

Departmental heads' perceptions of novice teachers' positive and negative characteristics

¹Peter Babajide Oloba, ²Monicah Gao Motlhabane & ³Batsirai Rejoice Tsedura

Abstract

Novice teachers are crucial to shaping the teaching and learning culture in schools, yet their integration into the profession often presents both challenges and opportunities. While existing research has largely focused on their limitations, such as inexperience, burnout, and difficulty applying theory to practice, few studies offer a balanced view of their strengths and weaknesses. This study explores departmental heads' perceptions of novice teachers in South African public schools. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, it employed a qualitative, phenomenological design. Ten departmental heads with at least five years of supervisory experience were purposively selected and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Findings revealed that novice teachers often show enthusiasm, technological savviness, idealism, and a strong willingness to learn. However, they also struggle with time management, assessment skills, overwhelming workloads, professional competence, and ethical conduct. The study recommends structured mentorship, targeted professional development, support for emotional and time management, and performance monitoring systems. These strategies could improve novice teacher integration, enhance retention, and promote school improvement.

Keywords: *departmental heads, novice teachers, positive characteristics, professional curiosity, teacher development, time management*

Article History:

Received: July 9, 2025

Accepted: August 22, 2025

Revised: August 21, 2025

Published online: August 31, 2025

Suggested Citation:

Oloba, P.B., Motlhabane, M.G. & Tsedura, B.R. (2025). Departmental heads' perceptions of novice teachers' positive and negative characteristics. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 6(3), 269-303. <https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353252>

About the authors:

¹Corresponding author. PhD. Lecturer, Department of Languages, Cultural Studies and Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg. Email: olobapeter4u@gmail.com

²PhD. Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Department of Education Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg. Email: monicahmot@gmail.com

³Med Student, Department of Education Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg. Email: rejoicebatsirai@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Novice teachers play a crucial role in the development of a school's teaching and learning culture. They are generally referred to as individuals with five or fewer years of teaching experience (Mbhele, 2024; Makoa & Segalo, 2021). However, other scholars argue that the number of years of service required to be considered a novice teacher may vary and can extend beyond five years. Stewart and Jansky (2022) assert that the time it takes for a teacher to move beyond the novice stage differs significantly, with some becoming effective in under a year, while others require more than five years. Similarly, Dyosini (2024) found that some teachers needed over five years to transition beyond the novice phase, whereas others became proficient in less than a year. The limited experience that novice teachers possess can affect their confidence, classroom management abilities, and decision-making skills, factors essential for fostering effective learning (Felisilda, 2024).

In the South African context, statistics reveal that at least 50% of novice teachers are considering quitting the profession within the next ten years, 8% in the preceding year, due to workload and stress (BusinessTech, 2025). Additionally, 54% reportedly leave because of the lack of teaching resources and inadequate school leadership support (Nemaston, 2020). These figures show the high attrition rate among novice teachers, which is largely attributed to the numerous challenges they face in their early careers. Consequently, much of the existing research focuses on these challenges, such as lack of mentorship, emotional burnout, and difficulty translating theory into practice (Lomi & Mbato, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024; Makoa & Segalo, 2021). While these studies are valuable, they contribute to a deficit-orientated narrative that highlights the struggles of novice teachers while overlooking their positive contributions to the school environment. Novice teachers also bring valuable attributes such as enthusiasm, innovation, openness to new methodologies, and a willingness to learn (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022), an area that receives relatively limited attention in the literature.

This study adopts a novel dual-perspective approach by exploring both the positive and negative characteristics of novice teachers, an area that remains under-researched. A balanced focus is rare and valuable, as it moves beyond dominant deficit-focused discourses to include the potential contributions novice teachers make to school improvement. These attributes, if recognised and nurtured, can significantly contribute to learner success and the overall development of the school. By examining both strengths and weaknesses, the study aims to present a holistic understanding of novice teachers, which can help inform more nuanced and

effective support strategies. Understanding both aspects is critical, as the current one-sided narrative limits school leaders', mentor teachers', and policymakers' ability to develop support mechanisms that both leverage strengths and address developmental needs.

Furthermore, after an extensive literature review, this study found that few existing studies examine the characteristics of novice teachers from the perspectives of experienced school leaders, particularly departmental heads. Existing research, such as that by Sydnor et al. (2024) and Allen (2024), mainly presents the perspectives of novice teachers themselves, neglecting the crucial insights that can be provided by those who supervise and support them. Understanding novice teachers through the lens of departmental heads is vital for designing effective induction programmes, shaping professional development initiatives, and strengthening school-based support systems. The findings from this study have important implications for education policy and teacher development, offering practical guidance for educational leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance novice teacher retention and performance. In doing so, the research supports the cultivation of inclusive and empowering school cultures that recognise both the potential and growth of novice teachers.

The problem this study seeks to address is the limited understanding of novice teachers' characteristics, both positive and negative, from the perspective of departmental heads in South African public schools. This knowledge gap limits the development of informed, context-specific support structures aligned with national goals to reduce teacher attrition and improve education quality. By focusing on departmental heads' perceptions, the study responds to a critical void in South African educational research and supports the objectives of the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (2011–2025) and the National Development Plan 2030, which both call for strengthening teacher development and retention mechanisms. To ensure a comprehensive exploration of this under-researched area, this study aims to explore the positive and negative characteristics of novice teachers in South African public schools as perceived by departmental heads.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strengths of Novice Teachers

Enthusiasm. Globally, novice teachers are recognised for their energy, enthusiasm, and strong intrinsic motivation when entering the teaching profession. This enthusiasm often becomes a valuable asset in the classroom, as it enables teachers to engage learners more

effectively and to apply recently acquired theoretical and practical knowledge in innovative ways (Zhang et al., 2021). Research further suggests that novice teachers demonstrate higher levels of motivation compared to their experienced counterparts, which can enrich classroom dynamics and foster learner participation. Within the South African context, similar observations have been made, where novice teachers' enthusiasm contributes significantly to learner engagement and the overall teaching and learning process. Madibana (2021) notes that such enthusiasm not only energises classroom practice but also helps bridge gaps between learners and educators, enhancing the quality of learning experiences.

Desire to positively impact learners' lives. Research highlights that one of the most prominent strengths of novice teachers is their strong desire to make a meaningful difference in learners' lives. Russell (2020) notes that this altruistic orientation is particularly impactful in under-resourced or disadvantaged contexts, where the presence of committed teachers can significantly improve educational outcomes. Similarly, Dai et al. (2024) emphasise that such intrinsic motivation benefits learners from marginalised backgrounds by fostering equitable learning opportunities. In support of this, Sydnor et al. (2024) found that novice teachers often experience fulfilment in equipping learners with essential skills, such as digital literacy, while simultaneously providing emotional and academic support. Within the South African context, where many schools face challenges of inequality and limited resources, this motivation is especially valuable. The anticipation of changing lives not only sustains novice teachers' commitment but also serves as a powerful driver of learner success and overall school improvement.

Innovativeness and technological competence. Generally, novice teachers are often recognised for their innovative approaches to teaching and learning, as they bring fresh perspectives shaped by recent exposure to contemporary pedagogical trends and practices during teacher training. Research highlights that beginner teachers tend to be more confident and creative in adopting instructional strategies that align with the evolving demands of 21st-century classrooms (Marimon-Martí et al., 2022; Momdjian et al., 2024; Aliazas et al., 2023; Malabanan et al., 2022). Their technological competence is also noted as a key strength, with studies showing that novice teachers generally display greater comfort and proficiency in integrating digital tools to enhance learner engagement compared to veteran teachers (Momdjian et al., 2024). Within the South African context, similar patterns emerge, where novice teachers' innovative pedagogical orientations and adaptability to technology are

recognised as critical assets in responding to the challenges of modern schooling. Bertram (2023) and Ramnarain and Malope (2023) emphasise that South African novice teachers enter the profession equipped with contemporary teaching strategies and digital literacy skills, positioning them to contribute meaningfully to learner-centred and technologically enriched educational practices.

2.2 Negative Teachers' Challenges

Challenges in diverse classrooms. Globally, novice teachers face considerable challenges in navigating diverse classroom environments, particularly in contexts where learners come from varied cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds (Green, 2023; Stewart & Jansky, 2022). These challenges are evident in addressing special educational needs, overcoming language barriers, and fostering effective communication with parents. International studies indicate that many novice teachers lack adequate preparation to differentiate instruction or adapt lessons to individual learner needs (Sydnor et al., 2024). Palmer (2023) further highlights that even in developed educational systems, novice teachers often feel underprepared for the demands of multicultural education, despite its increasing importance worldwide. Within the South African context, these challenges are amplified by the country's historical inequalities and multilingual education system, which place additional pressure on novice teachers to meet diverse learner needs in under-resourced classrooms.

Isolation and lack of support. Generally, isolation is a pervasive challenge that novice teachers encounter, particularly in schools lacking structured induction or mentoring programmes. Candra (2025) notes that many beginning teachers hesitate to seek help for fear of being perceived as incompetent, a tendency often reinforced by strained relationships with experienced colleagues or unsupportive leadership. Stewart and Jansky (2022) further argue that some veteran teachers perpetuate this isolation, expecting novices to undergo the same trial-and-error learning processes they once endured. However, the situation is not homogeneous; research also shows examples of experienced teachers who actively mentor and support newcomers. In the South African context, Madibana (2021) highlights a similar mixed reality: while some seasoned teachers provide meaningful support to novices, others defer the responsibility to school principals, assuming that institutional mechanisms should address professional guidance rather than individuals.

Transition from training to practice. The transition from pre-service training to professional teaching is often marked by what Lomi and Mbato (2020) describe as a “reality shock”, where novice teachers realise that their academic preparation does not fully equip them for the complexities of classroom practice. Rajsiglová and Mihulová (2023) highlight that new teachers frequently enter the profession expecting to focus primarily on instruction but are confronted with additional administrative and non-academic duties, creating a mismatch between expectation and reality. This international trend resonates in the South African context, where novice teachers similarly struggle with overwhelming workloads, inadequate preparation, and competing demands. Research by Mbhele (2024) notes that these challenges commonly result in burnout, emotional exhaustion, and confusion, thereby exacerbating the difficulties faced during the critical early years of teaching.

Lack of voice and professional agency. Research highlights that novice teachers often struggle with limited professional voice and agency within school environments. Studies from international contexts reveal that they are frequently perceived as inexperienced or less capable, which results in their exclusion from critical decision-making processes (Stewart & Jansky, 2022). This marginalisation undermines their professional identity, creating feelings of disempowerment and contributing to high levels of early career attrition in countries such as Canada, the United States, and parts of Europe (Schaefer et al., 2021). Within the South African context, these challenges are similarly evident, as novice teachers report restricted participation in school governance structures and limited influence on curriculum-related matters. Such exclusion not only perpetuates hierarchical staff dynamics but also exacerbates job dissatisfaction and increases the risk of attrition among early-career teachers in the country. The literature reveals a dual reality: novice teachers bring remarkable enthusiasm, fresh pedagogical knowledge, and technological competence to schools, yet they simultaneously face a host of challenges, including cultural complexities, isolation, inadequate preparation, and professional marginalisation. While these insights are well documented globally, there is limited research focused specifically on the South African context from the perspective of departmental heads. Therefore, this study aims to explore the positive and negative characteristics of novice teachers in South African public schools as perceived by departmental heads, thereby contributing to a more contextually grounded understanding and offering recommendations for improving teacher support and retention.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm and Approach

The study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which aims to understand the subjective world of human experience. Interpretivism values the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences and acknowledges the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Alele & Malau-Aduli, 2023). Within this paradigm, the study focused on understanding how departmental heads make sense of novice teachers' characteristics based on their lived supervisory experiences and professional interactions. This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore departmental heads' perceptions of novice teachers' positive and negative characteristics. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it seeks to gain in-depth insight into human behaviour, experiences, motivations, and intentions through observation and interpretation (Tenny et al., 2022). It enables researchers to make sense of a phenomenon from the perspectives of participants, and in this study, it allowed the researcher to understand the nuanced ways departmental heads experience and interpret the behaviours and attributes of novice teachers.

3.2. Research Design

In line with the research approach, the study adopted a phenomenological design. Phenomenology research design seeks to explore and interpret individuals' lived experiences by examining their perceptions, perspectives, and meanings attached to a particular phenomenon (Tenny et al., 2022). This research design was employed because it focuses on describing and interpreting the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences (Ayton, 2023). Phenomenology was particularly suited to this study because it allowed for the elicitation of rich, in-depth accounts of departmental heads' observations and experiences regarding novice teachers' professional behaviours.

3.3. Sampling

The sample that participated in the study was purposively selected from South African public primary schools situated on the western side of Gauteng province. Purposive sampling was employed in this study because it is perceived as the most effective when selecting

participants who possess specific knowledge or experience relevant to the study. In this case, ten departmental heads who had supervised novice teachers for a minimum of five years were selected because of their direct engagement with the subject of the study. The choice of ten participants was guided by Dahal et al. (2024)'s recommendation that a sample size for a phenomenological study typically ranges from five to twenty-five participants. This sample size was therefore considered sufficient to allow for in-depth, meaningful exploration of shared experiences. Smaller sample sizes are acceptable in qualitative research because qualitative research aims to provide rich and nuanced insights about the phenomenon (Ayton, 2023). Departmental heads were chosen as participants because of their prolonged exposure to mentoring novice teachers. To ensure gender representation and homogeneity of experience, the sample consisted of five female and five male participants, all drawn from public primary schools in the same geographic region (Western Gauteng). This demographic balance enhances the credibility and transferability of the findings by providing a diverse yet contextually consistent perspective.

3.4. Data Gathering Tools and Procedures

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. The duration of the interview sessions was approximately 30-40 minutes on scheduled dates and times, agreed upon between researchers and participants. Interviews were conducted in secluded places, such as school staff rooms and boardrooms. These settings were ideal in minimising disruptions and providing participants with some privacy. Semi-structured interviews provided a balance between guided questioning and open-ended responses, allowing participants the flexibility to share personal experiences and perspectives (George, 2022). An interview schedule with broad guiding questions was developed to facilitate conversations, with probing questions used where necessary to gain a deeper understanding. Each participant's session was audio recorded for transcribing purposes at a later stage.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, specifically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. First, audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researchers then familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and listening to audio-recorded participants' voices to identify initial meanings. Coding

followed, wherein significant patterns were labelled that captured researchers' interests. These codes were grouped into subthemes and overarching themes that captured recurring perceptions of novice teacher characteristics. The identified themes were then reviewed and refined to be clearer. Discussion of final themes was contextualised within existing literature to enhance interpretive depth and theoretical alignment.

3.6. Research Ethics

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee before data collection commenced. Approval was also sought from the school principals where the research took place. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and they voluntarily signed informed consent forms. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty and were protected from physical, emotional, or psychological harm (Boss, 2020). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting, and all data were stored on a password-protected device. Throughout the research process, the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants were prioritised in accordance with ethical research practice.

3.7. Limitation of the Study

The limitation of this study is that interviews with ten participants were solely used as the data-gathering tool to obtain rich, in-depth information. Other data collection methods, such as document analysis and observations, could have enhanced the study's credibility; however, the participating schools did not permit the researchers to access the necessary documents for analysis. In addition, reliance on a small sample drawn from a limited number of schools may restrict the generalizability of the findings across diverse school contexts. Nonetheless, despite using only interviews as the data collection method, the study still provides valuable insights through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their perspectives on the phenomenon.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Perceived Positive Characteristics of Novice Teachers

Technologically savvy. Participants described novice teachers, particularly from the younger generation, as technologically savvy. They noted that these teachers possess advanced

digital skills that enhance administrative efficiency and access to teaching resources. Participant 3 highlighted how novice teachers contribute to improving technological knowledge among older staff members. They explained that these younger teachers not only possess strong computer skills but also help their colleagues learn more efficient ways to handle administrative tasks.

"We appreciate novice teachers because they have a strong understanding of computers, often teaching us shortcut functions for data entry and administrative tasks that we struggle with. Learning from them has yielded positive results."

Similarly, Participant 1 emphasised the generational gap in technological proficiency, pointing out that younger teachers are more skilled in using digital tools for both administrative and instructional purposes.

"Most novice teachers are skilled in using computers for administrative tasks and retrieving teaching materials from platforms like Read Write Think, Wakelet Education, and Teaching for Change. Compared to them, we, the older generation, work at a slower pace in these areas."

The data reveals that departmental heads view novice teachers as digitally fluent and capable of enhancing both administrative and instructional practices. These teachers not only streamline processes but also facilitate intergenerational knowledge exchange by supporting older staff in using digital tools more effectively (Trujillo-Torres, 2023). This observation aligns with Carstens et al. (2021) and Madlela and Umesh (2024), who affirm that digital integration in teaching supports learner engagement and enriches classroom experiences. However, while digital fluency is celebrated, a more critical synthesis of the findings suggests an underlying structural gap in professional development practices. Specifically, the informal reliance on novice teachers to support older colleagues in digital literacy reflects a shortfall in institutional training efforts, thereby revealing a generational and systemic imbalance in upskilling approaches. These findings suggest that schools may be unintentionally placing disproportionate digital mentorship expectations on novice teachers, whose own need for pedagogical guidance and classroom management support remains unmet. Similarly, while the technological contributions of novice teachers are recognised, the absence of structured reciprocal support systems could undermine their long-term professional identity and job satisfaction. Therefore, to address these asymmetries, schools should adopt a reciprocal

mentorship model that pairs novice teachers' digital competencies with the pedagogical experience of senior teachers. This model promotes two-way learning and shared accountability for professional growth. Implications for policy and practice include the need for formalised mentoring frameworks that explicitly recognise the dual expertise of both novice and experienced teachers. Policy should mandate ongoing digital training for all staff, reducing the overreliance on informal peer-to-peer support. Simultaneously, novice teachers should be systematically inducted into effective teaching practices through structured mentoring, enabling balanced role expectations. In practice, this dual mentorship approach encourages a more collaborative school culture, supports professional retention, and bridges generational divides in educational innovation (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Professional Curiosity. Participants described novice teachers as individuals who demonstrate an eagerness to learn new classroom control techniques, particularly in maintaining discipline among learners. Participant 4 emphasised the significance of structured discipline models that guide novice teachers in classroom management:

“There are various models that we, departmental heads, encourage novice teachers in the school to make use of in reinforcing discipline among learners, such as the 20-discipline model. Novice teachers show an eagerness to learn the rules that learners must abide by, the repercussions of breaking such rules, and the rewards when learners adhere to them. One of these rules involves the completion of learner-assigned homework by novice teachers. Departmental heads identify novice teachers during class visits, rewarding learners who complete their tasks on time and remain up to date with homework assignments. Learners who lag behind in their homework are issued verbal warnings, demonstrating novice teachers' full acquaintance with the 20-discipline model.”

Participant 1 introduced the 3Cs model, Content, Conduct, and Context management, as a method that novice teachers are coached on for maintaining discipline:

“The model that works best for me as a departmental head is the 3Cs: Content, Conduct, and Context management. This model is also introduced to novice teachers. In content management, departmental heads coach novice teachers on how to ask a question, pause, look around the room before calling on a learner, and support the learner in formulating an answer. Conduct management involves coaching novice teachers on using explicit rules and stating consequences for not following them, such as issuing a warning before imposing a penalty for repeated misconduct. Context management entails coaching novice teachers on how to

encourage learners to work collaboratively and use each other's ideas. Novice teachers have shown an eagerness to learn this model by implementing it in their own classrooms."

Participant 7 noted that novice teachers show a strong interest in learning the Ginott Model for maintaining good learner discipline:

"As a departmental head, I have observed that novice teachers show an eagerness to learn the Ginott Model in maintaining good learner discipline. Novice teachers learn to use mentally sound and healthy messages to address student behaviour, focusing on remedying situations rather than personal attacks. For example, novice teachers have demonstrated the use of messages such as 'Let us try to stay on topic during a subject discussion' instead of 'You are completely off track,' which could demotivate learners in the learning process."

Novice teachers often exhibit strong professional curiosity, particularly in acquiring effective classroom management strategies from experienced mentors. The data show that departmental heads support this curiosity by introducing structured discipline models such as the 20-discipline model, the 3Cs model, and the Ginott model. These frameworks help novice teachers implement rules, reinforce positive behaviour, and manage misconduct (Pierson, 2023). The 3Cs model, which promotes a holistic disciplinary approach, mirrors Burden's (2025) findings that clear expectations and engaging pedagogy enhance learner participation. Similarly, the Ginott model, which emphasises emotionally intelligent communication, aligns with Siregar and Fatonah's (2022) emphasis on respectful, learner-centred environments. These findings collectively suggest that novice teachers thrive when provided with structured, clearly articulated behaviour management models that offer immediate applicability in classroom settings. However, they also reveal a pattern of initial dependence on external frameworks, which may signal an underlying uncertainty or lack of self-efficacy in autonomous decision-making. In contrast to experienced teachers who often adapt flexibly to evolving classroom dynamics, novice teachers may gravitate toward prescriptive approaches, potentially stifling creativity and responsiveness.

The implications for practice are twofold. First, while discipline models are essential scaffolds, departmental heads must pair them with reflective mentoring practices that promote adaptive implementation rather than rigid compliance. Policies should, therefore, support mentoring programmes that balance modelling with co-reflective dialogue, helping novice

teachers evolve their personal philosophies of discipline. Second, overemphasis on order and compliance within school systems may inadvertently reduce classroom management to behaviour control, rather than positioning it as a tool to cultivate learner autonomy, engagement, and motivation. In light of this, policy reforms should consider integrating emotional intelligence, learner voice, and restorative practices into teacher training curricula, ensuring novice teachers are equipped not only with tools but also with the capacity for critical adaptation. Thus, while novice teachers' professional curiosity is an asset, its long-term impact depends on how well school environments and policies cultivate spaces for experimentation, reflection, and contextual responsiveness, transforming structured compliance into professional growth and innovation.

Dedication and willingness to go above and beyond. Participants highlighted that novice teachers often exhibit enthusiasm and a strong commitment to their roles, especially during their in-service training or the early years of their teaching careers. This dedication is evident in their willingness to take on additional responsibilities beyond their regular teaching duties, including activities held outside normal school hours. Participant 1 described how novice teachers actively engage in extracurricular school activities, particularly those aimed at community support:

“Novice teachers are willing to go far with the positive energy they show. We host charity drive functions in the school mostly on weekends, such as cancer awareness events to raise funds for individuals battling terminal cancer. Novice teachers display enthusiasm and a strong sense of commitment by helping to organise these events, which in turn helps the school attract donations from stakeholders and the broader community.”

Similarly, Participant 6 emphasised the role of novice teachers in fostering positive relationships with parents and guardians:

“When it’s time for parental feedback meetings, novice teachers approach their duties with enthusiasm. Their energy is always positive when engaging with parents and guardians, ensuring they understand the areas where learners are struggling and suggesting specific academic support strategies. They also handle parental concerns with patience and professionalism.”

Participant 4 highlighted how novice teachers use their energy and dedication to support learners' personal and leadership development:

“In the classroom, novice teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to understanding learners’ interests and abilities. They take the time to recognise students’ strengths and use these insights to cultivate leadership skills. For example, they may assign a learner to be a class monitor as a way of fostering a sense of purpose and responsibility. Novice teachers consistently approach such tasks with enthusiasm and a genuine desire to support their learners.”

The findings suggest that novice teachers’ dedication is not merely a reflection of professional compliance but a complex interplay between intrinsic motivation, emerging identity, and institutional context. Their consistent engagement in activities beyond instructional duties, such as extracurricular programmes, parental engagement, and learner leadership, underscores a proactive embrace of teacher agency. Similarly, Karlberg and Bezzina (2022) found that early-career teachers are often deeply invested in their school communities, mirroring the current study’s evidence of novice teachers’ enthusiasm and drive. In contrast, this enthusiasm may be precariously motivated by a need to gain credibility and acceptance, rather than sustainable professional practice. This dual motivation, agency versus acceptance, raises critical policy questions about the structures in place to support teacher wellbeing. Notably, Bjorklund (2023) emphasises that this dedication is heightened when novice teachers feel a sense of belonging and receive encouragement from leadership. This aligns with the current findings, which indicate that institutional recognition and peer validation amplify novice teachers’ engagement. In turn, their active roles in home-school partnerships, as noted by Lin and Huang (2023), not only contribute to learner success but also to the cultivation of a collaborative school ethos. This points to the need for policy interventions that formalise mentorship programmes and parental engagement training to maximise novice teachers’ impact while mitigating role strain. Moreover, their role in fostering learner leadership reflects a deepening pedagogical maturity.

Guided by Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory, novice teachers are not just deliverers of content but facilitators of socio-academic growth, empowering learners through structured leadership experiences. Ben-Amram and Davidovitch (2024) support this by showing that novice teachers who mentor learners help instil responsibility and positively shape school culture. However, without institutional mechanisms, such as workload regulation, leadership coaching, and recognition platforms, this high engagement may risk teacher burnout. The findings suggest that novice teachers’ contributions are transformative when

appropriately supported but potentially detrimental when unacknowledged or unbalanced. Policies should therefore prioritise structured induction, leadership scaffolding, and emotional support frameworks to sustain early-career teacher engagement and wellbeing. For school practice, this means building inclusive leadership models where novice teachers are seen not as temporary interns but as co-constructors of school culture.

Sense of idealism. The participants described novice teachers as bringing a strong sense of idealism to their teaching roles. These teachers were seen as contributing fresh ideas and innovative approaches to various aspects of teaching, such as classroom decoration, community engagement, and the use of technology. Participant 1 emphasised how novice teachers, especially the younger generation, introduce contemporary ideas to enhance classroom environments. According to Participant 1:

“Novice teachers, especially the younger generation, are current and always bringing in fresh ideas on how classrooms can be decorated with the latest up-to-date educational materials. As departmental heads, we notice that the materials used take into account visibility, accessibility, comfort, and flexibility for learners. When novice teachers change the organisation of the classroom, removing outdated charts and incorporating feedback from students, it becomes clear that the learners enjoy these new ideas.”

Participant 4 highlighted how novice teachers are eager to encourage student involvement in community engagement activities. Participant 4 noted:

“As a departmental head, I refer to novice teachers as being full of ideas on how students can engage with their communities. Novice teachers encourage learners to interact with people in their communities to learn practical aspects of life and become responsible citizens. In teaching, novice teachers share real-life experiences and promote initiatives such as community clean-up projects. This helps learners understand the value of contributing to cleaner communities from a young age.”

The data reveal that novice teachers’ idealism manifests through proactive and student-focused innovations in classroom management and community engagement. However, beyond their enthusiasm, this idealism can be critically understood as a double-edged sword. While it introduces contemporary practices and learner-centredness, it may also reflect a lack of awareness about systemic limitations such as overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, or

entrenched school cultures resistant to change. Thus, although their creative input is appreciated, departmental heads must often mentor novice teachers to align idealism with practical constraints. This interpretation aligns with Mat et al. (2024), who found that novice teachers use classroom design intentionally, with an emphasis on learner comfort and engagement. Their use of student feedback and updated materials not only reflects an inclusive ethos but also helps cultivate democratic learning environments. Likewise, their active promotion of community-based initiatives suggests a growing trend towards experiential learning, with teachers integrating real-world relevance into their pedagogy (Kong, 2021). Similarly, Pilous et al. (2023) found that service-learning fosters reflective practice and real-world engagement; however, they caution that such approaches require robust institutional support. In contrast, Mat et al. (2024) emphasise the micro-level innovations in classroom spaces rather than broader community engagement.

These findings suggest that while novice teachers inject fresh, democratic approaches to teaching, their sustainability is heavily contingent on mentorship, systemic support, and professional development structures. This calls for school policies that institutionalise mentoring frameworks and allocate resources for innovation support. For practice, SMTs should not only provide emotional and logistical support to novice teachers but also scaffold their reflective capacity, helping them move from reactive idealism to strategic innovation. Yet, critical reflection is needed to question the sustainability of such engagement: Can idealism be maintained in the face of teacher burnout, institutional inertia, or under-resourced school contexts? As Pilous et al. (2023) suggest, while service-learning contributes to bridging theory and practice, its long-term impact depends on institutional support and the teachers' capacity for reflective practice. Therefore, the contribution of novice teachers is not only in their fresh ideas but also in how those ideas challenge the status quo and potentially catalyse broader pedagogical reform if appropriately nurtured. Novice teachers' idealism enriches teaching and school culture through innovation, but it requires structured support and critical mentoring to remain sustainable and impactful.

4.2 Perceived Negative Characteristics of Novice Teachers

Poor time management. Several participants expressed concerns about novice teachers' inability to manage time effectively, particularly regarding lesson preparation and yearly planning. According to the participants, novice teachers often fail to allocate sufficient

time to refine their teaching methods, choosing instead to prioritise leisure or delay preparation until the last minute, which can negatively impact their effectiveness. Participant 4 described how novice teachers struggle with lesson planning:

“Novice teachers are seen spending more time crafting a lesson plan the 'right' way. The amount of work that goes into lesson preparation is enormous, and it becomes even more overwhelming when novice teachers have to prepare for multiple subjects. Each subject requires planning in accordance with its syllabus. As departmental heads, we observe that novice teachers do not manage their lesson planning time effectively.”

Participant 2 indicated how novice teachers often prioritise leisure over preparation:

“What I have noticed, especially with younger novice teachers, is that they see free time as an opportunity for leisure. Instead of using this time to improve their teaching and lesson planning, they tend to procrastinate and end up working under pressure at the last minute. This results in poor outcomes in student assessments, which is evident when we monitor their teaching during class visits. We departmental heads identify that inadequate lesson planning is a significant factor contributing to poor student performance.”

Participant 2 pointed out how novice teachers' lack of preparation can lead to disorganised lessons that fail to meet objectives:

“In my experience, novice teachers often go off-topic during lessons. While trying to relate subject content to real-life situations, they sometimes refer to irrelevant examples that do not align with the lesson's core objectives. For instance, in a history lesson focused on South Africa's apartheid era, I have observed novice teachers deviating by discussing World War regimes of other countries, which undermines the lesson's focus and prevents them from achieving the intended learning outcomes.”

The data reflect a deeper issue beyond mere inexperience; poor time management among novice teachers appears symptomatic of underdeveloped pedagogical content knowledge and inadequate training in lesson planning and pacing. While some novice teachers excessively devote time to planning in a bid to "get it right", this often occurs at the expense of active classroom engagement, limiting opportunities for practical refinement. Similarly, procrastination, frequently observed by participants, may not simply be a personal flaw but a

manifestation of anxiety, lack of confidence, or the absence of professional habits cultivated during pre-service training. In contrast to more experienced teachers who intuitively balance instructional demands, novice teachers often struggle to prioritise content, leading to lessons that veer off-topic or include inappropriate real-life examples. This misalignment suggests not only a conceptual gap in instructional clarity but also a lack of exposure to effective mentorship and modelling.

These findings are consistent with the literature. For instance, Black et al. (2023) and Cruz and Alzate (2022) similarly link novice teachers' poor time management to heightened stress, burnout, and low instructional efficacy. However, while existing studies highlight the consequences, this study emphasises the origins of these issues in structural training deficiencies and contextual misalignments in the South African schooling system. The implications for policy and practice are significant. Structured induction programmes should be prioritised, with a strong focus not only on time management strategies but also on reflective pedagogical practices that help novice teachers align their planning with instructional goals. Mentorship should be reimagined as a sustained, dialogic process that helps bridge the gap between theoretical training and classroom realities. In doing so, educational policymakers can create systems of support that enhance instructional efficacy and promote teacher retention, particularly in under-resourced public primary schools where novice teachers often face the steepest learning curves.

Poor grading of assessments. Participants described novice teachers as exhibiting leniency when grading students' assessments, such as written tests, oral exams, and projects. This lack of rigour in applying grading criteria can lead to inconsistencies and discrepancies in students' marks. Participant 9, a departmental head, shared their concerns regarding novice teachers' grading practices:

"The area of assessment grading is one that I, as a 'departmental head', find novice teachers battling with. When novice teachers fail to interpret learners' ideas appropriately on written scripts, they leniently issue learners more marks, not in accordance with the test memorandum guidelines."

Another participant, P4, further corroborated this view, emphasising the difficulties novice teachers face during moderation:

"Grading learners' work is problematic for novice teachers. We, as 'departmental heads', find that novice teachers, during the moderation process, have

consistently failed to apply grading rubrics as expected for written tests. Such mistakes result in disparities in the marks of a group of learners for the very same assessment.”

These findings suggest that novice teachers' poor assessment practices are not isolated missteps but symptomatic of broader pedagogical and systemic shortcomings. Rather than viewing their grading inconsistencies as procedural flaws, the data reveal a lack of assessment literacy and diminished confidence in applying standardised criteria, both of which compromise objectivity and fairness. Similarly, Gaikwad et al. (2023) and Heidari (2024) observe that novice teachers often misinterpret complex learner responses and default to personal judgement, suggesting a widespread gap in assessment training. In contrast, experienced teachers typically apply rubrics with more consistency and authority, pointing to the crucial role of both experience and support systems. The findings also highlight a troubling trade-off novice teachers make between maintaining learner rapport and enforcing academic standards. Participants noted that some novice teachers avoid confrontational feedback and instead prioritise learner appeasement, undermining grading reliability. This aligns with Dahal (2022) and Lilly et al. (2022), who warn that inconsistent marking practices, especially in subjective tasks like essays, can demotivate learners and damage perceptions of fairness. However, these practices do not only affect learner outcomes but also undermine the professional legitimacy of novice educators, revealing a tension between empathy and accountability that must be addressed pedagogically.

Implications for policy and practice are far-reaching. There is a critical need for structured induction programmes that go beyond procedural training to include ethical reasoning and confidence-building in assessment. Similarly, continuous professional development workshops should focus on standardised rubric application, feedback delivery, and interpretation of diverse learner responses. In addition, robust moderation systems must be institutionalised to ensure grading consistency and to mentor novice teachers through collaborative reflection and feedback. Thus, the findings call for a shift from reactive to proactive teacher development strategies, ones that not only correct poor practices but also preempt them through deliberate, ongoing support.

Overwhelming workloads. Participants described novice teachers as individuals who often feel overwhelmed by the workload stress that comes with both teaching and

administrative tasks. Several participants elaborated on their observations. Participant 3 shared:

“Novice teachers are often overwhelmed with teaching duties. Filing and teaching are tasks done on a daily basis in the teaching profession, and novice teachers find it hefty during their first years. It is sorrowful when novice teachers get to know the quantity of workload expected just from filing. Novice teachers’ overwhelming stress increases due to this realisation.”

The participant highlights how the sheer volume of administrative tasks, especially filing, can be particularly overwhelming for novice teachers as they adapt to the profession. Participant 4 elaborated:

“Novice teachers tend to think teaching learners is about standing in front of the learners, opening a textbook, reading it to learners, and providing a task for the day, considering teaching to be done. Instead, teaching involves entering the classroom, greeting learners, recapping the previous lesson, identifying learners’ struggles and strengths, connecting new knowledge with what was taught before, and testing learners’ understanding through exercises or written tests. As departmental heads, we notice that novice teachers are easily dazzled by the realities of what teaching in the classroom truly entails.”

The participant emphasised how the overwhelming workload isn't just about physical tasks but also the mental load of balancing effective teaching with administrative duties. Participant 8 added:

“Learners understand teaching in varied ways, which is something novice teachers find staggering when they start their jobs. Some learners grasp knowledge when teachers are standing, others respond better to visual aids, and some learners find it easier when teachers explain a concept and ask students to come to the front and demonstrate it to their peers. Novice teachers find adjusting to these varied teaching methods overwhelming during their first years in the profession.”

This indicates that novice teachers often lack the pedagogical flexibility to respond to diverse learner needs, further intensifying their sense of inadequacy and stress. The data reveals that the overwhelming workload experienced by novice teachers is not only physical but also cognitive and emotional. Tasks such as filing may appear routine, yet they are time-consuming

and can be daunting for those still orienting themselves in the profession. At a deeper level, novice teachers often enter the field with idealistic or simplistic views of teaching, only to be confronted by the realities of differentiated instruction, learner engagement, and ongoing assessment. Critically, this mismatch between expectation and reality highlights a gap in teacher training programmes, where novice teachers are often underprepared for the full scope of classroom responsibilities.

The participants' reflections underscore the lack of readiness to handle diverse learner needs and the complexity of instructional design, resulting in high levels of anxiety and perceived incompetence. This interpretation aligns with literature that positions the first years of teaching as a formative yet fragile period marked by stress and disillusionment (Hogan & White, 2021). Administrative duties such as filing, while seemingly simple, can compound stress and contribute to burnout (Jomoad et al., 2021). Furthermore, the cognitive load of managing learner diversity without sufficient experience in differentiated instruction has been identified as a major challenge (Chen, 2023). Similarly, Ortan et al. (2021) and Nwoko et al. (2024) highlight that without proper induction and mentorship, novice teachers are more susceptible to early career burnout and attrition. In contrast to veteran teachers who have developed adaptive strategies, novice teachers are still negotiating their professional identities and thus experience these demands more acutely.

The findings suggest that what may be perceived as personal shortcomings, such as stress, rigidity, or naivety, are in fact symptomatic of broader structural failings in teacher education and school-based support. The implications for policy are clear: teacher education programmes must include stronger practical components that prepare teachers for differentiated instruction, workload management, and real-world classroom dynamics. Furthermore, schools should institutionalise structured induction and mentorship programmes that offer emotional, administrative, and pedagogical support. For practice, school leaders and senior teachers need to recognise the layered challenges facing novice teachers and provide scaffolded responsibilities rather than overwhelming them with full teaching loads and administrative duties from the outset. The findings not only confirm but also expand on existing literature by illustrating how systemic inadequacies, rather than individual deficiencies, drive much of the stress and attrition among novice teachers. This deeper synthesis calls for coordinated efforts between teacher education institutions and schools to ease the transition from training to practice.

Lack of professional teaching skills. Participants identified a lack of professional teaching skills as a significant characteristic of novice teachers. This included challenges such as writing legibly on boards and addressing learners with confidence. Participant 4 elaborated on the issue of legibility when writing on boards, saying,

"Novice teachers lack the skill of writing legibly on chalk or smart boards. When analysing novice teachers' handwriting, we "departmental heads" see the handwriting to be too small or too big, or written in a slanted way that proves a lack of experience."

Participant 7 reflected on the anxiety that novice teachers often feel during their first days of classroom ownership, noting,

"Novice teachers feel scared during their first days of classroom ownership. We 'departmental heads' understand their fears and know it is a common thing that novice teachers aren't used to. Novice teachers' voices are found shivering at the end of lines, teaching for the very first time."

Participant 1 shared their perspective on the lack of confidence in handling classroom discipline, stating:

"Novice teachers lack confidence in the way they handle learners during their first years. We 'departmental heads' find that novice teachers deal with misbehaving learners using a lower tone, which lacks authority in demonstrating teacher leadership. This lack of confidence signals an incapability of novice teachers to perform in a way that ensures learners' academic excellence."

The data suggest that novice teachers often enter the profession underprepared for the everyday demands of the classroom. While issues such as illegible board writing and nervous classroom demeanour may appear superficial, they point to deeper concerns regarding the adequacy of initial teacher training programmes. The lack of confidence observed, whether in voice projection or in managing learner behaviour, reflects not only inexperience but also a gap between theoretical training and the realities of practice. In contrast to the structured pedagogical theories emphasised during pre-service training, the unpredictability and intensity of classroom realities demand more robust, hands-on preparation. This disconnect raises questions about how teacher education institutions scaffold practical readiness, particularly in

foundational competencies such as classroom communication, discipline, and learner engagement.

As noted by Silva (2021), early-career teachers frequently struggle with instructional delivery and behaviour management due to limited hands-on exposure. Similarly, Lasekan et al. (2024) highlight overlooked but essential practices like legible board writing as pivotal to learner comprehension, reinforcing the need for more emphasis on practical micro-skills in training curricula. The emotional toll, evident in trembling voices and anxiety, further suggests that novice teachers are not only under-skilled but also emotionally unsupported, exacerbating their struggles in asserting authority. This finding aligns with Masood et al. (2022), who emphasise that emotional resilience and psychological adjustment are often underdeveloped in early-career teachers due to insufficient mentoring or psychosocial preparation. Therefore, these findings suggest that teacher preparation programmes may overemphasise theory at the expense of readiness for the affective and procedural realities of teaching. For policy, this underscores the need for reforms that integrate extended, mentored practicum experiences and emotional intelligence development into initial teacher education. In practice, schools must strengthen induction programmes to bridge the gap between pre-service training and full-time teaching, including peer coaching, stress-management support, and structured classroom simulations. Without such measures, novice teachers remain vulnerable to early burnout and ineffective classroom leadership, compromising educational quality and learner outcomes.

Emerging work ethic skills. Participants identified emerging work ethic skills as a significant characteristic of novice teachers, highlighting behaviours such as favouritism, discrimination, and failure to report incidents both inside and outside the classroom. Below are the insights shared by the participants: Participant 4 described how novice teachers tend to show favouritism towards certain students. They observed:

“Departmental heads find novice teachers favouring some learners over others. The most common examples include favouring learners who excel in sporting activities related to the teacher’s interests, such as athletics; favouring students who share similar interests or beliefs with the teacher; and favouring students from wealthier families who attend the school. There is no rational thinking exercised by novice teachers, which is very poor ethics in the teaching profession.”

Participant 5 pointed out that some novice teachers engage in discriminatory behaviour, especially towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with disabilities. They provided an example:

“Some novice teachers exercise discrimination on the job, such as not enjoying working with learners who come from disadvantaged families because they don't present themselves well or may have a disability. An example I can relate to is a boy with a hearing problem in one of the novice teacher's classes. Novice teachers interact with him less than with other learners, and some students avoid him too because of his situation. At the end of the day, that learner is just a child and deserves to be loved, helped, and guided to become a better person in the future.”

The data suggest that novice teachers often enter the profession underprepared for the everyday demands of the classroom, pointing to a broader systemic concern. While issues such as illegible board writing and nervous classroom demeanour may appear superficial, they are symptomatic of a deeper disconnect between pre-service training and in-service expectations. This aligns with Silva (2021), who notes that early-career teachers frequently struggle with instructional delivery and behaviour management due to limited hands-on exposure. Similarly, Lasekan et al. (2024) emphasise the overlooked importance of foundational teaching aids, such as legible board writing, as essential tools for effective communication and learner comprehension. However, where Silva foregrounds pedagogical gaps, Lasekan et al. (2024) reveal a lack of attention to practical detail, suggesting that the problem spans both macro-level training design and micro-level instructional practice. Moreover, the emotional toll experienced by novice teachers, evident in trembling voices and signs of anxiety, reveals that psychological readiness is also insufficiently addressed. This resonates with Masood et al. (2022), who contend that the emotional adjustment to full-time teaching is frequently underestimated in teacher preparation programmes. In contrast to physical competencies, emotional readiness requires structured psychosocial support, which appears absent in current induction models.

These findings suggest that institutional preparation remains largely theoretical, underemphasising the complex, relational, and emotional labour inherent in classroom teaching. The findings imply that teacher education institutions must re-evaluate their curricula to embed experiential learning and emotional resilience training as core components, not peripheral modules. School-based induction programmes should provide structured, values-

driven mentorship that addresses both instructional gaps and emotional needs. Also, policy frameworks must hold both institutions and schools accountable for ensuring that novice teachers are not merely placed but meaningfully supported. Without such systemic intervention, there is a continued risk that novice teachers will not only underperform but also leave the profession prematurely, perpetuating a cycle of attrition and instability in schools.

5. Recommendations

Establish structured mentorship and induction programmes. School leadership teams and district education offices could collaboratively implement structured mentorship programmes that pair novice teachers with experienced, well-trained mentors. These programmes should foster reciprocal learning, enabling experienced teachers to share pedagogical and classroom management expertise while also learning about emerging technologies and innovative strategies from novice teachers. In addition, school leaders should facilitate a robust induction programme lasting at least one academic term, covering essential areas such as professional ethics, institutional policies, workload expectations, classroom discipline models, and parent-stakeholder collaboration. This dual approach could help in easing the transition for novice teachers, enhance their confidence, and ensure they align with the school's values and operational culture from the onset.

Provide targeted and continuous professional development. The study recommends that the department of education and school management prioritise the design and delivery of targeted continuous professional development workshops tailored to the specific needs of novice teachers. These workshops should cover crucial areas such as time management, assessment literacy, lesson planning, effective classroom strategies, ethical teaching practices, and emotional intelligence. Sessions should include practical components, such as case-based simulations, rubric design, grading moderation, and peer feedback exercises. By equipping novice teachers with these essential tools and practices, institutions could bridge skill gaps, standardise assessment practices, and foster high-quality teaching that promotes learner success and professional growth.

Promote reflective practice and peer collaboration. School leaders and professional development coordinators should create opportunities for novice teachers to engage in continuous reflective practices and collaborative learning. Strategies such as maintaining reflective teaching journals, video-recording lessons for self-assessment, and structured peer

observation sessions should be formally integrated into professional development plans. Furthermore, schools should establish collaborative platforms, both physical (e.g., innovation hubs, staff meetings) and virtual (e.g., forums, WhatsApp/Teams groups), where novice teachers can freely share teaching resources, digital tools, and community engagement strategies. This reflective and collaborative culture will not only enhance teachers' awareness of their practices and areas for growth but could also build collegiality, foster innovation, and strengthen school communities.

Support time management and emotional well-being. It is recommended that human resource departments and school leaders embed time management coaching and emotional well-being support into novice teacher development programmes. This can be implemented through targeted workshops, one-on-one coaching sessions, and mentoring discussions focused on lesson pacing, workload prioritisation, and scheduling strategies. Additionally, emotional intelligence training, including topics like self-awareness, empathy, and conflict resolution, should be included to help novice teachers navigate complex interpersonal dynamics within school settings. Supporting novice teachers in managing both their time and emotional well-being reduces the risk of burnout, enhances job satisfaction, and promotes sustained engagement in the teaching profession.

Implement ongoing monitoring and recognition systems. To ensure continuous growth, the study recommends that school administrators and departmental heads establish structured systems for monitoring and recognising novice teacher development. This can involve regular performance appraisals, developmental feedback loops, peer and mentor reviews, and formal reflection meetings throughout the academic year. Moreover, contributions made by novice teachers, especially in areas like community engagement, innovation, and extracurricular activities, should be formally acknowledged through recognition awards, commendation letters, and promotion pathways. These systems reinforce accountability, boost morale, and help retain competent educators by making them feel valued and supported in their professional journeys.

6. The Paper's Unique Contribution

This paper offers a unique contribution by presenting a balanced, dual-perspective exploration of novice teachers' positive and negative characteristics from the viewpoint of departmental heads, an angle rarely addressed in South African or global literature. Rather than

perpetuating a deficit narrative, the study highlights the valuable assets novice teachers bring, such as technological fluency, professional curiosity, idealism, and dedication, while critically examining developmental gaps including time management, assessment literacy, and ethical conduct. By integrating these strengths and weaknesses, the findings move beyond binary depictions and offer a nuanced, context-specific understanding that can inform more targeted, sustainable support mechanisms.

The study's originality lies in its focus on experienced school leaders' perceptions, providing insights that bridge theoretical teacher preparation with the realities of school-based practice, and revealing systemic gaps that undermine novice teacher retention and performance. Building on these findings, the paper's recommendations – structured mentorship, targeted professional development, reflective practice, time management and well-being support, and ongoing recognition systems – extend its contribution from descriptive insight to actionable policy and practice guidance. These recommendations advocate for reciprocal mentorship models, integrated emotional and pedagogical support, and institutionalised monitoring frameworks that value novice teachers' contributions while addressing their developmental needs. This applied orientation not only has the potential to strengthen novice teacher integration and professional identity but also to inform leadership practices, teacher education curricula, and retention policies in South Africa and similar contexts. In doing so, the study adds both conceptual depth and practical relevance to the discourse on teacher development and school improvement.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive lens through which to understand novice teachers' multifaceted characteristics as viewed by departmental heads. The theme reveals a dichotomy of strengths and developmental gaps. Positively, novice teachers bring digital competence, enthusiasm for the profession, and a strong sense of purpose that enrich the educational environment. Their idealism, willingness to learn, and dedication to both classroom and extracurricular duties demonstrate a high potential for professional growth and innovation in schools. However, concerns such as poor time management, inadequate assessment grading, and lack of teaching experience point to the urgent need for structured support mechanisms. These challenges, if not addressed, may hinder the effective integration and retention of novice teachers in the profession. It is important for schools to embrace a

holistic approach to novice teacher development, one that celebrates their fresh perspectives while simultaneously equipping them with the essential skills, reflective practices, and ethical grounding needed to thrive. The implications of these findings are critical for multiple educational stakeholders. School leaders and departmental heads should establish mentorship and induction programmes that address the specific developmental needs of novice teachers. Educator training institutions may also benefit from incorporating more experiential learning to better prepare student teachers for the realities of the profession. Policymakers are urged to consider frameworks that prioritise novice teacher retention, professional wellbeing, and career-path support.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. It was confined to selected South African public primary schools, which may limit the generalisability of the findings across other provinces or school types. In addition, since all interviews were conducted in English, language limitations may have affected how some participants articulated their experiences. Future research could expand to include a broader geographical scope, explore novice teachers' self-perceptions, or conduct longitudinal studies that track novice teachers' development and retention trajectories over time. To advance positive change, education departments, school leaders, and policymakers must urgently act on these insights by designing and implementing sustainable, context-sensitive support systems that nurture novice teachers' early professional journeys. Therefore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on teacher development and retention in the public education system. By amplifying the voices of departmental heads, it provides a grounded understanding of how schools can better support novice teachers, thereby informing educational policy and practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Johannesburg. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee.

Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used QuillBot in paraphrasing ideas and correcting the grammatical errors. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of content generated using AI.

References

- Ahmed, J., Burdi, A., & Abbasi, F. A. (2024). Embracing innovation: teachers' adoption of artificial intelligence in education. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(4), 609-617. [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024\(5-IV\)53](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024(5-IV)53)
- Alele, F., & Malau-Aduli, B. (2023). *An introduction to research methods for undergraduate health profession students*. North Queensland: James Cook University.
- Aliazas, J.C., Del Rosario, A.P. & Andrade, R.R. (2023). Teaching efficacy structures and influencing factors in promoting success and retention among pre-service teachers. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 4 (3), 90-109. <https://doi.org/10.53378/353011>
- Allen, J. R. (2024). *Perspectives of novice kindergarten through grade 3 teachers on the challenges of teaching* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).

- Ayton, D., Tsindos, T., & Berkovic, D. (2023). *Phenomenology: qualitative research – a practical guide for health and social care researchers and practitioners*. Monash University
- Ben-Amram, M., & Davidovitch, N. (2024). Novice teachers and mentor teachers: from a traditional model to a holistic mentoring model in the postmodern era. *Education Sciences, 14*(2), 143-159. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14020143>
- Bertram, C. (2023). A systems approach to understanding novice teachers' experiences and professional learning. *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, 90, 11-31. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i90a01>
- Bjorklund Jr., P. (2023). “I kind of have that place to sit”: First-year teachers' experiences of belonging. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 131*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104187>
- Black, D., Hine, G., & Lavery, S. (2023). Exploring challenges faced by early-career primary school teachers: A qualitative study. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, 48(8), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.14221/1835-517X.6147>
- Boss, J. (2020). Research ethics step by step. In: *Research ethics for students in the social sciences*. Springer, Cham.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Burden, P. R. (2025). *Classroom management: Creating a successful K-12 learning community*. 8th edition, John Wiley & Sons.
- BusinessTech Newsletter (2025). *Budget speech*. 50% of South African teachers want to leave. Accessed at <https://businesstech.co.za>
- Candra, N. N. P. (2025). Pre-service EFL teachers' anxiety during teaching practicum at senior high school: Causes and solutions. *RETAIN: Journal of Research in English Language Teaching, 13*(2), 1-10.
- Carstens, K. J., Mallon, J. M., Bataineh, M., & Al-Bataineh, A. (2021). Effects of technology on student learning. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET, 20*(1), 105-113.
- Chen, J. J. (2023). Pedagogical adaptability as an essential capacity: Reflective practice of applying theory to practice among first-year early childhood teachers during remote

- instruction. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 44(4), 723-746.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2022.2147879>
- Cruz, A. A. D., & Alzate, M. M. B. (2022). Challenging prospective elementary teachers to mitigate academic procrastination. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(3), 5445-5456.
- Dahal, N., Neupane, B. P., Pant, B. P., Dhakal, R. K., Giri, D. R., Ghimire, P. R., & Bhandari, L. P. (2024). Participant selection procedures in qualitative research: experiences and some points for consideration. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 9, 1-13.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/frma.2024.1512747>
- Dahal, S. (2022). *Using rubrics in continuous assessment systems: A narrative inquiry* (Doctoral dissertation, Kathmandu University School of Education).
- Dai, T., Chung, H., Sack, J. K., Sánchez, B., & Monjaras-Gaytan, L. Y. (2024). Intrinsic motivation and school outcomes for underprivileged urban high school students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 1-29.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2024.2334045>
- Dyosini, T.P. (2024) Professional development of teachers: Perceptions and challenges of foundation phase teachers, *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14(1), 1-13.
https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sajce_v14_n1_a1572
- Felisilda, A. U., Labitad, G. F., & Comon, J. D. (2024). Challenges and performance of novice teachers: Basis for school management plan. *American Journal of Arts and Human Science*, 3(4), 96-118. <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajahs.v3i4.3866>
- Fouche, C. B., Strydom, H., & Roestenburg, W. J. H. (2021). *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (5th ed.). (pp. 289–307). Van Schaik Publishers.
- Gaikwad, S., Wadegaonkar, A., Mitra, G., & Chakravarty, D. (2023). Assessment literacy, current assessment practices, and future training: Reflections of teachers in higher education. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 22(7), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.7.1>
- George, T. (2022). *Semi-structured interview: Definition, guide & examples*. Scribe.
- Green, A. M. (2023). *Mentor teachers as reciprocal learning partners for equity*. (Doctoral thesis, University of California).

- Heidari, A. (2024). *Examining learners' evaluative judgement supported by technology-enabled feedback information*. (Dissertation, Georgia State University).
- Hogan, J. P., & White, P. (2021). A self-study exploration of early career teacher burnout and the adaptive strategies of experienced teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(5), 18-39
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.051011407741269>
- Jomuad, P. D., Antiquina, L. M. M., Cericos, E. U., Bacus, J. A., Vallejo, J. H., Dionio, B. B., ... & Clarin, A. S. (2021). Teachers' workload in relation to burnout and work performance. *International Journal of Educational Policy Research and Review*. 8 (2), 48-53. <https://doi.org/10.15739/IJEPRR.21.007>
- Karlberg, M., & Bezzina, C. (2022). The professional development needs of beginning and experienced teachers in four municipalities in Sweden. *Professional Development in Education*, 48(4), 624-641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1712451>
- Kong, Y. (2021). The role of experiential learning on students' motivation and classroom engagement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1-4.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.771272>
- Lasekan, O. A., Pachava, V., Godoy Pena, M. T., Golla, S. K., & Raje, M. S. (2024). Investigating factors influencing students' engagement in sustainable online education. *Sustainability*, 16(2), 1-15 <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16020689>
- Lilly, J. D., Wipawayangkool, K., & Pass, M. (2022). Teaching evaluations and student grades: That's not fair! *Journal of Management Education*, 46(6), 994-1023.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10525629221084338>
- Lin, X., & Huang, H. (2023). Novice teachers' identity exploration in their relations with parents in an era of social networking sites: A case study in China. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 8(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100752>
- Lomi, A. N. K., & Mbato, C. L. (2020). Struggles and strategies in constructing professional identity: The first-year teaching experiences of Indonesian EFL novice teachers. *Journal of English Education and Teaching*, 4(1), 1-19.
- Madibana, E. (2021). *Transitioning from University to Workplace: Experiences of Novice Teachers in Rural Schools* (Master's thesis, University of Pretoria, South Africa).

- Madlela, B. & Umesh, R. (2024). Utilising educational technologies to support inquiry-based learning in natural science. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 5(3), 172-197. <https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353093>
- Makoa, M. M., & Segalo, L. J. (2021). Novice teachers' experiences of challenges of their professional development. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 15(10), 930-942.
- Malabanan, J.L., Briones, E.O. & Madrideo, J.V. (2022). Pre-service teachers' readiness on online learning and their 21st century pedagogical skills. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 3(3), 79-97. <https://doi.org/10.53378/352909>
- Marimon-Martí M, Romeu T, Ojando ES, Esteve González V. (2023). Teacher digital competence: self-perception in education students. *Pixel-Bit, Rev De Medios Y Educ.* 65(2022), 275–303. <https://doi.org/10.12795/pixelbit.93208>
- Masood, S., Siddiqui, M. F., & Arif, K. (2022). Challenges pre-service teachers face during teaching practicum: An anatomy of teachers' education programmes. *VFAST Transactions on Education and Social Sciences*, 10(2), 131-141. <https://doi.org/10.21015/vtess.v10i2.1049>
- Mat, N. C., & Jamaludin, K. A. (2024). Effectiveness of practices and applications of student-centred teaching and learning in primary schools: A systematic literature review. *Int. J. Acad. Res. Progress. Educ. Dev.*, 13(3), 1025-1044. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/21733>
- Mbhele, T. (2024). Novice teachers' challenges and strategies in coping with COVID-19 at a rural school. *International Journal of Studies in Inclusive Education*, 1(1), 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijisie.v1i1.1258>
- Momdjian, L., Manegre, M., & Gutiérrez-Colón, M. (2024). Assessing and bridging the digital competence gap: A comparative study of Lebanese student teachers and in-service teachers using the DigCompEdu framework. *Discover Education*, 3, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00308-2>
- Nemaston, A. R. (2020). *Novice teachers' experience of support from the Head of Department in primary schools*. University of Pretoria (South Africa).
- Nwoko, J. C., Anderson, E., Adegboye, O., Malau-Aduli, A. E., & Malau-Aduli, B. S. (2024). Navigating teachers' occupational well-being in the tides of classroom processes and

- school structures. *Education Sciences*, 14(11), 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14111225>
- Ortan, F., Simut, C., & Simut, R. (2021). Self-efficacy, job satisfaction and teacher well-being in the K-12 educational system. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(23), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312763>
- Palmer, S. N. (2023). *A phenomenological study of novice teachers' experiences with diverse classroom readiness*. Doctoral Dissertations and Projects.
- Pervin, N., & Mokhtar, M. (2022). The interpretivist research paradigm: A subjective notion of a social context. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(2), 419-428.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i2/12938>
- Pierson, E. M. (2023). Preservice teacher education programs, novice teachers, and classroom management preparation, *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: 13(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.7710/2168-0620.0285>
- Pilous, R., Leuders, T., & Rüede, C. (2023). Novice and expert teachers' use of content-related knowledge during pedagogical reasoning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 129, 1-10.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104149>
- Rajsiglová, I., & Mihulová, K. (2023). The influence of undergraduate preparation on professional beginnings in school practice of novice teachers. In D. Otega-Sánchez (Ed.) *Education Annual Volume 2023*. IntechOpen.
- Ramnarain, U., & Malope, M. (2023). Comparing the technological pedagogical content knowledge-practical proficiency of novice and experienced life sciences teachers. *South African Journal of Education*, 43(4), 1-10.
https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-educat_v43_n4_a9
- Russell, M. B., Attoh, P. A., Chase, T., Gong, T., Kim, J., & Liggans, G. L. (2020). Examining burnout and the relationships between job characteristics, engagement, and turnover intention among US educators. *Sage Open*, 10(4), 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020972361>
- Schaefer, L., Hennig, L., & Clandinin, J. (2021). Intentions of early career teachers: Should we stay or should we go now? *Teaching Education*, 32(3), 309-322.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2020.1730317>

- Silva, R., Farias, C., & Mesquita, I. (2021). Challenges faced by preservice and novice teachers in implementing student-centred models: A systematic review. *European Physical Education Review*, 27(4), 798-816. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X21995216>
- Siregar, V. V., & Fatonah, S. (2022). The verbal and nonverbal reinforcement approach is emotion control to increase self-confidence of elementary school students. *Jurnal Ilmiah Sekolah Dasar*, 6(3), 501-508. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jisd.v6i2.45329>
- Stewart, T. T., & Jansky, T. A. (2022). Novice teachers and embracing struggle: Dialogue and reflection in professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education: Leadership and Professional Development*, 1, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tatep.2022.100002>
- Sydnor, J., Davis, T. R., & Daley, S. (2024). Learning from the unexpected journeys of novice teachers' professional identity development. *Education Sciences*, 14(8), 895-916. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080895>
- Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G. D. (2022). 'Qualitative' studies. *StatPearls [Internet]*, StatPearls Publishing, FL, (2), 93-187. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395>
- Trujillo-Torres, J. M., Aznar-Díaz, I., Cáceres-Reche, M. P., Mentado-Labao, T., & Barrera-Corominas, A. (2023). Intergenerational learning and its impact on the improvement of educational processes. *Education Sciences*, 13(10), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13101019>
- Vygotsky, Lev (1978). *Mind in Society*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Zhang, X., Admiraal, W., & Saab, N. (2021). Teachers' motivation to participate in continuous professional development: relationship with factors at the personal and school level. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 47(5), 714-731. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2021.1942804>