'It feels like its sink or swim': Newly Qualified Teachers' Experiences of their Induction Year

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Abstract. This study examined the experiences of a small group of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) during their NQT year. A focus group was used to explore the NQTs' understandings of their role and the influence of the NQT year on the development of their professional teacher identity. Data were digitally recorded, transcribed and organised into themes. The data indicate that the participants had developed a strong sense of their own accountability for their own professionalism and for improving the academic performance of their pupils. They had been initiated into the discourse of performativity that is entrenched across the education system. Consequently, some, but not all, NQTs had rejected their personal educational philosophies and had embraced a socially assigned identity which embraced the principles of performativity.

Keywords: Teachers; Newly Qualified Teachers; Induction Year; Professional Development; Teacher Identity.

1. Introduction
In England, Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) are required to complete a mandatory induction year to teach in state-maintained schools. This paper uses the terms 'NQT' and 'early career teacher' interchangeably to represent teachers in their first year of teaching. In England NQTs can arrive at their first year of teaching having successfully progressed through an undergraduate or postgraduate programme of initial teacher education. There is also a non-accredited school-based route which confers Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) but none of the participants in this study had qualified as teachers through this route.

Schools in England, like other parts of the world, are required to focus relentlessly on raising students' academic performance. School effectiveness and teacher performance are based mainly on how well students fare in standardised assessments and in primary schools this is limited to Mathematics and English. Senior leaders and school governors monitor closely individual teacher performance and parents, local authorities and the school inspectorate (Office for Standards in Education – OfSTED) monitor whole school performance data which is based on student results.

For an NQT this provides a challenging context in which they are required to work. As early career teachers, they are undeniably at an early stage of forming their professional teacher identity. Their identity will be shaped through a myriad of networks and experiences as they start to discover the kind of teacher they want to be. Yet, at the same time they are expected to raise the academic profile of the school and to do this they must priorities the academic performance of their learners.

This paper explores the experiences of NQTs during their first year of teaching. At the time when the data were collected the participants were in their second term of teaching.

2. Key literature
Tickle (2000) argues that 'we should not think of induction simply as if novices are to be socialised into some well formulated and accepted practices which exist on the other side' (p. 1). However, in order to 'survive' their induction year NQTs must adopt the policies and practices within their schools or risk potential failure. Educational practice can always be subjected to healthy critique but challenging existing practice in some schools is not a risk worth taking. In other schools, subjecting practice to critique would be welcomed. Therefore, the experiences of early career teachers are always influenced by the educational context in which they are operating within.

Recent research in England (Education Support Partnership, 2018) has demonstrated that early career teachers who have taught between 1-5 years have a greater likelihood of experiencing mental ill health compared to more experienced teachers. More research is needed to help us to understand why this is the case, but one likely explanation is that the transition from the first year of teaching (induction year) to subsequent years is too abrupt, given that the systems of support that are available in the first year are then removed. This would support the case for extending the induction year over two years rather than limiting it to one year.

There has generally been a lack of research into the early professional development of new teachers (Totterdell et al, 2004; 2005). The literature which is available demonstrates that the induction process for teachers has been a cause for concern for several years (Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2012). One of the reasons for this is the apparent discontinuity of experiences in the transition from initial teacher training to the induction year (Hobson et al., 2007).

Literature has identified that there is little evidence of a staged, progressive induction process where knowledge and skills are developed over time (Harrison, 2001). Additionally, models of support tend to adopt a deficit approach by targeting support on addressing weaknesses in teacher performance (Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2012; Harrison, 2001) rather than developing teachers' skills further to support them in becoming more effective.

More recently, OfSTED inspection frameworks for initial teacher education have emphasised the need for providers of teacher training to support trainees into the induction year. Models of provision vary across providers and include access to professional development, access to resources, web-based support, telephone helplines and visits to NQTs by university tutors. The impact of this is yet to be measured nationally but many providers operate under financial constraints and therefore intervention and support is likely to be targeted at those NQTs who are demonstrating weaknesses in their practice rather than being universal for all.

Development as a teacher involves a considerable degree of identity work. Robin Smith (2007) argues that there has been a move away from coherent and stable identities towards a view that professional identities are multiple, fragmented and prone to change. Britzman (2003) emphasised identity construction as a continuous 'becoming', suggesting that identity is always in a state of flux. Sfard and Prusak (2005) identified two types of identity; *actual identity*, which refers to a personal identity and *desired identity*, which refers to an identity which is imposed on the individual by others. Whilst we accept that identity is influenced by a range of experiences and interactions and is fluid rather than static, notions of what constitutes an effective teacher are politically influenced and have become increasingly solidified within schools. Within the education system teachers who are '*outstanding*' are those who can close achievement gaps between groups of learners and maximise student performance. Whilst this is a laudable aim, it neglects other aspects of teacher effectiveness, such as the ability to meet students' holistic needs, raise self-concept and self-esteem and engender inclusive practice. Within this educational context, Smith (2007) argues that new entrants to the profession become teachers within the new discourses and therefore take for granted curriculum and assessment policies.

Research questions
This study focused the following research questions:
-What were NQTs experiences of their induction year?
-How had their NQT year shaped the development of their teacher identity?

3. Methodology
This study was a small-scale case study of 8 participants who were in their first year of teaching in the primary phase (5-11). The participants were recruited via an e-mail invitation which was distributed to all NQTs who had exited from one teacher training provider in the north of England. Both authors were employed in the institution during the conduct of this research. The invitation was distributed to NQTs who had followed both undergraduate and postgraduate

routes. 8 volunteers agreed to participate, and they have signed informed consent. The participants are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Names of participants

Trainees	Teacher training route
Jack	Undergraduate
Michael	Postgraduate
Josh	Postgraduate
Sue	Undergraduate
Amy	Undergraduate
Ameena	Postgraduate
Claire	Postgraduate
Fran	Postgraduate

Pseudonyms were used instead of their actual names and no reference was made to the names of the schools in which they were employed. One focus group which lasted approximately 1 hour was held at the teacher training provider base. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to loosely frame the discussion. One of us acted as moderator of the focus group. The focus group was digitally recorded by the moderator and subsequently transcribed by the second researcher. Data were analysed using a thematic approach.

The focus group was used to broadly explore the following aspects:
-NQTs' understandings of their role
-NQTs' experiences during their induction year
-NQTs' access to professional development
-NQTs sense of identity

Member checking was offered to the participants, but all participants declined this opportunity.

4. Results

4.1. NQT perceptions of their role

The NQTs in this study demonstrated a clear understanding of their own accountability. They had understood that, unlike during their initial teacher training, they were employed by the school and this brought with it a sense of greater accountability. They had a strong sense that they should be held to account for the progress of their pupils and the need for them to demonstrate a strong sense of professionalism:

> *When I started in September I requested pupil progress meetings. As an NQT I wasn't going to get them. It is a decision made by the school that they did not*

want to put further pressure on me as an NQT to discuss the data of their class. But I didn't want to be seen as an NQT - I wanted to be judged like everyone else. (Jack)

Being responsible for upholding my professionalism has been a key part of my role. I would say that this is more important for an NQT than an experienced teacher. *I think you need to show greater professionalism as an NQT as you are just starting out in your career and because you are employed by the school.* (Sue)

First and foremost, my main responsibility is a class teacher. (Amy)

Ameena demonstrated that she was aware of her responsibilities in relation to managing other adults and communicating with other members of the teaching team:

Being a manager of adults is a key part of my role. As an NQT I initially thought would be really difficult. However, I have handled this better than I thought I would. Also, part of my role involves being responsible for communicating effectively with my Key Stage Lead. This includes being responsible and accountable to management. Another key part of my role is to develop good working relationships with parents. (Ameena)

Michael commented that the process of enculturation was important and that fitting in with the school culture and forming good relationships with colleagues was crucial at this early stage of his career:

As flippant as it may sound – you get a sense of what your school is like as a culture and as a whole – it has got nothing to do with your skills of a teacher as far as I am concerned. You have to fit in and get on with people. (Michael)

4.2. Networks of support

The NQTs in this study emphasised the importance of having an effective mentor. They characterised this as someone who was supportive and able to provide constructive feedback on their teaching. They valued both formal and informal support from their mentor and they emphasised the importance of establishing a good relationship with their mentor. They also emphasised the importance of having access to a network of support from other people including teaching assistants, parents, other teachers in the school and their peers:

My NQT Mentor is the Deputy Head Teacher. She has supported me in advising me what I need to be doing in my NQT time. She has been there to observe me and give me ideas for improvement. I have also been supported by the Head Teacher who has also observed me and he has given me feedback and different tasks to do –that has been really helpful. (Josh)

We look at the minutes from the last meeting and look at how we have addressed the actions. We consider next steps as well as checking what is coming up in the school diary, such as reports or data collection. (Claire)

In terms of seeking support from my mentor it is a case of going to see her on a very informal basis - discussing any needs that arise.... if that relationship breaks down then you are not going to succeed during your NQT year. The role of the mentor is very much to help support you and give you advice and nurture you through your first year of teaching. (Fran)

I have been supported by other colleagues within school who I work with in both classrooms – they have all observed me as well. We have a very good working relationship with each other. My Teaching Assistant is brilliant- and I talk to her about all the different things and I ask her for feedback and how I can make things better for the children. In both classes, the TAs are very good. We have good working relationships. (Sue)

In the school, we have another NQT who is the teacher in Year 5. She isn't from the same University. We have our non-contact together. We support each other. (Josh)

I still speak to a few NQTs who were on the PGCE course with me and we share ideas and that can be useful. (Michael)

I suppose that it is just knowing that if I needed to drop an email or a make a phone call- I would get positive support. (Jack)

I kind of thought that the Head Teacher wouldn't be around as much - but that suited me. On placement, it always suited me for my mentor to be that bit further away or not as involved in things just so I could take a bit more control. I have not felt under pressure as such. When I have spoken to other NQTs they have been quite nervous about constantly having their Head Teacher on their backs. (Claire)

Other colleagues have played a part in this in terms of supporting me. We are a very open school and everyone talks to everyone e.g. the Year 5 teacher is the Maths Coordinator and I am always in her classroom discussing Maths with her. (Josh)

The Year 3 teacher carries out a lot of Kagan teaching strategies and she is also very much into outdoor learning - so I liaise with her quite a lot. We have attended courses together on outdoor learning. The Nursery teacher is the special needs coordinator. I am in constant dialogue with her about special needs issues that arise in my classroom. I spend time with the Reception teacher and discuss with her what Year 1 provision should look like, for example, am I doing this at the right time of the year? She is also literacy leader so I spend lots of time talking to her about phonics. (Amy)

4.3. Continuous professional development during the NQT year

The NQTs in this study emphasised the importance of having access to continuous professional development during their induction year. Some of them

had attended a conference hosted by their initial teacher education provider and this was perceived as valuable to their development. Sue valued the Masters course that she had enrolled because of its emphasis on how children learn:

> *I feel that the Masters course has been a key part of my role as an NQT as it has enabled me to look more deeply into how children learn and in what ways children make greater progress. It has also helped me to become more reflective and to look more closely at my own practice.* (Sue)

Other NQTs valued more practical training which provided them with exposure to activities that they might use in their classroom. They appeared to value professional development which supported them in developing active approaches to learning:

> *I took lots of ideas back to the classroom from the NQT Conference and I have tried out loads of ideas with my class in school already e.g. the chocolate bar activity with Reception which was linked to phonics.* (Jack)

> *The activities that I trialled have encouraged my pupils to be more active- and the ideas of what to include in plenaries have been a great help. These activities have given more opportunities to promote quick AfL techniques. I can see more clearly where the children are in terms of their progress. I can then plan the next lesson with more ideas – knowing where the children are up to. In terms of pupil progress, I feel that I have a better knowledge of what to plan which is more suitable to meet their individual needs.* (Claire)

4.4. Raising outcomes for pupils

The NQTs in this study demonstrated a strong sense that their role was to raise pupil progress, thus contributing to school improvement. Michael acknowledged the tensions between accelerating pupils' academic progress and maintaining a commitment to the whole child:

> *… creates a performative culture which makes holistic teaching and learning more challenging.* (Michael)

In contrast Fran emphasised the importance of negotiating the imperative to raise academic standards whilst, at the same time, maintaining a commitment to the whole child:

> *As an NQT I believe enthusiasm and the willingness to learn and absorb ideas from University training and school observations ensure that creativeness is not restricted. It is possible to raise standards and maintain a commitment to the whole child. My children have made good progress this year so far but I have supported them holistically.* (Fran)

Others demonstrated that they had begun to displace their personal values in order to focus their energies on raising children's academic performance.

Ameena had begun to displace her personal commitment to inclusive education and this had started to influence her commitment to teaching as a profession:

> *Having 30 children all needing to make progress is vital. It has been drilled in to us throughout school that progress is key. It feels like its sink or swim and everything rides on the progress that pupils make. This can be challenging as I have several children in my class with special educational needs. Some of these children would be better placed in a special school, despite the fact that I used to be against exclusion. I don't like saying this but I don't think I'll stay in teaching long because it feels like I am not teaching in a way which is true to my beliefs.* (Ameena)

Sue had started to 're-think' her commitment to play-based pedagogy in the early years because she felt that it did not prepare children for the formality of the next phase of their education:

> *The national and school expectations are very high and there is a lot that they need to cover in order to meet the expectations at the end of the year. I was made very aware of these expectations right from the start of my NQT year. As a Year 1 teacher I feel that it needs to be a bit more formal than it is in the Reception class, even though I have always believed passionately in play-based learning in the early years.* (Sue)

5. Discussion

The role of the mentor as pivotal during the NQT year was emphasised by the participants in this study. They emphasised the importance of having access to both formal and informal support from their mentor and the necessity for constructive feedback and target setting. However, they also emphasised the importance of having access to a network of support across the school and a wider support network from their peers who they trained with. They highlighted the importance of having access to support, not solely from qualified teachers but also from teaching assistants and the importance of establishing good relationships with colleagues.

The participants seemed to value professional development courses which provided them with active learning strategies that they could use directly in the classroom. Only one participant was studying a Masters programme in education and she valued the contribution that this had made to her understanding of children's learning. Consequently, the course had enabled her to reflect in greater depth on her own teaching.

The participants demonstrated a strong sense of accountability. They had understood that they were accountable for the progress of their learners and that they were also accountable for their own professionalism. Their sense of accountability was heightened because they were now employed by the school in comparison with their initial teacher training phase when they were simply 'guests' in the school. It was evident that some of them had experienced an

initiation into a standards-driven agenda and this had resulted in some internalising this and displacing their previously held personal teacher values.

It was evident from the data that the NQTs in this study had been initiated into the discourse of performativity that is entrenched within the education system. Ameena's use of the word '*drilled*' suggests that there was a process of indoctrinating these early career teachers into the values and practices of performativity.

The term *performativity* was coined by Lyotard in his thesis entitled *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984). It refers to the emphasis on the use of outcome related performance indicators. These narrow performance indicators are then used to evaluate school effectiveness. School performance is based on pupil *performance* in standardised assessments and made public through the use of league tables and the publishing of inspection ratings. According to Stephen Ball (2003) 'performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change...' (p.216). The *machinery* of performativity was established by the Conservative government in the late 1980s and early 1990s through the introduction of high stake assessment processes, school inspections and national performance indicators. Over the last two decades the language of performativity has been internalised, often without question, by school leaders, teachers, learners and parents. As a totalising discourse, performative values and practices have been unquestionably assimilated into notions of what makes a good teacher or an effective educational institution (Thomas & Loxley, 2007) and there was evidence that this was the case with the early career teachers in this study.

Ball has argued that performative discourses result in 'inauthentic practice' (Ball, 2003: 222) which can have detrimental effects. By acknowledging '… *that it needs to be a bit more formal than it is in the Reception class'*, Sue had already formed the view that play-based learning in the early years was too informal and did not adequately prepare her learners for the formality of the first year of the National Curriculum. Sue had started to re-think her personal values as a teacher; she was beginning to displace her commitment to play-based learning in the early years in favour of more formal learning. It has been argued that teacher identity is not a stable entity but continually reconstructed as a product of conflicting discourses and practices (Day, Ellison and Last *et al.*, 2003; Day, et al., 2006; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985). It is 'always deferred and in the process of becoming- never really, never yet, never absolutely there' (MacLure, 2003: 131). Sue's identity as a teacher appeared to be in a state of flux and she was beginning to internalise a new identity in favour of a new assigned social identity (Snow & Anderson, 1987) which embraces the values of performativty. For Ameena, there was evidence that she had begun to displace her commitment to inclusive practices by demonstrating a degree of resentment towards the children in her class with special educational needs. Michael acknowledged the tensions between maintaining a commitment to the whole child whilst, at the same time, subscribing to the values of performativity. Sadly, Ball (2003) warns us that such values of 'care' have 'no place in the hard world of performativity'

(p.222) and are now redundant. Consequently, Sue, Adam and Ameena had already recognised that in order to survive in their chosen profession it was necessary to displace their personal values in order to focus their energies on maximising children's performance. They had subscribed to being 'deprofessionalised' and 'reprofessionalised' (Seddon, 1997) as they rejected previously held values

Ball's critique powerfully demonstrates ways in which the market, managerialism and performativity in education result in 'potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and learning and for the inner-life of the teacher' (Ball, 2003: 226). In developing his critique, Ball argues that the performative discourse has resulted in increased competition, devolved accountability, incentives and the introduction of new forms of surveillance and monitoring processes designed to ensure that outcomes continually improve. Within performative regimes Ball suggests that 'value replaces values' (p.217) as new performance related values replace previous values of care, cooperation and commitment.   Teachers learn to focus their energies on maximising performance, often displacing their own professional beliefs about education for social justice (Ball, 2003). In turn 'the heart of the educational project is gouged out and left empty…Authenticity is replaced by plasticity' (Ball, 2003: 225).

However, despite this displacement of values, Fran demonstrated that she was committed both to raising pupil performance and meeting the holistic needs of the children in her class. Web and Vulliamy (2006) have demonstrated how teachers are able to subvert, reject and recast the dominant political versions of what it means to be a teacher, thus enabling them to assert their own professional values on their identity. In support Clarke (2008) argues that it is possible for teachers to 'author' their own identities by resisting identities which are undesirable. Thus, identity formation is a continual process of negotiation and 'a potential site of agency' (Clarke, 2008: 187). He argues that teachers have an ethical obligation to reflect on their identities and to engage in identity work by 'claiming' their identity (Clarke, 2008). It seems that Fran's desire to negotiate her own identity within a performative discourse had provided her with a sense of personal agency. Foucault's concept of *transgression* (Foucault, 1977) is useful in considering how teachers can marginally resist the socially assigned identity to maintain a commitment to their personal values as a teacher. in favour. In *Preface to Transgression* (Foucault, 1977) Foucault describes transgression as a momentary crossing of, but not the violation of a limit. Fran maintained a commitment to supporting the whole child alongside raising their academic performance.

It is important that senior leaders in school provide NQTs with an opportunity to negotiate their personal identities as teachers so that they can teach authentically in ways which are true to their personal values. Ameena had considered at such an early stage of her career that she might not remain in the teaching profession. It is important that teachers feel that they have some ownership over the way they teach. Early career teachers should be empowered to experiment in their teaching, to take risks and to form their own teacher

identity whilst, at the same time, demonstrating a commitment to raising academic standards. A sense of agency in relation to their values as a teacher and their approach to teaching should contribute to a sense of fulfilment at work. Indoctrinating early career teachers by drilling the values of performativity is likely to result in teacher attrition.

Although this is a small-scale study, the results have implications for initial teacher education and the professional development of Newly Qualified Teachers. We recommend that courses of initial teacher education give greater emphasis to the accountability pressures that new teachers will experience during their first year of teaching. We also recommend that the induction year is extended over two years which includes access to quality early professional development courses which are designed to promote the skill of critical reflection and exposure to the latest research findings. Courses of early professional development should go beyond providing 'tips for teaching' and should instead be designed to ensure that new teachers are exposed to the latest research evidence on effective pedagogy.

6. Conclusion

The limitations of this research lie in it being a small-scale study based in England. Thus, it is not possible to generalise from the data. Nevertheless, the study provides a useful insight into the lived experiences of Newly Qualified Teachers.

The NQTs in this study had begun to internalise a socially assigned identity of what makes a good teacher in England in the 21st century. They demonstrated a clear understanding of their own accountability and there appeared to be a shift in their teacher values amongst some and restricted agency in relation to their professional identity. They had been initiated into the discourse of performativity which is entrenched across the education system and this had resulted in some displacement of personal values in favour of neoliberalist values. Although there was evidence that is was possible to negotiate personal values with the socially assigned values of what makes a good teacher, this was not evident across all participants and it had resulted, in some cases, to a sense of disempowerment.

Whilst this is a small-scale study, schools that recruit NQTs may need to consider how these early career teachers are supported to maintain a sense of personal agency in relation to their teacher identity. Whilst the need to raise standards in schools is paramount, teachers also need to feel that they have a degree of agency both in relation to their personal educational philosophy and how they teach. The danger of not allowing teachers a sense of agency is that when teachers teach in a way which does not chime with their personal philosophy it results in educational practice which is inauthentic. Whilst it is critical that NQTs understand their role in raising pupils' academic standards, it is also essential that due consideration is also given to pupils' holistic well-being.

Indeed, we argue that maintaining a commitment to the whole child will raise academic standards, not lower them. It is critical that early career teachers have the freedom and space in the curriculum to experiment with pedagogical approaches. This will contribute to the development of their teacher identity, result in more creative approaches to teaching and ultimately raise academic standards. Finally, we support continuous professional development for NQTs and we value greatly the contribution that Masters level professional development can make to teachers' knowledge and their skills in reflection.

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