biographic, reflexive and shared, since they included fieldwork collected in collaboration with the NQTs (Siry & Zawatski, 2011). The main source of these interim texts was the interview, which was narrative and reflexive in nature (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008), giving the beginning teacher the opportunity to reflect on the context where she works and how she feels within this context. This interview was based on open questions regarding NQTs initial experiences. All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed for further analysis.

Third, we negotiated the content of each text with the corresponding teacher until both researchers and teachers agreed on the descriptions of the events and their interpretations. At this point teachers understood the purpose of the study; they saw its value in their professional development and gave us their consent to make their narratives public in conferences and articles on education. In this way, by discussing the interim texts with the teachers and by having them sign a consent form that was also negotiated, any ethical concerns regarding the display of personal stories was addressed.

Finally, we analyzed these interim texts by identifying the passages where the teachers reported their feelings regarding their first teaching assignments and the difficulties, tensions, dilemmas and doubts they experienced with the students, the parents or the more experienced teachers.

3.4. The teaching context

The Spanish education system divides Early Childhood Education in two cycles: the first cycle is for children aged 0 to 3 and the second cycle for children aged 3 to 6 (Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, 2014). Our focus is on teachers who work in the second cycle, which attacks 95% of the children in Spain even though scholarization is not obligatory until the age of 6. In addition, there are three types of schools, each with a different funding scheme. Private schools, in which only 5% of children are enrolled, receive funding from the students’ parents; public schools are funded by the government of the autonomous community that they are located in, and 65% of children are enrolled in these schools; subsidized schools, in which the remaining 30% of student are enrolled, are funded by both government and parents. Public and subsidized schools choose their own teachers, but in the public schools the selection is based on a complex merit-based criteria. The NQTs are placed on the public school systems’ teacher lists, and they wait to be called in to substitute for more experienced teachers. Substitution contracts can last for days or weeks. When teachers sign up for the substitute lists, their merits are given based on academic degrees and certificate (that is, college degrees, language certificates). The second source of merit is experience; the more teaching experience accumulated, the higher teachers are on the list. Higher ranked teachers are therefore able to choose the better appointments (in terms of duration or location, and maybe previous knowledge about the reputation of the school in terms of methodologies, types of students and colleagues). This precarious situation can last for a very long time. Periodically, the official exams that are required in order to become a permanent member of the public school system are offered, and in that case substitutions are a very valuable merit.

There is no induction program for substitute teachers in Spain. This situation is akin to the lack of induction or reduction in teaching load during the first year of teaching in other countries, such as Norway, as described in Ulvik and Langørgen (2012). These NQTs depend on the willingness of their school colleagues to help them in the transition from being student teachers to being teachers of their first group of students.

3.5. Participants

Following Polkinghorne’s purposive strategy (2005), we selected five NQTs in Early Childhood Education who work with 3–6 year olds in the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain as participants in this research. They all had less than five years of experience; four had attended a public university and one a private one. As is typical in Schools of Education and in the teaching profession in general, four of the five participants were women. Perhaps what differs from previous accounts of NQTs’ trajectories is the heterogeneity of their experiences. One of the most striking features of our VUCA world is the lack of job stability, particularly in the context we are describing. Thus, as can be seen in Fig. 1, the five participants had very heterogenous trajectories, which will be further described below: two of them, Eider and Mikel, had permanent appointments in private schools, but Eider switched to the public school system, starting with six-month appointments in two different schools. Leyre started with many sporadic appointments in public schools. Miren had a job outside the education system until she received different appointments shorter than six months. Susana opted for a long-term 33% appointment instead of a full-time position.

On the following lines, we give a characterization of the five NQTs in a more detailed way in order to provide a more rounded picture of the varied biographies that shape the different identities that will intersect with the development of their professional identities, as proposed by Beijard, Meijer & Verloop (2004).

3 As usual, the names of schools, students and teachers have been changed to ensure anonymity.
In terms of other background information, the NQTs teach in Basque in bilingual schools (Basque and Spanish) and use English as a third language. At the time of the study, Mikel was 30 years old, Miren and Susana were 29, Leyre was 27 and Eider was 28. As previously noted, all participants had undergraduate degrees in Early Childhood Education, but some came to Early Childhood Education with prior undergraduate degrees: Mikel had a degree in Economics, Susana had a degree in Journalism, and Leyre had a degree in Special Education. There were no difference in social class among the participants, and they could all be classified as belonging to the middle class.

Eider: A novice teacher that has rotated through five schools in five years (public and semi-private or charter school). She started with two year-long appointments in two different semi-private schools, then she switched to the public school system, where she has been a substitute teacher. Obviously, she wants to abandon her unstable job situation.

Miren: During the first two years, she worked in a public childcare center (0–2 years). The following three years she worked for the public school system and she rotated through more than 10 different schools for different lengths of time. She fights to conquer her space in order to reach a degree of personal and professional stability. This job insecurity and moving from one school to another affects her self-confidence. She reports having difficulty relating to the children and having to repeat certain school routines that she does not identify with.

Leyre: She accepts the rigid norms and the culture of the schools, but she also wants to be original, creative and innovative. She rotated through 14 different schools in her first year of teaching; her longest appointment in her first five years was a six-month appointment in Bergara, a small town in the Basque Country. She has a set of personal motivations that lead her through the different contexts where she negotiates the type of teacher she wants to be, triggered by her political commitments that go beyond the school walls.

Susana: She is convinced that experience is what draws the line between the novice and the expert. She does not need to lead; she seems happy as a supporting actor. She keeps taking courses that will give her some advantage in order to choose a more permanent position. She has worked in four different schools in her first five years (public and semi-private), but these were 33% appointments rather than full-time jobs.

Mikel: Since graduation he has been working for the same semi-private school. He thinks that a teacher learns by doing, accepting failures and trying new strategies. He feels obliged to use the teaching material and deal with classroom problems, but he also feels he has the right to innovate, to share teaching techniques and methods with his colleagues, to create his own material. He is the only one who mentions a sense of competition among the teachers in his school.

Having familiarized ourselves with the beginning teachers, their teaching contexts, their types of appointments and the meaning that they attach to their practice and job situations that we gleaned from their narrative texts, we can recall the research questions that emerge from this narrative inquiry.

- What dilemmas, problems and tensions do newly graduated teachers face similar to the ones mentioned by Veenman in his account of reality shock, or do new problems emerge regarding the uncertain context of ongoing change in which education takes place today?

4. Discussion

We organize our discussion by selecting relevant scenes described by the five participants in their interviews with the authors of this article, scenes whose interpretation was negotiated and subsequently inserted in our discussion regarding NQTs’ first experiences in the schools.

4.1. Eider: “I won’t shut up!”

After five years of experience in seven public and subsidized schools, Eider tells us that she feels forced into working in the way that the schools where she has substituted work. She wants this phase of job insecurity to end, and she feels that she can teach in
her own way once she is granted a more permanent position, where she can develop her own professional identity to its fullest.

In her initial experiences, she felt the need for more coordination and convergence with her colleagues. She recalls that she felt a deep loneliness and shyness that made her speak up cautiously at staff meetings. After five years, she now feels she wants to make her voice heard: “Like many beginning teachers, I would show up and feel shy, cautiously weighing in at the beginning even though it was a challenge for me, but now I do not shut up!”

As in previous recounts of NQTs’ situations in other countries (Ulvik & Langørgen, 2012; Woodgate-Jones, 2012), Eider talks about the lack of acknowledgment from her Community of Practice when she has ideas to share at staff meetings. The fact that old-timers do not even consider her ideas is a source of disappointment: “On the other hand, at staff meetings, there are times that you talk and they stare at you … I blush very easily. Nevertheless, in smaller schools, even though I have always been shy about talking, I try to say what I think, but when you let your idea loose, and when you do not see a reaction … you are disappointed.”

Eider does not forget that she is a substitute teacher, and this self-positioning blocks her desire to change aspects of the normalized ways of functioning in the school. Her agency is limited by her lack of stability: “You can have an impact on certain things, but you cannot change everything because in June you leave and in September the regular teacher will continue. I think that the educational system is like that and probably something needs to be done to change it. I think that there is the possibility of making a difference, being a substitute teacher, but you are a little apart, and if you want to change anything you need more stability.”

Eider does not mention any of the problems previously identified by Veenman, such as discipline problems, student motivation, etc. What is described here is clearly a secondary position, legitimate peripheral participation, rather than the full participation that is usually attached to the teaching members of the school. The situation described here echoes the ones described in Yandell and Turvey (2007). Although it is clear that student teachers are in a position of legitimate peripheral participation, it is not clear that NQTs have attained full participation status; instead as Yandell and Turvey point out, despite having full responsibility for a group of students in most cases, they have serious limitations to being taken seriously.

4.2. Miren: suffering from job precariousness

Miren tells us about the trauma of waiting for a phone call that will announce a teaching substitution. She shares her tension of not knowing where she has to go or what to expect in her new school. She also assumes that being a substitute teacher means being in charge of the least rewarding tasks. However, Miren also fights to conquer a space where she has personal and professional stability, but hopping from one school to the next leaves a trace of insecurity in her performance. This becomes clear when she tells us her opinion about the photocopied standardized worksheets. Although she does not agree with using them, she sees that they give security to the teacher and are a part of the shared repertoire of the COP.

“I think,” Miren says, “that although I am not in favor of them, for a teacher, a worksheet gives security, because with a worksheet you know if the student knows or doesn’t know and why that can be, that is, when we understand our job it is easier”.

Perhaps the clash with the old-timers manifests itself at a staff meeting where she explicitly disagrees with the opinion of the other teachers regarding the role of the parents in the schools. Miren uses the metaphor of an explosion to describe her reaction because she feels anger at the teachers’ lack of interest of what the parents are doing in some satellite classrooms:

“It is not that way, the parents do not mess with what we do; in fact we propose things to them and we are so incredibly lucky that they say yes—which usually takes a lot of effort—and they take part. I was getting more and more annoyed and finally, I exploded and said: “Look, if it was true that they [the parents] are interfering with the methodology—which I do not think they are doing—it is because the school is not in charge of the two satellite classrooms in that neighborhood, because you have no idea of all the things we have done during this year.” They really did not know, they had no idea of what we were doing and how can that be? And I had my outburst and since I am leaving I do not care; I could not care less and said: “I would be happy to stay up there and I hope you realize that (the satellite classrooms uptown) they are a pleasure and you have the wrong impression but it is a pleasure.” And everybody remained silent.

Miren does not suffer because the relationship with the children’s parents is difficult, as in Veenman’s study. She is resentful about the lack of dialog with the old-timers regarding the role of parents in the school and she feels that they do not want to solve the problems she perceives in the school. As in Eider’s case, Miren feels that since her position in the school is not stable she is not a legitimate member of the COP and her agency is very limited.

The above scene reveals the uneasiness that comes with being positioned as inferior, which calls her professionalism into question. She feels the need to talk about the quality of her work and the parents’ recognition of the choice of methodologies, but she only receives no recognition from her colleagues.

4.3. Leyre: the positive effects of the revolving door

Lrey stands out as the most proactive of the five teachers and the one who fights to teach according to her ideals and believes. She has rotated through 14 different schools in her first year of teaching; her longest appointment in her first five years was six months. She has a positive impression of her short sojourns in these different schools, as this unstable situation has made her negotiate the type of teacher she wants to become in many different arenas and with different colleagues. She claims her right to be original, creative and innovative, but at the same time, with a degree of ambivalence, she feels the obligation to comply with the functioning rules and the culture of the schools she works in.

Lrey recalls her experience in Danish schools during a stay abroad while she was at university. She had the opportunity to see other ways of functioning, where children’s games are as important as academic activities. “But if you try that in a school here they send you to jail. In our schools children are sitting, filling in worksheets in the classroom. And we do that to give a filled folder to the parents. That is not what children want. In my opinion, children are much happier in the schoolyard, either engaging in open play or using their psychomotor skills to do activities, than in the directed tasks that we assign. But … how can we change this? It is not difficult but this model is so ingrained that parents may think that you are crazy.”

Lrey tells us that she cannot accept the old-timers’ stagnation, and for her the normalized practice of “plugging the children in” to a video when it rains is a sign that the teachers are doing what is most convenient for them. The following scene shows her self-positioning towards her colleagues: “It is a big school. Sixty teachers. In XXX, in the middle of Bilbao, we do not have a covered yard, but if it rains in the morning and the weather is fine in the afternoon, they have a machine to dry the puddles. Nobody thinks of using this machine in the middle of day. I said, I am going to use it, because I’d rather spend 15 min with it and have an hour and a half in the yard than spending an hour and a half with the video”. 
From 10:00 to 11:00 they have recess and if the weather is bad they are watching a video. Then they rotate, for example, one day you spend the whole recess hour with a video, plus 40 more minutes with video. And then, in the afternoon, from 15:00 to 16:00 again they’re watching a video. That kills me, I cannot stand it. And I would tell myself, “I could not survive here” but when you can, act up. (...) But I won’t get angry, if they think that way, I cannot change it. For the same price, as I heard in one school, they are paying us the same if we are good or bad. For the same price, let’s be good.

In this particular situation Leyre cannot apply what she believes is a more progressive teaching model; not an imagined model, but one that she has previously been involved with. She feels ambivalence about knowing these other forms of teaching but also wanting to become active part of her COP. The transformative power of beginning teachers clashes with the impossibility of changing some teaching models, which does not equal suffering a reality shock. Leyre explicitly rejects her colleagues’ teaching model, but her positioning reflects a negotiation strategy that she helps survive, even though she is aware that she may be marginalized for doing so.

4.4. Susana: the clarity of goals to achieve stability

Susana is convinced that experience makes a difference, and that she has to put up with precarious job conditions in order to achieve stability. She tells us that she feels she has to continue her education, taking courses that, together with her accumulated experience, give her an advantage in the competition among teachers. Her strategy for getting a permanent teaching position is to accept part-time appointments in public schools. She uses the remainder of her time to continue her education. Unlike the vivid experiences reported by Eider and Miren, Susana chooses not to attend faculty meetings, deliberately separating herself from decision-making processes. One consequence is that she feels excluded from the organization of excursions, celebrations, etc. Furthermore, because she only goes to the school in the afternoons, she is not informed of organizational changes. She admits that she has felt lost on many occasions and that she feels like an outsider, but she also points out that her rights and obligations are limited to the ‘in-classroom’ space (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber and Orr, 2009).

When she reads in the interim narrative account that we researchers shared with her that she plays a supporting actor role, following the lesson plans designed by the permanent teacher, she told us that she does identify with it. She added: “I am not a poor baby that is not capable of doing anything on her own ... I do not think it is like that. I am a hard worker, I try to do things well, sometimes better than others ... It is true that with time and experience, one learns, I see that in three years I have learned a lot, I have more resources but I think that one is always learning. Learning takes place throughout life, doesn’t it?”

Susana’s narrative is conditioned by contemporary job conditions. Although she is a beginning teacher, she knows school practice well. She does not adopt a survival discourse, but she clearly adheres to the COP through legitimate peripheral participation: she has a group of students under her responsibility but she does not have control over the decisions made in the school.

She knows what she has to do in order to play the role of lead actor: she has to accept substitution or part-time jobs. Unlike Eider or Miren, Susana does not show tensions in having adopted a peripheral role because she has accepted that it is the only route towards her professional goals. Given the prevailing job conditions, Susana has opted to accept this type of job, cognizant that it is an unavoidable transit, one that is not linked to lack of professional capacity.

4.5. Mikel: negotiating his membership in the COP

Mikel has a different profile than the previous four teachers. He opted for a subsidized school where he started as soon as he graduated and he has not changed schools. Moreover, he has accepted the responsibility of becoming the coordinator of Early Childhood Education at his school. He tells us that “all the students have to follow a methodology based on a workbook. It is like a textbook that includes didactic units, songs, and stories to be performed in class”. Although he recognizes that teachers should design their own materials, he feels forced to follow the workbook, which provides evidence of learning for the parents.

Mikel left a job in a company where competition was the norm and now he finds himself competing with other teachers to obtain similar levels of productivity with his students. He confesses that the idea that parents would compare a student’s results with the results of that student’s twin brother in another class scared him. This fear led him to do the homework for his student to avoid being positioned as a failed teacher in this potential comparison. Mikel’s competitive nature contributes to his conforming positioning.

Nevertheless, Mikel has his rebellious positionings as well. In the following scene he tells us that children were studying metric units through the story of Gulliver, following the explanation in the textbook. The teachers decided to take a field trip to Alzo, a Basque town where an unusually tall person lived and where there is a real-scale image of the giant. The children were told to bring a ruler and to measure some body part so they could compare it with the giant’s. While they were doing the task, a child started saying that he was scared of the big man, and Mikel tried to calm him down by telling him that the man had died a long time ago. The child reacted in an unexpected way and asked: “Dead? Where is he now?”

The whole class moved its attention towards what being dead meant and where we go after death. Mikel decided to satisfy the children’s curiosity and abandoned the assigned unit about metric units. They visited the town’s cemetery and saw the giant’s tomb, talking about what happens after death. Mikel believes that by following the children’s interest over a topic and stemming outward from there, he produced significant learning. He thinks that this kind of learning can be done better than with the workbook, but one needs a flexible and creative attitude.

If we analyze Mikel’s experience, we do not see discipline problems, a lack of motivation from the students, or problems regarding class organization or his relationship with the parents, as is seen in the now traditional definition of reality shock. Moreover, he does not mention any gap between what he learned in university and the reality he found in his school. Mikel, in his transition towards becoming a full member of his school’s COP, feels uncomfortable with the rigid methodology followed in his school. He has to share the repertoire of the COP, including the workbook, but he is still looking for a position where his identity can flourish, so he is resisting some of the practices of the COP. He is afraid of being positioned as a non-expert, as inexperienced and consequently, as a poor teacher who does not elicit evidence of learning from his students. He then experiences a conflict between his desire to be a full member of the COP, achieving good results, and adopting the whole repertoire blindly. He wants to be a full member and he makes efforts by becoming the coordinator of Early Childhood Education. Nevertheless, he feels a contested teaching identity and tries alternative forms of teaching, such as the one illustrated in the scene from the field trip.

5. Conclusions

This research has described the different tensions and dilemmas that NQTs face during their first years in the profession. Following
Clandinin et al. (2009, p. 83), “[t]ensions also helped us identify, inquire into, and represent the relational tensions between individuals’ storied lives and their expressions as they were enacted in in- and out-of-classroom places on the professional knowledge landscapes in which they lived.” As we have repeated several times, these first experiences, and particularly the tensions felt, experienced and told are crucial to building a professional identity, and the fact that young teachers are having a hard time having sustained practice in a given community is definitely not a minor detail in their professional development.

Our intention has been to update the current literature on new teachers by asking about the dilemmas, problems and tensions NQTs experience in classrooms and schools of the contemporary VUCA world. The first topic that Eider and Miren tell us about is the lack of recognition in their corresponding COP, where they are positioned as agency-less or as teachers whose opinions do not have an impact on the functioning of the school. Susana chooses not to participate full time and she asks for a time reduction from the beginning; instead of being positioned as powerless, she self-positions as such. Moreover, Miren adds that with these short-term contracts there is not time to make a difference or leave a trace with the kids.

A second problem or tension that we have identified, particularly in Leyre’s narrative, is the difficulty that NQTs have in carrying out their own teaching plans when they do not agree with the practices of the COP, or in Mikel’s case, without compromising his desire to make the most of the serendipitous opportunities for learning that emerge. It comes as no surprise that Mikel is the only participant who worries about balancing his own ideas with the repertoire of the community, since he is the only participant who is not a sojourner; that is, he is the only one who is stable. Therefore he is very cognizant of the established routines of the school but at times he wants to change them. In sum, the newly qualified teachers worry about their lack of agency, their lack of recognition from the COP, and developing a personal teaching identity.

This takes us to our second research question, namely, are the difficulties that NQTs face similar to the ones mentioned by Veenman? The blanket term “reality shock” or “practice shock”, commonly used in the literature on education, was coined under different economic conditions and by reading research based in the UK, USA and Australia. The problem in those countries, that schools are having trouble retaining new teachers, is the opposite of what we see in Spain, where attrition rates are very low. Moreover, the concept of reality shock is invariably linked to the idea of deficit, of lacking, of “not being there yet”; this is, to the best of our knowledge, firmly ingrained in the academic discourse of educators.

Our research aligns with Ulvik and Langørgen (2012, p. 48) when they say that they aim to challenge “the assumption that new teachers are helpless by asking about their strengths and what could be learned from them”. We should not forget that acts of representation are not innocent and have consequences on the lives of people, and teachers are no exception to this. Research in the field of language acquisition has revealed that the way identities are portrayed, shaped and even imagined can have an impact on second language learners’ degree of participation in the host community (Norton, 2000), which in turn may promote or deter language learning. In research conducted by Pavlenko (2003), she reports working on her international graduate students’ self-perception. Through readings and lectures, she represented her students as multicompetent, bilingual or multilingual speakers, trying to dismiss their previous self-perception as failed native speakers of the target language. She reports that a negative self-perception as an incompetent speaker can lead to non-participation; alternatively, classroom discourse can have an important role in “shaping the student’s memberships in imagined communities and legitimizing new identity options” (p. 266). Pavlenko’s (2003) proposal can be transferred to the situation of beginning Early Childhood Education teachers in several ways.

First, instead of portraying NQTs who move from one school to another as powerless, transient, nomadic or rootless, educational practitioners in general and School of Education teachers in particular should emphasize that the different schools or COPs offer different learning settings that can enhance beginning teachers’ flexibility and ability to cope with change. In addition, this type of situation where teachers are not totally aware of the routines of a particular COP can be fertile ground where informal, unplanned and serendipitous innovations can take place. Finally, the idea of “transportable knowledge” can be useful for these NQTs, since they can take with them whatever is valuable, as one of the participants acknowledged.

Nevertheless, these circumstances of constant change can also be emotionally draining for NQTs. Some type of stable community is absolutely necessary so that they can express their doubts about and agreements and disagreements with what they are experiencing. Some grass-roots initiatives, such as social networks, may be able to cover the gap left by the absence of an organized teacher induction program or even a stable group of old-timers that can assist in the first days of teaching. By traveling alongside these five teachers and discussing their worries and moments of failure or success, we have tried to fill in this gap. However, we are aware that much more can be done from the Schools of Education. Abandoning a deficit-related image of the beginning teacher, which has been the norm in the literature on NQTs, can be the first step. NQTs offer a unique opportunity for innovation, change and reflection about how the actual COP is functioning and its future, but the old-timers have to be receptive to newcomers’ opinions, and as we have seen, this is not always the case. In addition, a minimum degree of stability is needed in order to generate the opportunities for these exchanges to occur. In order to flourish, a COP needs both the memory and the experience of the old-timers as well as the inspirational ideas and energy of the newcomers. As Wenger puts it, the merging of the new and the old is a complex process: “[d]epending on how a community negotiates individuality, the generation encounter can have different effects – with different degrees of emphasis on continuity and discontinuity as old-timers and newcomers fashion their identities in their encounter” (Wenger, 1998, p. 157).

Acknowledgements

This article was funded and is part of the research project funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain (EDU2010-20852-C02-02, 2010–2013) entitled “Building the identity of pre-school and primary education teachers during initial training and the first years of work”. A preliminary version of this article was presented under the title “First teaching experiences: A fight between the pressure to conform and innovate” at the European Conference on Educational Research 2013, which was organized by the European Educational Research Association and Bahçeşehir University and held in Istanbul in September 2013. We particularly thank Juana Sancho and Fernando Hernández not only for organizing the symposium “Learning to become a teacher in the contemporary world: the role of initial professional development and the first professional experiences” where the original paper was framed, but also for giving us the chance to share and contrast our ideas on novel teachers with them.

References
