

# **Sink or Swim: Stories from Indonesian Beginning Teachers' First Year of Teaching**

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## **Introduction**

What prospective teachers learn and practice in the college classrooms—in a controlled environment without children present—is often substantially different from the reality of their first teaching assignments (Gujarati, 2012). The teaching profession cannot be simulated in a university classroom that fails to provide a real classroom atmosphere and experience to practice teaching (Kavanoz and Yuksel, 2010). Moreover, short field experience that focuses more on how to teach subject matter; lacks rigorous reflective practice; or without continuing guidance and support from experienced faculty members cannot provide prospective teachers with the essentials to succeed in their classroom (Hanuscin and Musikul, 2007). Upon graduation, novice or beginning teachers will generally spend their first year of teaching, or an entire academic year, managing both teaching and non-teaching jobs. They will adapt to their new work and familiarise themselves with students, parents, other teachers, and principals in a real school setting. Hence, an induction programme for beginning teachers in their first year of teaching is crucial to help them start the profession.

In the context of induction for beginning teachers, previous studies also reported differences in types of induction in developed and developing countries. Stephens and Moskowitz (1997) found that developed countries such as Australia, Japan, and New Zealand provide promising teacher induction models that operate within a culture of shared responsibility and an environment where all professionals take active roles in the acculturation and transition of new teachers. The programmes use multipronged sets of support strategies, including mentoring, modelling good practice, orientations, and in-service training; they focus on assisting rather than assessing new teachers.

Induction for teachers in many developing countries, however, is quite different. Kuranchie (2013) explained that the majority of beginning teachers in Ghana, for example, do not receive induction upon assumption of their teaching duty. Schools do not set in place measures to ensure that essential steps in a teacher's career are executed effectively. Ghana's experience posits that a comprehensive induction system, which fosters professional learning communities through a network of supports, is critical for retaining highly qualified teachers. The inexistence of induction support for beginning teachers is exacerbated by the lack of principals' ability to manage teachers and schools due to their lack of leadership preparation (Bush and Oduro, 2006). Given the remarkable differences between the developed and developing countries' contexts regarding how teachers are orientating in their early years on the job, little is known on how the beginning teachers in developing countries adapt. Many studies examining beginning teachers' first years of teaching have been conducted in developed country settings (Schuck et al., 2012; Stanulis et al., 2002; Gratch, 2001).

To understand the narrative of Indonesian beginning teachers in their induction year, CRT Indonesia carries out a study to learn how beginning teachers experience their first years of becoming a teacher. The study collects data from sixteen beginning primary school teachers who recently graduated from the Teacher Professional Education Programme (*Pendidikan Profesi Guru/PPG*) in seven universities located in Java, Indonesia's most populated island. The teachers voluntarily participate in this two-year longitudinal study (2019–2021). They are required to write bi-monthly essays on selected topics of how beginning teachers undergo socialisation in their first two years of teaching. Six topics from the first year of the study are 1) motivation to become a teacher, 2) good teaching according to beginning teachers, 3) the job search process, 4) how beginning teachers manage their workload, 5) how beginning

teachers socialise with the school community, and 6) how beginning teachers go through the first months of teaching. This paper reports data from the last three topics.

At the end of the study, there would be twelve essays written by each teacher. In the months when the teachers are not submitting essays, the researchers interview them by phone to elaborate or clarify information on their writing and prompt the upcoming topic. At the end of the first year of data collection, face-to-face interviews were conducted as this study is part of more extensive research of beginning teachers.

## **Context of Teaching in Indonesian Schools**

In Indonesia, teachers are required to hold a bachelor's degree, even though more than 50 percent of Indonesian adults only have nine years of schooling. In general, teachers can be categorised as public and private school teachers. In public schools, the teachers may comprise civil servants and contract teachers. The latter are usually recruited informally and often without any selection process other than meeting administrative requirements. Many civil servant teachers start their career as contract teachers because the civil servant position is not opened regularly. When the position becomes available, teachers can apply to their respective district government, who oversees the school where they wish to teach.

Usually, the school where the newly appointed civil servant teacher is assigned is unlike the school where they worked for several years as a contract teacher. In reality, there is no continuation from a teacher's previous contract status to their civil service appointment. The probationary period for a newly appointed civil servant teacher starts upon their civil service appointment. This "rule" disregards the teacher's previous years of service as a contract teacher. Teachers are put in a situation where they have to start over, at a different school, when they finally secure the civil servant status.

There is also the issue of teacher quality. Indonesian teachers, irrespective of their status, suffer from chronic absenteeism (SMERU, 2014) and lack mastery in the subjects they teach as well as the pedagogical skills necessary to lead classroom learning (Chang et al., 2014). Indonesia's teachers remain unmotivated to teach regardless of their salary. A civil servant teacher may receive a salary up to fifteen times greater than that of contract teachers. In contrast, private school teachers' salaries vary depending on school management. In most Indonesian districts, private school teachers' salaries are comparable to that of civil servant teachers. Kusumawardhani (2017) showed that the salary increase, as an implication of Indonesia's teacher certification intended for senior teachers, did not have effects in improving student test scores or teacher attendance. With this poor teaching culture, it is despairing for Indonesian teachers to move forward. Hence, the country puts high hope on the new teacher cohort to carry out the education reform

## **New Teacher Managing the Workload: Hit the Ground Running**

Of the sixteen teachers, half qualified as civil servants upon their first year of graduation. The other half worked as a contract teacher at public schools or were hired by private schools. According to the teachers working at public primary schools, they did not undergo any induction. Minimal support and guidance were provided to novice teachers; even if there were, they were limited to orientation on administrative tasks. From their very first day at school, novice teachers—both contractual and civil servants—were given full responsibility as a homeroom teacher, and thus had to specify all learning and non-learning activities for their students.

In private schools, novice teachers said they had gone through induction weeks where they received orientation on the school and its students' characteristics. After completing the orientation, novice teachers are fully responsible for their students. Most of these teachers also reported that their principals assigned them with various responsibilities other than teaching, such as serving as the school administrator or extracurricular instructor, including occupying a higher position as the vice-principal of curriculum.

There are at least two explanations for the absence of orientation for new teaching staff, as reported in this study. First, civil servant teachers assigned to public schools by the government or teachers hired by private schools are regarded as highly qualified as they have successfully passed the rigorous recruitment process. Moreover, the teachers have obtained teaching certificates from PPG—which are approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture—after previously completed a four-year undergraduate teaching degree, and thus regarded as “professional” teachers. Schools may think that the teachers have undergone extensive training in the professional education program, which makes induction seem unnecessary. The school may consider the teachers’ qualifications as an asset, and decides to assign some of them with important roles such as vice-principal despite their probationary status. Yet, in the phone interview, teachers mentioned that public schools do not hold induction for novice teachers, including those who have never attended PPG.

Second, schools have difficulty in staffing classrooms. In an interview, a teacher mentioned that he was hired as a contract teacher to replace a teacher who passed the civil servant recruitment and was deployed to another school. For both public and private schools, staffing classrooms with new contract teachers is already challenging, let alone assisting novice teachers in adjusting to teaching. Formally, civil servant teachers must receive mentorship from senior staff in their probationary year. However, senior teachers think that such a task would increase their already high workload. According to the teachers that participate in our study, their schools do not provide incentive scheme for senior teachers (e.g., fewer hours of teaching) to assist novice teachers. Even if there were teaching-related mentorship for novice teachers, it is usually provided by the principal under the mandatory biennial supervisory activity. As for contract teachers, due to their low salary, many of them then take on additional responsibilities as a school operator and extracurricular instructor. This other, non-teaching jobs can bring the teachers extra income, so this mutual arrangement is seen as beneficial for both the school and the novice teachers.

### **Socialisation with the School Community: Maintaining Good Relationship with the Superiors**

All teachers in their essays mentioned that they did not meet significant challenges during the socialisation with school principals, senior teachers, school administrators, parents, or students. Many teachers underline the importance of maintaining a relationship with school principals and senior teachers and seeing relationships with students and parents as the least important thing to think about.

The teachers described how a good relationship with the school principal might be beneficial for their future career or increase their chances of becoming involved in continuing professional development programmes. Maintaining a good relationship with senior teachers is important as well as they need advice on how to survive in school, or at least how to be accepted as part of the group. The teachers reported that they try to immerse themselves in their workplace by doing extra, voluntary work requested by senior teachers, such as doing tasks related to information and communication technology or acting as a substitute teacher for when a senior teacher has to attend activities out of school. Contract teachers in particular see that a good relationship with senior teachers is also influential to their extra income. Senior teachers who receive higher allowance often share some of their earnings to low-paid school staff—including contract teachers whose salary payments are irregular and are paid every three months. The teachers did not report any challenges regarding the adaptation process in communicating with parents. While they think that maintaining a good relationship with parents is equally important, many of the teachers reported that they often communicate with parents in a less formal and friendly setting. Teachers usually communicate with parents in an online chat platform to inform student’s activities or behaviour at school. For most of the teachers, this part of work is not as demanding as maintaining relationship with the school principal.

## The First Months of Teaching

Beginning teachers reported that they looked for teaching strategies and methods that may work for their students in their first months of teaching. Their main inspiration comes from, among others, other novice teachers who are also PPG alumni or the teachers' former fellows at the teacher college. The teachers also said that they sought examples from sources on the Internet.

The teachers mentioned that students' misbehaviour, students' varied academic abilities, and the unavailability of school facilities were major challenges they met in their first months of teaching. Although, few teachers noted that looking for a creative way of teaching without violating the curriculum standard set by the school or the government was the main challenge in the first semester at school. For example, teaching in primary schools must use an integrated-thematic approach, not a subject-based one. However, in teaching the subject like mathematics, a teacher may provide supplementary lessons for their students to master mathematics content, in addition to the thematic teaching suggested by the curriculum.

One teacher in a private school described that his school has set a rigorous standard and procedure for teaching staff in delivering each lesson. He had tried to follow the standard as best as he could. But when he found out that there is a big difference between the targeted standard and students' responses in the classroom, he decided to use a different approach from what was suggested by the school. This decision was made solely by the teacher, without any mentorship or monitoring from the school principal or senior teachers.

Teachers also mentioned that they realize that ideally, a teacher should prepare a lesson plan for each meeting. However, the norms that apply in schools are different. Before the new school year starts, teachers are required to prepare a lesson plan for the entire school year, or at least for one semester. Lesson plans are commonly developed in a teacher working group (*kelompok kerja guru/KKG*). In the KKG, teachers within a sub-district work together to prepare the lesson plan, usually resulting in a uniform lesson plan collection used by all teachers in the group. According to the teachers, such practice is common as schools prepare lesson plans for the school's accreditation purpose. During the accreditation process to maintain the school's quality assurance, which is conducted every four years, an external inspector will have a long checklist of school administration, including lesson plan collection and teacher logs. As the primary concern of the inspection is the format rather than the quality of the lesson plan, schools usually use the ready-to-use lesson plan produced in the KKG. As long as the format is correct, the external inspector will not make comments on the lesson plan. The teachers at public schools further explained that in addition to the lesson plan prepared in KKG, they also develop a more-personalised lesson plan for supervisory activities conducted once or twice every semester by the school principal. During supervision, the principal will make comments and give feedback to the teacher's performance and administrative work, including on the lesson plan.

In private schools that apply a full-day scheme, the teachers are working for eight hours a day. These schools often require teachers to prepare the following-day lesson during their spare time in the afternoon. However, this practice might not be observed in public schools as teaching is regarded as a half-day job, and teachers leave school immediately after school hours. A female teacher working at a public school admitted that her primary motivation for becoming a teacher was to have a "work-life balance". According to her, a teacher can work half-day in a school located close to home, so that she can still take care of her children and family.

## Conclusion

Our findings show that beginning teachers in Indonesian schools receive little support in their first year on the job. Instead, during this supposedly induction process, while teachers are still learning and looking for what works and does not work for their students, schools assign them with various additional

non-teaching tasks. Schools are in need of teachers, and the novice teachers are seen as fresh blood to the school aging workforce, regardless of their probation status.

This disorganisation in teacher orientation year is partially due to the unclear teacher recruitment and deployment system, the lack of continuity between contract and civil service status, and the non-existence of career path for teachers at the education system level. Teachers' recruitment and deployment are based on national yearly budget allocation, rather than on schools' needs (Huang et al., forthcoming). Moreover, teachers' career plans are not well-defined, resulting in schools distributing the same workload to all teachers despite differences in their career stage.

For novice teachers, the experience-based incentives provided only for senior teachers discourage them from taking the extra mile in improving their teaching quality. Apart from the non-merit seniority-based incentives, the teaching corp is structured to reward individuals who display loyalty and obedience, and that being different might not be desirable. As a result, once the novice teachers enter the system, they are unlikely to swim against the current. In an effort to gain acceptance from the school community, beginning teachers who are in the stage of shaping their identity must immerse themselves into the established—practicing business as usual—norms in the school. The norms and values that put administrative compliance over education quality are now transmitted into the new teaching generation.

In the context of recent educational reform, one effect of this emphasis on following directions and avoiding drawing attention to oneself is that novice teachers may face problematic situation when they try to implement reform ideas into practice. If this poor teaching culture continues, the idea to have dedicated and enthusiastic beginning teachers who defy all odds and make learning happen with passion may never materialise.

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