

Supporting sustainability: The professional learning of beginning teachers in Vanuatu

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The importance of sustaining training for teachers cannot be overestimated. Trained teachers require continual professional development to keep up with changing contexts. Ongoing training is particularly important for beginning teachers as they start their professional journeys. Vanuatu, a small island state in the southwest Pacific, is currently grappling with significant obstacles to providing effective ongoing professional development for its teachers. To ensure children's academic success in Vanuatu, as elsewhere, it is imperative to have well-prepared and proficient teachers who can navigate the complexities of education in a rapidly evolving world. To pursue this matter, the article reports on the findings of an interpretive qualitative case study that makes meaning of the professional learning experiences of new teachers in the Vanuatu context. The study assumes that new teachers' voices, perspectives and motivation are important when investigating professional development. The study objective was to critically explore the professional learning support provided to them in Vanuatu's schools. To this end, seven new teachers' experiences and perceptions of professional learning were complemented by the perceptions of four school principals involved in their support. The findings reveal general satisfaction tempered by a lack of formal feedback and evaluation mechanisms. As a response, the article proposes an induction program contextualised to the local environment and sustained over time as a vital solution to enhance teachers' professional development, thereby positively impacting the learning outcomes of children in the future.

Keywords: Beginning teacher; teacher induction; sustainable education; teacher professional development; schools as learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

This study provides a contextualised exploration of the induction experiences of beginning secondary teachers in the Republic of Vanuatu, emphasising sustainability in education. By aligning with the first objective of Vanuatu's *Ministry of Education and Training Corporate Plan 2013-2017*, which aims to 'improve the quality of education' (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2013), this research addresses the immediate challenges faced by novice teachers and the long-term sustainability of teaching practices. While various aspects of Vanuatu's education system significantly impact educational quality and warrant investigation, this study focused specifically on the transition of beginning teachers into secondary schools and how their early formative experiences foster professional growth within their chosen careers.

Beginning teachers play a crucial role in education, bringing with them their personal and professional identities, pedagogical knowledge, and life experiences (Palmer & Scribner, 2007). However, transitioning from pre-service education to a teaching role can be complex and challenging (Kearney, 2014; Langdon, 2010). Many countries have established induction programs to support beginning teachers. Such programs are continually reviewed to ensure their effectiveness. These programs are essential for achieving quality education because they help new teachers navigate their new roles and apply their knowledge. Currently, there are no such programmes in Vanuatu.

The importance of sustaining ongoing training for teachers cannot be overestimated. This study explored the induction experiences of beginning secondary teachers in Vanuatu, a Pacific country with a dual language education system (French and English medium schools). A qualitative case study was conducted to investigate the perceptions and experiences of new teachers as they transition into secondary schools and develop as professionals in their early careers. Knowing the experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers in Vanuatu of informal induction is extremely useful. Knowledge in this area helps develop structures that can support future beginning teachers in the first years of their careers and perhaps contribute towards their licensing and registration when such formal processes are fully in place. Thus, this study aimed to help secondary school leaders and policymakers understand the experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers. It aimed to enable policymakers to design and implement effective induction programs to support teachers in the profession. Such induction programs are a key to quality education in contexts such as Vanuatu. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the Republic of Vanuatu's aspiration for improved educational quality as stated in corporate plans (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2013, 2022).

VANUATU

The Republic of Vanuatu, formally known as the New Hebrides, is a Pacific archipelago comprising 83 islands. The most recent census records a total population of 272,459 (Vanuatu National Statistic Office, 2016). The population is spread widely over Vanuatu's six provincial regions. Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital on Efate Island, and Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo are the two largest towns. Vanuatu is culturally and linguistically diverse, with over 113 languages (Simons & Fenning, 2017). There are three official languages: colonial English and French, and the local Bislama language, a form of Melanesian Pidgin. Vanuatu is described as the most vulnerable place on earth because of its location and small land mass in relation to natural hazards (Wele, 2015). Climate events, including drought, coastal erosion and flooding, occur in the Vanuatu islands and adversely affect citizens. Most recently, Vanuatu has been described as 'having the highest disaster risk worldwide' (Day et al., 2019, p. 6).

Natural events, such as cyclones and volcanic eruptions, are highly disruptive in the Vanuatu context and considerably affect the provision of education. Regardless of natural events, teachers must ensure that they complete the syllabus each year because all students have to sit an examination at the end of the school year to move on to the next level of study. Teachers, especially in rural areas, must show resilience and initiative without close support. These circumstances place great emphasis on the professional learning of beginning teachers.

Education in Vanuatu

Like other Pacific Island countries, formal classroom-based education for the Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu began with the arrival of Christian Missionaries in the 1800s (Siegel, 1996). The first curriculum aimed to provide basic literacy and numeracy. It was Western-oriented and

supported Bible reading so that conversion to Christianity would be easier (Hindson, 1995; Sanga & Walker, 2005). In 1906, the governance of Vanuatu fell under the joint control of France and England as the New Hebrides Condominium (Crowley, 1990). The joint colonial governments extended the curriculum (Lingam et al., 2014) beyond its religious origins. In 1980, Vanuatu gained political independence, forming the modern Republic of Vanuatu. In 1983, the Ministry of Education began using the *School Administration Act* to administer schools (Tarosa, 2013). The education system is currently administered under the *2014 Education Act No. 9 of the Republic of Vanuatu*.

Politically independent Vanuatu inherited a dual system of education from the period of French and English colonial rule (Siegel, 1996) and many philosophies and ideologies of governance and education from the former colonial system. Religious practices and leadership remain closely connected to school practices and leadership, and it is often the case that schoolteachers support or lead community and Church activities.

Because teachers in Vanuatu's primary and secondary schools are required to teach using French or English and not Bislama, the local lingua franca, Ni-Vanuatu teachers have to deliver education in a non-dominant language. Teachers may be unable to speak the indigenous languages of the students in their classes. Students have to learn the educational content and the language of instruction simultaneously. When education is delivered in a non-dominant language, there are recognised negative consequences for academic success. (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2016). Despite this, Vanuatu's dual system of Anglo-French education persists. This situation places great significance on appropriately preparing new teachers, most of whom, especially in the primary sector, are graduates of the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE).

PREPARING TEACHERS

International experience

School organisation and induction programs can impact teachers' practices and learning (Buchanan & McEwen, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2007). Induction is a crucial phase in a teacher's career, leading to their integration into a professional community and continuous learning (Tickle, 2000). Many countries have invested in induction programs to improve teacher development, teaching quality and student success (Massey, 2016; Shannon, 2023). The literature highlights the significance of professional learning, particularly during the induction stage, for motivating and supporting teachers throughout their careers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Grudnoff, 2007; Main, 2009).

Beginning teachers play a significant role in the educational landscape, bringing formative experiences that impact their personal and professional identities and pedagogical knowledge from their initial teacher education (Palmer & Scribner, 2007). Teacher identity involves understanding oneself as a teacher and seeking, constructing and reconstructing meanings about oneself and how to be interconnected with others (Gibbs, 2006; Palmer & Scribner, 2007). Beginning teachers also bring life experiences into their teaching roles and are expected to learn from their new setting.

Shifting from pre-service education into a teaching role in a school is extremely complex and challenging (Kearney, 2014; Langdon, 2010) as beginning teachers seek to make sense of themselves in their new context and to find ways to apply and extend their existing and developing knowledge. Many countries have established induction programs to support beginning teachers through this complex time and help new teachers address their challenges.

Many researchers believe that the induction of beginning teachers is a core element in achieving quality education (Cameron et al., 2007; Hattie, 2003; Kearney, 2014).

Vanuatu experience

Reflecting on international experiences, three main areas of teacher preparation in Vanuatu require attention: induction, mentoring and policies that frame support. Induction programs with professional development, mentoring and a reduced teaching load can help new teachers adjust to their first post. However, there is a lack of consistency in professional development opportunities for beginning teachers in Vanuatu, with no specific policies to support them beyond the initial recruitment phase. This can lead to ‘transition shock’ (Corcoran, 1981) and negatively impact teachers and their development. Access to information, training and professional development is crucial to new teachers’ success, but currently, these are challenging and inconsistent aspects of the Vanuatu education system.

Introducing a mentoring system within schools could be a valuable initiative for supporting beginning teachers’ professional development. As with other countries, Vanuatu’s beginning teachers form their professional identities through a combination of home and school experiences. A formal mentorship system could guide them during their early professional years. However, mentoring for new teachers in Vanuatu is currently ad hoc or non-existent. Without mentoring, beginning teachers in Vanuatu are sold short.

Finally, beginning teachers in Vanuatu lack formal policies of support and protection. Instead, they are expected to be personally resilient. A policy that prioritises teachers’ professional development, including that of beginning teachers, is needed to address this situation. This policy should provide consistency in treatment across schools and be accompanied by professional learning programs implemented by the Teaching Service Commission. Additionally, educators require professional development in educational leadership to implement support and protection programs effectively. This study provides pointers to solutions in the area of early teacher development for Vanuatu.

THE RESEARCH

Given the context of education in Vanuatu generally and that of new Ni-Vanuatu teachers specifically, research into beginning teachers’ entry into the teaching profession is vital. This study captured the journeys of beginning teachers and their principals as the teachers transitioned into their first teaching role in a Vanuatu secondary school. It provides valuable information about what might be in the gaps between induction, mentoring and support. This study specifically identifies required informal induction elements and, consequently, proposes a contextually appropriate model to better support beginning teachers in Vanuatu. The research focused on secondary education, but much of the information will likely apply to the primary sector.

Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) work on teacher induction has been foundational in understanding the critical role of comprehensive support systems for novice educators. Her seminal studies outlined that effective teacher induction is not merely about orientation but involves a structured process that enhances teachers’ professional development and teaching efficacy. Feiman-Nemser (2001) notes that teacher induction serves multiple functions: it aids in the transition into the profession, fosters ongoing learning and development, and ultimately promotes student achievement. Central to her theory is that new teachers benefit most from mentorship, collaboration and reflective practices, which collectively facilitate their adjustment and growth

in an increasingly complex educational landscape. By emphasising the importance of community and collaboration, Feiman-Nemser advocates for induction programs that not only support teachers' emotional and professional needs but also align with broader systemic goals of educational quality and equity. Thus, this study is needed to enhance the quality of education and support a more sustainable system of teacher professionalism.

Knowing the experiences and perceptions that beginning secondary teachers in Vanuatu have of informal induction is extremely useful. The knowledge can support the development of structures to help future beginning teachers in the first years of their careers. It can, perhaps, contribute towards their licensing and registration when such formal processes are fully in place. This research helps secondary school leaders and policymakers understand the experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers and enables them to design and implement effective induction programs to support teachers into the teaching profession. Ultimately, the aim is to contribute to the Republic of Vanuatu's aspiration for improved educational quality, as stated in corporate plans (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2013, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

An interpretive research paradigm involving a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology was used to ground the study. The research explored, made meaning of and theorised the perceptions of beginning secondary teachers' experiences (complemented by principals' experiences) during the early years of teaching to find strengths and solutions. Meanings are constructed by beginning secondary teachers as they engage with the world and view and interpret their world experiences (Crotty, 1998). The study mainly focused on co-constructing knowledge of the induction experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers and their principals.

The research methodology resembles an intrinsic case study because it looked at the early stage of the beginning secondary teacher's professional journey. The first year or two of teaching provided the temporal boundaries of the study and mirrored the gap into which effective mentoring might be inserted. The University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research Regulations guided the study. The research was conducted at several school sites as a collective case study to address the ethical issue of identifiability. The findings are reported collectively (and using pseudonyms) to protect participants' identities.

The study involved a small number (7) of beginning teachers who graduated from the VITE (now known as the School of Education for the National University of Vanuatu) and the four principals of the schools to which they were assigned. The key data were collected in two phases (at the beginning and end of the year) using interviews. Reflective journaling and document analysis were used to make observations and support understandings of the beginning teachers' experiences. The work of Saldaña (2016) was used to make sense of the data for the initial data coding and integration of the ideas through a cyclic coding process into categories and emerging themes. In turn, these understandings were used to formulate recommendations regarding induction in Vanuatu.

FINDINGS

The selected findings illustrate the balance between challenges and opportunities understood by beginning teachers in the study. The selection aims to ground future initiatives to better support beginning teachers while acknowledging the strengths these teachers bring with them to the profession.

Challenges

There is a plethora of literature on the challenges beginning teachers experience in the field. These challenges refute the impression that beginning teachers may have that teaching is an easy job (Tickle, 2014). Education in Vanuatu presents challenges generally experienced by beginning teachers and those unique to each context. Here are two examples of challenges that are centred on resources and time.

Accessing teaching resources

Accessing the necessary resources to meet curriculum requirements was a common challenge for beginning teachers in this study. Resource limitations are broadly experienced in schools in Vanuatu—impoverished resourcing impacts most subject areas, especially in the more remote islands of the nation. In particular, science is an equipment-intensive subject and science teaching resources in many schools are limited. Sheena spoke about the challenges with resources that she faced:

I did not feel like I was going to be able to teach all these classes because there were no resources. So, it was another burden for me to find my own resources to teach the classes . . . Some of my resources I had to ask for from teachers at . . . and . . . schools. For science I looked through the resources I had, and did research on internet, and then gave the summary notes to my students.

Sheena was fortunate to be in school early in the school year, so she managed to identify the resource challenges and worked to resolve them. However, she also highlighted that teaching science relies largely on evidence observed by the human senses, and her approach of simply giving summary notes may not have been highly effective compared to more engaging and hands-on learning experiences.

Kylie also commented on resources and worked out a solution:

I teach English years 9 and 10. That was so hard for me because there were no resources at this school. So, I had to wait for a week or two. I called other schools nearby for their resources to get them and [make] photocopies.

In his context, Ray described his struggle to access technology:

Another challenge is that there are not enough computers to use for lesson preparation and the internet. Many teachers do their work on the computer and they do not have enough of them (computers) for us all.

Teachers with experience may have developed resource banks and nurtured relationships, enabling them to access resources such as computers more easily. New teachers enter the profession without these advantages and support, and it may take time and a great deal of effort to develop the materials and networks required.

Time constraints

Completing the year's syllabus is vital in Vanuatu, where the education system has an examination-driven curriculum. Time for learning becomes an important factor in fulfilling expectations each year. However, the beginning teachers in this study revealed several challenges with time.

Beginning teacher participants were particularly impacted by the time available for teaching and learning in a year when schools closed early due to political expedience. Viviane described the challenge of completing her year's work:

This year is quite short due to the mini South Pacific Games. We were really rushing as we were approaching the end of the year. It came to a time where I had to stop planning my lessons because time was too short. We were squeezing everything together . . . Exams were also coming up. We were working against time.

In an examination-driven education system, examinations serve as gatekeepers to the next level of student education.

Sheena reported her time pressure more generally:

I found out that I had not done much when semester was about to end. I covered the term one topics but I did not go through the term two topics, because the students learn very slowly and I have to follow their pace . . . Another thing that drags us back is that we have to copy notes on the blackboard and wait for students to . . . copy all the notes. You go through the notes with them, then give them exercises to do. Doing this takes up a lot of time.

The pace of student work is critical in losing valuable teaching and learning time. Pace is related to the lack of resources because handwriting teaching and learning materials are time-consuming.

Ray shared how logistics affected time pressures that impacted his work:

We do not have enough time to run extra classes as some students travel to school daily from different villages and [use] varied forms of transport . . . [D]uring the two weeks break, it took some students a week or two extra to return to school the next term. Therefore, we did not have enough time to complete the syllabus.

Beginning teachers are surprised by time constraints. While more experienced teachers may be prepared for such happenings and plan accordingly, the new VITE graduates were not prepared nor supported to be prepared.

Strengths and enablers

Three of the four principal participants indicated they did not provide much professional support for their beginning teachers. The beginning teachers confirmed this in their accounts of their first years of teaching. Despite the lack of support, the beginning teachers did not leave their teaching duties entirely. Instead, they remained until the end of their first year of teaching. This section looks at the factors that supported beginning teachers through their early careers as they tried to find ways to enable them to survive.

Accessing and forming effective professional relationships

The Head of Department (HOD) role is a leadership role that most secondary schools in Vanuatu include in their school structure. The principal participants used HODs to take care of their beginning teachers. As most schools use HODs for informal orientation for new staff, beginning teachers acknowledged the role of HODs in helping them settle into their schools and demonstrated an understanding of the HODs' responsibilities. Thus, the beginning teachers called on HODs when they needed their help with teaching or other areas. Viviane elaborated on this point using an incident that she encountered which was quite sensitive:

I don't know but I think I followed the procedure by taking the first step from me as the subject teacher to the HOD. The HOD will decide where to go from there . . . To me I would say, when situations arise, the best thing to do is to talk with the student and inform the HOD, that would be the first step. Then it would be out of my hands.

Viviane revealed her understanding of line management within her school, which is a vital development for a beginning teacher. Beginning teachers need to know which door to knock on when a difficult situation arises.

For some small schools, beginning teachers are the HODs themselves, so they do not have the privilege of working alongside an experienced HOD. Schools may regard beginning teachers with VITE qualifications as more educated and capable than untrained and unqualified teachers filling vacant positions. Sheena, who was given the role of HOD in her small school, needed to work successfully with other HODs:

For the HOD [role], we always discuss strategy—ways to run interesting classes . . . we looked at the examination graph sent from the Examination Office in Port Vila. We found out that our students are very weak in mathematics.

Sheena's experience revealed the importance of working collaboratively with other HODs. She was able to continue her growth as a teacher by learning from and being informally mentored by others who were in similar roles. At the same time, asking a beginning teacher to perform an HOD role is a significant expectation of someone so new to the profession.

Individual professional learning and development

While challenging, accessing information and furthering professional development was an essential element of success for a beginning teacher. The beginning teachers in this study spent time reading when they found things difficult, and there was no one to help them. Sheena talks about reading to enhance her independence as a teacher:

I realized I have to read more so I do not depend on my colleague, and now the students are more comfortable with me and so I am teaching the class alone.

While her colleague taught the remaining hours, Sheena was uncomfortable teaching just a few hours of her subject with a senior class in her school. Reading helped Sheena improve her self-confidence, enabling her to teach the class herself, even at a senior level.

Other participants described similar experiences of using reading to better survive the challenges of being a beginning teacher. Ray commented that:

[A]s it is my first year, sometimes the topics are new to me, and I spend more time reading and trying to find more information.

Beginning teachers revealed that reading from among the schools' limited resources or going back to their VITE lectures and books was of great help in their first year of teaching. In the face of minimal professional support, reading helped beginning teachers to teach unfamiliar topics.

Engaging with colleagues

The beginning teachers highlighted the importance of building effective relationships with their school colleagues. David described how his colleagues were important role models for him as he developed as a teacher:

I learnt from my colleagues that time management is very important. In the afternoon, after class they would come into the staffroom and prepare their lessons for [the next day]. That is what I saw in them, so I tried to copy or imitate how they did things to help my teaching.

The actions of more experienced colleagues informed David's activities, which helped him in his teaching.

Peers from VITE who were now teaching colleagues were helpful when the beginning teachers approached them. When they first arrived at their new schools, some beginning teachers were uncomfortable asking their new colleagues questions. Instead, they used Facebook and Messenger to contact their VITE colleagues in other schools to discuss their problems. In this way, they found answers to questions regarding their teaching. Kylie recounted how she communicated with her VITE peers:

I was thinking about my VITE friends (colleagues), but they were not here. They were in other schools far away from me. So, for me to need help, I just have to call or contact them on Facebook chat, asking them, 'Can you help me with how to teach this topic or that?' When I need help, I just have to contact them.

Beginning teachers leave initial teacher education with self-concerns, and when they arrive at their schools, they tend to have high expectations of their students and themselves (Fuller & Brown, 1975). Having advice from a more experienced colleague or friend may become very helpful when expectations are not met.

Using the internet

In a context where professional support was sometimes lacking for beginning teachers, technology became a form of support for some. Lucille described how she used technology to support her teaching:

Within these two years, we did not have much material, so I tried to download [resources] from internet and also improvise a lot for my experiments

Lucille was in her second year of teaching. Having experienced a lack of teaching resources in her school, Lucille learned how to conduct an experiment by watching videos on YouTube. She used videos to teach herself and showed them to her students to help them understand science concepts. Sheena, another beginning teacher, reported:

When I found that I could not answer or help them (students and staff in the Maths, Agriculture & Basic Science (MABs) department meeting), I just went on the internet to find solutions.”

Kylie also used online resources:

I did some research on internet to find ways to teach. The internet helps me so I can teach better inside the classroom, as I am teaching a senior class.

In Kylie's school, the senior class refers to years 9 and 10. As the senior class's subject teacher, Kylie was in a leadership position. She was the teacher that other teachers could go to for help; however, Kylie herself needed extra help as a beginning teacher to teach this senior level in her first year. She used the internet to get information to aid her teaching as there were no other senior teachers to whom she could turn.

All the above beginning teachers identified the internet as a form of help. The internet has been important for these participants, scattered as they are through Vanuatu's islands in their first year(s) of teaching. It is a way to sustain professional and personal relationships and access teaching material and information to develop their pedagogical content knowledge.

Using reflective journals

In this research project, reflective journals were given to each beginning teacher at the end of their phase one interview. Within the research, the purpose of the reflective journal was to serve

as a data generation method. Many beginning teachers commented on how the reflective journals helped them professionally through the early year(s) of their teaching career.

David commented on the value of the journal to his development as a teacher, particularly regarding developing reflective teaching practice, but also with leadership:

The reflective journal helped by making me reflect and improve. So yes, it helped a lot with my teaching inside the classroom, and it also helped me with my responsibilities and roles.

David found the journal helpful as he performed his teaching duties and Deputy Principal responsibilities. The opportunity to reflect on his decisions and lessons was valuable to him through his first year of teaching.

Nelsa, one of the second-year beginning teachers, made this concluding remark about the professional value of the reflective journal:

Before we finish, I just want to say thank you for the reflective journal that you have given me. After I have worked with the journal, I have improved with my teaching and learning. I just wish that other teachers can also have this. There are some teachers in this school who really want this, and they want me to print [the journal prompts] and give it out to them so that they can have access to this, and they can also do their own reflective journals and reflect on their own lessons and see how they can help the classes that they're teaching.

Although intended as a method of data generation, the reflective journals clearly impacted the individual beginning teachers and, beyond this, some of their colleagues, who saw the professional value of the thoughtful engagement with one's teaching practice that the journals provided.

Other enablers

The beginning teachers in this study mentioned a few other enablers that had an impact. Involvement in extra-curricular activities supported the beginning teachers to embrace their new roles. Sports is positioned as an extra-curricular activity within the Vanuatu education curriculum. Within the hierarchy of the curriculum, it is not given the same status as English or Mathematics. In secondary schools, it is regarded as a non-core subject. Despite this, Ray shared how taking part in sports helped him in his teaching:

I have attended sports programs and it helped me . . . attending sports programs in school and out of school made me able to organize. I can now organize sports activities, and give advice to students on the playground. I have also learnt [new information] from some of the meetings that we attended.

Ray found that being involved in sports improved his organisational skills. Sports also helped him develop positive and trusting relationships with his students and other colleagues involved in sports. He developed skills he could not develop while at VITE, thus broadening his knowledge of how he would deal with students in different situations.

There was no specific professional support offered to the beginning teachers by schools or higher authorities within the Ministry of Education and Training during the research period. However, two participants mentioned training that consisted of helpful elements. Nelsa described an ad hoc training session that she attended with some Australian educators passing through the region:

So far there have been no workshop or training, but I remember the time when there was a yacht that came over. There were some expatriates from Australia who came over and went into one of these classrooms (in Nelsa's school) and talked about how they teach some

concepts in Maths . . . about how we can get students to understand the particular concept. That was helpful to me.

Nelsa commented that the talk, which was just an hour long, was helpful to her as a mathematics teacher.

Kylie also described attending a workshop:

I attended a workshop because they appointed me to be the Assistant Academic Principal for the school. All Academic Principals attended this workshop . . . They (workshop attendees) were reminded about how to work, and they discussed ways to help schools . . . After that workshop, when we came back, we had to inform other teachers about it. We are all trying to work on what my colleague and I learned at the workshop.

Although very new in the job, this leadership position opened up an opportunity for Kylie to engage in professional learning that she found personally useful in her first year as a beginning teacher. The appointment of junior staff to leadership positions in schools is not new in the Vanuatu context, especially in smaller schools in more remote areas.

Summary

The findings presented here revealed that beginning teachers experienced various challenges in their first years of teaching and coped by using various enablers. When faced with inadequate resources, a school year that for some beginning teachers was shortened at both ends by a late arrival and then by an early closure to accommodate a regional sporting event, the beginning teachers experienced feelings of isolation and frustration. They struggled to manage their student learning and behaviour. Difficulties in the classroom were exacerbated by the sometimes-significant additional responsibilities assigned to each beginning teacher. In the face of these challenges, the beginning teachers in this study successfully employed various strategies to help them survive and make sense of their new teaching, administration and leadership roles. Through their first years of teaching, the beginning teachers experienced the perception of professional development. Whether the actions taken by the beginning teachers positively impacted their teaching practice and enhanced their professional development is an important new question that has emerged from the findings of this research project. Having presented the key findings from the study, I now turn to a discussion of the findings.

DISCUSSION

The findings clearly show that the Vanuatu education system expects a lot from its beginning teachers. This includes the two key areas reported here: accessing materials in contexts where these are in short supply or non-existent, managing time, and completing courses in contexts where decisions about annual timetables and interruptions, scheduled or otherwise, are not in beginning teachers' hands. On top of these challenges is the potential for natural disasters beyond anyone's control. The educational literature argues that pre-service training should not be the end of a teacher's professional learning, and there is evidence that the professional learning of a teacher should include pre-service education, induction and then continuous professional learning development (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). The findings suggest that in the absence of much formal help of this nature, beginning teachers in Vanuatu seek their own solutions and training. This includes accessing professional relationships within the school hierarchy, engaging with colleagues—often known to them through VITE and contacted through social media, personally directed reading as professional development, and the internet as a source of information and resources.

Despite these evident strengths and enablers, the advice of Feiman-Nemser (2003) is valid. She cautions that ‘if proper support for . . . [beginning teacher] learning is not provided, they may leave teaching or stay clinging to practices and attitudes that help them survive but not serve the education needs of students’ (p. 26). This may be true for beginning teachers who depend on their own agency to survive their first year of teaching and who may revert to how they were taught in school. While the individual efforts of teachers in the study can certainly be praised, it is evident that there is no system in place to evaluate the result of their efforts.

Monitoring the performance of beginning teachers is important in supporting the development of skills, the effective creation of resources and time management. Most of the participants in this study did not have their professional performance evaluated by any senior authority during their year of teaching, so whatever strengths they displayed were not measured against outcomes or placed as part of a developmental journey by a skilled observer. Thus, while they could find material and seek advice, the wider context of teaching and learning was not addressed by a more experienced professional.

However, all the participants were satisfied with their achievements in the classroom. This is where Vanuatu needs to be cautious. Beginning teachers may successfully reproduce practices that they are familiar with or take advice on practice from well-meaning peers, but these practices may not necessarily be helpful to student learning. Kagan (1992) cautions that if beginning teachers repeat the same practice throughout their teaching career, they may not be as effective as teachers who go through appropriate induction programs and continuous professional development. Thus, Ni-Vanuatu students, who are the nation's future, may bear the consequences of poor teaching (Knowles, 1988; Ryan, 1986).

In 2018, the Vanuatu Education Support Programme reported that ‘while student[s] would benefit immensely from input of effective teachers throughout the instruction process and can be a source of inspiration and motivation for students, identifying such teachers in the context of Vanuatu remains a huge challenge’ (VESP, 2018, p. 2). This study's findings help us understand the scarcity of inspiring and motivating teachers in a situation where beginning teachers are essentially left to themselves. Vanuatu teachers are not supported after graduating from their initial teacher education institution. While the beginning teachers in this study revealed that they wanted to continue to learn, the learning space and human resources were not always provided to them.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has implications for several players in the field of teacher preparation in Vanuatu and beyond. Locally, implications involve the creation of training pathways, teacher induction, and the development of policy by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) in Vanuatu—linked to the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) and, regionally, the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP).

The first implication based on the findings of this study is the value of formal professional learning pathways for beginning teachers in Vanuatu. This must be considered an important priority for Vanuatu's education system. Formal induction programmes that lead new teachers to fully integrate into their professional community (Kearney, 2013) are vital to addressing the gap identified in this work and echoed by the 2018 VESP report cited above. An induction programme may help to ease the transition shock that beginning teachers face and potentially allow beginning teachers to achieve more in their classrooms than simply survive their first year. The lack of formal induction programs mandated by the MoET means that professional

development and relationship building are ad hoc and may simply involve reproducing an education system that has documented poor outcomes.

Secondly, understanding education in Vanuatu needs to shift towards recognising the importance of induction for beginning teachers, which needs to have several elements, including, in skeletal form:

- A thorough understanding of the school context conveyed through a full orientation
- A manageable workload appropriate for their entry into the profession
- Supportive and high-quality input from an Associate Teacher or mentor allows them to form relationships, develop critical professional skills and improve their teaching practices
- Monitoring to ensure that the quality of education provided by teachers and the associated educational outcomes for students are improving
- Access to resources adequate for the teaching they are expected to conduct and/or support to design effective resources for educational purposes

A third implication is that while the agency of all individuals in Vanuatu's high-risk natural environment is essential, in the educational context, this agency needs to be recognised, valued and managed rather than left to chance. The positive experiences beginning teachers have had through this study of reflective journaling suggest the potential of processes that encourage self-knowledge and could form the basis of a way forward under supervision.

A further implication is that formal induction programmes should be mandated by the MoET in Vanuatu and designed with the leadership of the TSC. Utilising the elements discussed above would benefit beginning teachers, school communities, and the educational system in Vanuatu, more generally, where improving educational quality is a primary objective. Feiman-Nemser (2012) claims that induction when viewed as a longer-term professional development activity within a school, can positively impact the entire teaching staff. She notes that 'professional communities are strengthened as teachers across experience levels work together to improve their teaching and their students' learning' (p. 163). As observed by Tucker (2019), 'you cannot produce the improvements needed in student performance unless you improve the teaching skills of your current teachers and fully support and make the best use of the new teachers you will want to hire' (p. 139).

A final implication of this study, joint action, has already begun to be enacted. From 2023, the MoET, through the EQAP and TSC, have worked on induction by developing a policy on Teacher Development and induction of beginning teachers is included as a component within the policy. A team from EQAP, TSC, MoET, and the author have further developed a draft induction manual that should be piloted next year. Hopefully, progress in this important area acknowledges the balance of issues experienced by beginning teachers and the existing strengths and enablers they display and matches their struggles and enterprise with centrally organised support. In this way, education in Vanuatu will be more sustainable, and the children well-served.

CONCLUSION

This article provides insights from a study examining the experiences and perceptions of novice teachers in Vanuatu as they embarked on their teaching careers. The findings indicate that all participants encountered significant challenges upon entering the profession but demonstrated resilience in overcoming these obstacles. While this resilience is commendable, it highlights a critical gap that Vanuatu must address by implementing a more sustainable initiative,

specifically a structured teacher induction program, which other countries have successfully adopted. By adopting such a program, the performance of teachers is likely to improve, leading to enhanced student outcomes and ultimately fulfilling the primary objective of the MoTE's Corporate Plan.

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