

COMMENT

## Why investing in early-career teachers is priceless

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THIS year, World Teachers' Day – celebrated on October 5 – emphasised collaboration under the theme "Recasting teaching as a collaborative profession".

Research indicates that early-career teachers in South Africa face many contextual challenges, particularly in low socio-economic contexts. This is exacerbated by not always receiving support and guidance from more experienced teachers and senior management.

Inclusive education – the inclusion of all students, regardless of their abilities, in mainstream classrooms, emphasising diversity and individualised support – has long been recognised as a fundamental human right internationally. In South Africa it is also regarded as significant in the pursuit of eradicating inequalities of the past.

However, despite several reforms, policies and documents that shape them, the legacy of apartheid left deep-rooted inequalities in our educational system. The unequal educational landscape is littered with challenges that early-career teachers face as they struggle to provide quality teaching and support, particularly in low socio-economic contexts. These teachers are often left to carry the weight of implementing inclusive practices with limited preparation and support.

Recent research by one of us draws on the voices of early-career teachers navigating inclusive education in under-resourced schools. What emerged is both encouraging and unsettling. While teachers are deeply committed to their learners, they feel underprepared, overwhelmed, and undersupported. This raises crucial concerns on how early-career teachers are prepared to translate theory into practice.

National and international research shows that despite being trained in inclusive education, they often struggle to bridge the gap between their theoretical knowledge and the realities of the classroom. They feel isolated and overwhelmed because they do not receive enough structured support when they begin their teaching careers.

This gap presents significant difficulties for teachers working in schools in low socio-economic areas where resources and support may be limited.

Too often, policy debates on inclusive education take place in boardrooms, detached from the classroom realities where policies are meant to play out. In a recent paper, we highlight the experiences of early-career teachers, underscoring the daily struggles of those tasked with implementing inclusive practices.

Our study shows that teachers feel confident in what they learned in theory, support structures, a diverse classroom, and their ability to modify and adapt the curriculum, but powerless when having to put these skills into practice.

The disconnect between pre-service training and the reality of the classroom emerged as a recurring theme. For example, teachers knew the principles of tailored teaching but lacked concrete strategies to implement them when faced with a class of 40 learners, limited resources, and no teaching assistant. It is also acknowledged that the systemic challenges identified, such as large class sizes, inadequate resources, poor parental involvement, are not new.

Furthermore, these committed early-career teachers explained the social and emotional struggles they experience teaching in under-resourced schools. Many expressed guilt about failing learners who struggle, frustration at inadequate support, and anxiety about surviving

in the profession.

While good training programmes are essential to the profession, training alone cannot compensate for schools with no remedial teachers, no psychosocial services, and no ongoing professional development and support.

International studies have shown that early-career teachers are most likely to leave the profession within their first five years if they feel unsupported. Research has also indicated that a collaborative approach within the teaching profession has many advantages. One advantage is that teachers become more confident in supporting struggling learners.

We know that learners' needs are complex, and these are even greater in low socio-economic contexts. It is thus clear that collaboration is key to providing much-needed support to learners.

Unlike professions such as social work and physiotherapy, new teachers receive little to no organised support throughout their first year. They are practically left to "sink or swim".

Internationally, there is a move toward providing mentorship to new graduates before they are given full teacher status. In countries such as Scotland and England, for example, new graduates are novice teachers until they meet specific requirements. Research in South Africa shows that once student teachers qualify, they are granted full teacher status and may register with the South African Council of Educators.

Against this background, we call on the Department of Basic Education to implement a comprehensive induction and mentorship model for early-career teachers.

This formalised mentorship programme should pair early-career teachers with experienced mentors for at least their first two years. These mentors should provide classroom-based coaching, model different strategies and offer emotional support. In addition, district-based support teams must become more visible and proactive in their support to early-career teachers.

We further recommend that senior teachers collaboratively develop a tailored framework for support through shared meaning-making processes and dialogues. This approach will allow for the development of school-specific and practical frameworks that address the unique challenges faced within a specific school.

What South Africa urgently needs is a systemic approach: one that integrates strong training, structured mentorship, functional support teams, and policy accountability.

If we fail to act, we risk perpetuating a cycle where early-career teachers feel abandoned, learners with barriers to learning remain marginalised, and inclusive education is more of an ideal than a lived reality.

Collaboration through mentorship and support for early-career teachers can strengthen their professional identity and improve educational outcomes of so many children in South Africa's post-apartheid, yet still very unequal educational system. We must invest in our teachers. The real question is: can we afford not to?

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COMMITTED early-career teachers feel underprepared, overwhelmed, and undersupported, say the writers. | Independent Media Archives