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Self-directed learning as a resource for beginner teacher agency in South African schools

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Background: Beginner teachers enter classrooms where learner behaviour, inclusive education, parent involvement and resource limitations can challenge their readiness and ability to take purposeful action.

Aim: The study explored how beginner teachers used self-directed learning (SDL) to exercise professional agency in the shift from formal teacher preparation to classroom practice and how school contexts facilitated or hindered this process.

Setting: The study was conducted with beginner teachers in selected public schools in one education district in the North West province in South Africa, of which 94.1% were employed in township or rural schools.

Methods: An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used. Sixty-eight teachers completed the SDL Instrument and an adapted first-year teaching preparedness and professional development questionnaire. Quantitative patterns informed semi-structured interviews with 15 volunteers from the survey sample.

Results: Participants reported high SDL scores across four dimensions. Preparedness was comparatively lower for discipline, behavioural and physical support needs, parent engagement and work–life balance than for content teaching and assessment. Interviews showed agency through goal-setting, reflection, digital resource use and collegial consultation, while overcrowding, inaccessible infrastructure and uneven support restricted what teachers could enact.

Conclusion: Self-directed learning was one professional learning resource through which beginner teachers enacted agency; it was not equivalent to agency and could not substitute for induction, mentoring or equitable resourcing.

Contribution: The article distinguishes SDL from teacher agency and proposes an empirically grounded ecological framework that links diagnosis, goal-setting, resource mobilisation, action, monitoring and reflection to enabling institutional conditions.

Keywords: beginner teachers; self-directed learning; teacher agency; professional development; induction; mentoring; inclusive education; South Africa.

Introduction

The transition from initial teacher education to classroom praxis is a demanding phase in the careers of beginner teachers. Newly qualified teachers must translate university-based knowledge into situated judgement, responsive classroom action and continuing professional learning. This transition in South Africa is influenced by unequal school resources, large classes, learner diversity and unequal access to induction and mentoring (Du Plessis & Mestry 2019; Esau & Maarman 2021; Mpu & Adu 2021). International studies also reveal that classroom management, inclusion and broader relational aspects of teaching are familiar challenges for beginning teachers (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis 2017; Kozikoğlu & Senemoğlu 2018).

The research problem is not just whether the beginner teacher has a formal qualification. It is about whether they can make informed professional judgements and keep learning when they encounter situations for which they have not been adequately prepared in initial teacher education. Induction is linked to teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen 2017), and South African scholarship has demanded support that is related to initial teacher education, workplace learning and the realities of public school contexts (Esau & Maarman 2021; Jeram & Davids 2020). A narrow focus on recruitment, therefore, overlooks the professional environments in which beginner teachers must develop.

In this article, teacher agency refers to the capacity to make purposeful, professionally informed choices and to act on them in relation to teaching, classroom management, professional learning and wider school responsibilities. Agency is not treated as a stable personal trait. Ecological accounts conceptualise it as an achievement that emerges through the interaction of teachers' knowledge, beliefs and aspirations with the cultural, structural and material conditions of their work (Eteläpelto et al. 2013; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson 2015). This definition is important because it prevents responsibility for systemic constraints from being transferred to individual beginner teachers.

Self-directed learning (SDL) is related to, but not synonymous with, teacher agency. It describes a professional learning process in which teachers diagnose learning needs, formulate goals, identify human and material resources, implement strategies and evaluate outcomes (Knowles 1975; Louws et al. 2017). These processes may support agency by enabling beginner teachers to respond deliberately to classroom problems. However, agency is broader: It also includes the pedagogical, relational and organisational choices teachers are able to enact within their particular schools. Mentors, colleagues, school leadership, professional learning communities and material resources can therefore expand or restrict the possibilities for self-directed action (Eteläpelto et al. 2013; Priestley et al. 2015).

Existing literature has examined beginner teacher challenges, induction, practice-based professional learning and the theory–practice divide (Jeram & Davids 2020; Kozikoğlu & Senemoğlu 2018; Ronfeldt & McQueen 2017). Less is known about how beginner teachers in predominantly rural and township South African schools use SDL to respond to immediate classroom demands, how these learning practices are expressed as professional agency and where that agency reaches its contextual limits. This is the knowledge gap addressed in the article. The study connects preparedness, self-initiated professional learning and enabling or constraining school conditions rather than examining them as separate issues.

The aim was to examine how SDL functioned as a resource for beginner teacher agency during the transition from structured teacher preparation to classroom praxis. The objectives were to describe participants' SDL perceptions; identify areas of stronger and comparatively lower preparedness; examine the learning strategies and support networks used to address classroom challenges; explain how contextual conditions enabled or constrained purposeful action; and integrate the findings into a framework for SDL-enabled beginner teacher development. These objectives locate agency in classroom practice, professional learning and the conditions under which teachers can act.

Conceptual framework

Self-directed learning and adult professional learning

Knowles' (1975) formulation of SDL is retained as seminal work because it identifies the core process of diagnosing needs, setting goals, locating resources, acting and evaluating learning. More recent teacher-learning research shows that teachers' self-direction concerns what they want to learn, how they pursue that learning and why particular professional problems become priorities (Louws et al. 2017). The four dimensions measured in the present study: (1) learning motivation, (2) planning and implementation, (3) self-monitoring and (4) interpersonal communication – represent related components of that process rather than separate outcomes of SDL (Cheng et al. 2010).

Adult learning theory helps explain why immediate classroom problems can become powerful triggers for professional learning. Adults draw on prior experience, value relevance and tend to engage strongly when learning can be applied to an identifiable problem (Knowles 1975). For beginner teachers, this means that professional learning is likely to be experienced as useful when it assists them to interpret and address concrete demands such as disruptive behaviour, differentiated support, parent communication or administrative work. This does not diminish the value of theoretical knowledge; rather, it emphasises the need for opportunities to connect theory with rehearsal, feedback and situated judgement (Guskey 2003; Jeram & Davids 2020).

Teacher agency as an ecological achievement

Professional agency is enacted when practitioners influence their work, make choices, take positions and pursue professional purposes within social and material conditions (Eteläpelto et al. 2013). Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological approach similarly argues that agency is achieved through the interaction of past experience, future aspirations and the practical possibilities of the present environment. This perspective is relevant for beginner teachers: A teacher might identify a need and intend to do something about it, but the available time, mentoring, accessible infrastructure, teaching materials and institutional support will affect what can be accomplished.

The relationship between SDL and agency is therefore enabling rather than equivalent. Self-directed learning can provide processes through which teachers strengthen knowledge, test strategies and review practice. Agency is visible when these learning processes inform purposeful decisions and actions in classroom management, pedagogy, inclusion, parent engagement or professional participation. In inclusive education, for example, agency may involve adapting instruction and mobilising support, but the feasibility of such action depends on access, resources and collaborative expertise (Mpu & Adu 2021; Pantić 2015).

Social mediation and classroom praxis

Social constructivism explains how self-directed professional learning can remain self-initiated while being socially mediated. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development concerns the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what becomes possible with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. In beginner teacher development, mentors, heads of department, subject specialists and experienced colleagues can scaffold the

interpretation of classroom incidents, model strategies and provide feedback. As competence develops, support can be reduced, and the teacher can act with greater independence. Professional learning communities extend this mediated process by making inquiry, resource-sharing and reflection collective rather than episodic (Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008).

Sustained and collaborative professional development is influential when it creates repeated opportunities to examine practice, enact alternatives and receive feedback, rather than merely transmitting decontextualised information (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner 2017). This argument connects social constructivism to agency: Collaborative support does not replace the teacher's judgement but expands the repertoire from which purposeful action can be taken. It also connects to SDL because interpersonal communication and the deliberate selection of human resources are part of how teachers direct their own development.

Classroom praxis is used here to denote the iterative relationship between professional knowledge, action and reflection (Arnold et al. 2012). The integrated conceptual proposition is that beginner teachers enact agency when they identify a practice problem, set a learning purpose, mobilise appropriate resources, implement and adapt a response and evaluate its consequences. This cycle is strengthened by supportive relationships and institutional conditions and constrained when teachers lack time, expertise, infrastructure or resources. The framework therefore guides analysis of both teachers' self-directed actions and the ecology in which those actions occur.

Research methods and design

Research paradigm and explanatory sequential design

The study was located within a pragmatic paradigm because the research problem required both an account of measurable patterns and an explanation of how those patterns were experienced in practice. Pragmatism supported the selection and integration of methods according to their contribution to the research purpose rather than privileging one form of evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A non-experimental explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used: Quantitative data were collected and analysed first, selected results were then used to refine the qualitative interview guide, and the two sets of findings were integrated during interpretation. This sequence added value by combining the breadth of survey patterns with contextual explanations of how beginner teachers learned and acted in their schools.

The full data collection and connecting sequence took approximately 16 weeks. The survey phase was completed before interviews began. The interval between phases was used for statistical analysis, identification of results that required explanation and refinement of interview prompts. Thus, the phases were sequential rather than concurrent. The available study record did not retain separate calendar dates for each phase, and the overall duration is reported as the most precise timing available. The data sources, connecting logic and analytical purpose of each stage are summarised in Table 1.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in selected public schools in one education district of the North West province. Eligibility was not restricted by school setting: Participants had to be qualified teachers with less than 4 years of teaching experience, employed in a primary or secondary public school in the selected district and willing to provide informed consent. Purposive sampling was used to recruit teachers who could speak directly to the transition from initial teacher education to classroom practice. The study was not designed to compare rural, township, town and city schools.

The quantitative sample comprised 68 beginner teachers. Of these, 50 (73.5%) taught in secondary schools and 18 (26.5%) in primary schools; and 64 (94.1%) worked in township or rural schools and four (5.9%) in town or city schools. Fourteen participants (20.6%) were in their first year, eight (11.8%) in their second year and 46 (67.6%) in their third year of teaching. The sample included 33 males (48.5%), 34 females (50.0%) and one missing gender response (1.5%). The four town or city participants were retained because they met the eligibility criteria; they did not constitute a comparison stratum. The strong rural or township concentration is therefore interpreted as a defining feature of this context-specific sample, not as evidence about differences between settings.

A volunteer or convenience subsample of the quantitative participants was used for the qualitative phase. Inclusion required completion of the survey, continued eligibility as a beginner teacher and separate consent to be interviewed. An independent recruiter was used to schedule eligible volunteers until 15 interviews were completed, and the

TABLE 1: Data sources, connecting logic and analytical purpose.

Stage	Participants and data	Purpose	Connection or integration
Quantitative phase	68 beginner teachers	Describe preparedness, SDL dimensions and professional development participation; assess internal consistency and identify patterns requiring qualitative explanation.	Identify patterns requiring qualitative explanation, particularly lower preparedness areas, high SDL scores and uneven professional development support.
Connecting stage	Quantitative results and draft interview schedule	Translate selected survey patterns into open-ended prompts.	Prompts addressed inclusive education, learner behaviour, parent engagement, wider school roles, goal-setting, resource-seeking and support.
Qualitative phase	15 volunteers from the survey sample	Explain how challenges were experienced and how teachers sought, enacted and evaluated responses.	Provide contextual mechanisms and counter-examples for the quantitative patterns.
Integration	Both data sets	Compare convergence, complementarity and limits across findings.	Use the integrated conclusions – not either phase alone – to construct the framework in Table 2.

SDL, self-directed learning.

researcher monitored to see if additional interviews were yielding substantively new information. Participants who did not complete the survey, no longer met the experience criterion or declined further participation were not included. The qualitative sample was used to explain survey patterns rather than to represent a separate population.

Phase 1: Quantitative data collection and analysis

The first instrument was the standardised Self-Directed Learning Instrument (SDLI) developed by Cheng et al. (2010), which consisted of 20 items. It is based on five-point Likert-type response options and consists of four dimensions: learning motivation, planning and implementation, self-monitoring and interpersonal communication. These dimensions were chosen because they align directly with the study's focus on how beginner teachers identify, organise, monitor and socially resource their professional learning. The second instrument was based on the first year of teaching and professional development items created by Glazerman et al. (2006). The preparedness section included 23 items rated on a four-point scale ranging from 'not at all prepared' to 'very well prepared' and other items that asked whether professional development topics were offered and attended, whether they were useful and whether they had an impact on teaching and SDL.

Before full administration, the questionnaire package was reviewed by an independent statistician for face validity and pre-tested with five beginner teachers from the same district. The pre-test assessed clarity, relevance and completion procedures and supported the instruments' face validity in the local context. The published instruments are fully attributed in the manuscript.

Quantitative analysis used frequencies and percentages to describe preparedness and professional development participation, and means and standard deviations to summarise the four SDLI dimensions. Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency against the criterion of 0.70 specified in the study protocol (Maree & Pietersen 2020). The SDLI dimensions ranged from 0.79 to 0.91, while the two first-year challenge factors yielded 0.857 and 0.901; these values indicate good to excellent internal consistency for this sample. An exploratory comparison between lower and higher SDL groups appeared in the source statistical analysis. However, the available statistical record did not specify the subgroup sizes or the rule used to classify participants in the middle SDLI category. Because these details could not be verified, the subgroup comparison was excluded from the present article.

Connecting stage and Phase 2: Qualitative data collection and analysis

The connecting stage followed the initial statistical analysis. Items with comparatively lower preparedness – especially discipline, behavioural and physical support needs, parent engagement and work–life balance – were translated into interview prompts that asked participants to describe incidents, available support and strategies attempted. High SDLI means prompted questions about goal-setting, resource selection, self-monitoring and learning with colleagues. Professional development results informed prompts about which forms of support were useful, missing or insufficiently practical. This procedure made the qualitative phase explanatory rather than merely parallel (Draucker et al. 2020).

Semi-structured online interviews of approximately 45 min were conducted with 15 participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. Analysis was inductive and iterative: Transcripts were read repeatedly, meaningful segments were assigned open codes, related codes were compared and grouped through focused coding, and categories were reassembled into themes that addressed the research questions (Saldaña 2013). The researcher checked transcripts for accuracy, reviewed the developing categories with the supervisory team and considered saturation across the completed interviews. Six themes were generated and then organised into three analytic clusters for a more coherent presentation: (1) practical demands and confidence; (2) professional learning and support; and (3) self-directed action within contextual constraints.

For the article, the original identifiers (which contained personal information) were replaced with neutral labels P01–P12 for the participants quoted. The labels are not demographic and do not allow for the reconstruction of identity. This change enhances confidentiality while retaining an auditable link between each quotation and a single participant record.

Integration

Integration occurred through side-by-side comparison of quantitative patterns and qualitative explanations. Convergence was identified when survey and interview evidence addressed the same issue in compatible ways; complementarity was identified when interviews supplied mechanisms or contextual detail not available from the survey; and limits were noted where self-reported tendencies did not imply that teachers could overcome structural constraints. The final conclusions from both phases informed the framework, rather than the framework being generated directly from a single statistical or thematic result.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from North-West University and the Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. NWU-00316-24-A2).

Results

Participant profile and contextual concentration

The participant profile locates the findings primarily in township and rural public school contexts: 64 participants of the 68 participants (94.1%) worked in these settings,

50 participants (73.5%) taught at the secondary level, and 46 participants (67.6%) were in their third year of teaching. The concentration was consistent with the eligible volunteers reached through the purposive recruitment process, but it was not a deliberate stratification for contextual comparison. The high proportion of third-year teachers is significant because it shows that transition-related learning needs extended beyond initial orientation and remained relevant across the first 3 years.

Preparedness for classroom praxis

To avoid treating any single negative response as proof of a 'problematic' area, the analysis uses the term comparatively lower preparedness for items on which at least 40% of participants selected either 'not at all prepared' or 'somewhat prepared'. On this transparent threshold, lower preparedness areas were working with learners who had behavioural challenges (51.5%), managing discipline (51.4%), working with learners who had physical challenges (47.0%), working effectively with parents (45.6%), balancing teaching and private life (45.6%) and working with learners who had emotional or developmental challenges (44.2% for each).

The contrast with core instructional tasks was marked. The combined 'not at all' and 'somewhat prepared' responses were 20.6% for teaching subject content, 14.7% for assessing learners and 17.6% for improving academic performance; correspondingly, 79.4%, 85.3% and 82.3% felt well or very well prepared in these areas. The pattern therefore refers to a relative difference across domains, not to a claim that all participants were unprepared. It suggests stronger perceived preparation for curriculum-related work than for relational, inclusive and boundary-spanning demands that are encountered from the start of teaching. This interpretation is consistent with research on practice-based learning and inclusive preparation (Jeram & Davids 2020; Massouti 2021; Mpu & Adu 2021).

Self-directed learning dimensions

Participants reported high mean scores on all four SDLI dimensions: (1) learning motivation ($M = 4.12$), (2) planning and implementation ($M = 3.95$), (3) self-monitoring ($M = 4.08$) and (4) interpersonal communication ($M = 4.20$). These constructs are dimensions of SDL rather than separate 'levels' or outcomes. The relatively high interpersonal communication mean is especially relevant to the conceptual framework because it indicates that participants associated self-direction with learning through other people, not only with solitary study.

Professional development participation and perceived value

All 68 survey participants responded to the professional development section. Attendance was highest for lesson planning (77.9%), content-area knowledge (75.0%), instructional techniques (72.1%), classroom management (70.6%) and analysis of learner assessment (70.6%). Fifty-four participants (79.4%) reported that professional development made a moderate or large difference to teaching performance, while 51 (75.0%) reported a moderate or significant difference to SDL. Support was less prominent for human resource policies, assessment of community and school resources, administrative paperwork and non-teaching duties.

These findings are discussed together with the interviews rather than treated as self-explanatory. They indicate that participants valued professional learning connected to classroom work, but attendance and perceived value do not establish that every activity addressed the most urgent needs. The interview evidence was needed to explain why practical, differentiated and follow-up support remained necessary (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017; Guskey 2003).

Qualitative explanations of classroom praxis

Practical demands and confidence

The first cluster combined the themes of managing inclusive classrooms, confidence in supporting learners with physical challenges, parent engagement and wider school roles. Participants described how behaviour management consumed instructional time and exposed uncertainty about practical responses.

> 'Disruptive behaviour, learners failing to adhere to the rules I give them. I was frustrated most of the time, and I did not know how to best handle the situation'. (Beginner, P01, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'I had a challenge of managing my classes effectively as a result of disruptive learners; I was additionally unable to conduct and complete a lesson within a stipulated timeframe'. (Beginner, P02, Less than 4 years experience)

Inclusive education was experienced as both a knowledge problem and a contextual problem. Limited practical exposure during teacher education reduced confidence, while inaccessible facilities narrowed what teachers could implement.

> 'I was not very confident because I had never worked with such learners during training at varsity. I was not sure how to adapt my lessons or the physical classroom setup to accommodate their needs'. (Beginner, P04, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'There was no correlation between the university's inclusive-education-ready school and the school I was in; it lacked the basics to accommodate learners with physical challenges'. (Beginner, P05, Less than 4 years experience)

Parent engagement and wider school responsibilities generated similar uncertainty. One participant described the first parent meeting as 'quite nerve-wracking' (Beginner, P03, Less than 4 years experience), while another stated that university preparation had focused mainly on curriculum and pedagogy rather than school management roles (Beginner, P04, Less than 4 years experience). These accounts provide the mechanism behind the preparedness contrast: Participants possessed curriculum knowledge but had fewer rehearsed strategies for relational and organisational demands.

Professional learning and support

The second cluster concerned the kinds of support that strengthened confidence and the forms of professional learning participants considered useful. Mentoring and specialist guidance supported the movement from uncertainty towards more informed action.

> 'I now feel more confident after being guided by my mentor and subject specialist'. (Beginner, P06, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'More practical workshops and simulations during teacher training would have helped, along with the help and support of a social worker at the school level'. (Beginner, P04, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'Workshops, peer collaboration, and informal mentor feedback helped me feel more prepared; the university had not covered differentiated support in enough depth'. (Beginner, P09, Less than 4 years experience)

The quotations clarify why generic workshop attendance could coexist with unmet needs. Participants were asking for modelling, simulation, observation, feedback and access to specialised support. In social-constructivist terms, these activities provide scaffolding for the interpretation and rehearsal of practices that are not mastered through abstract information alone.

Self-directed action within contextual constraints

The third cluster concerned goal-setting, resource mobilisation, enactment and reflection. Participants described identifiable professional problems, selected resources and attempted changes; their learning was therefore purposeful rather than random information-seeking.

> 'I aimed to improve my classroom management, and I achieved that by attending online classes on management'. (Beginner, P10, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'This year, I set a goal to improve student engagement by integrating interactive tools like Google Forms; lessons became more dynamic'. (Beginner, P11, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'I wanted to plan all lessons a week in advance; I used templates from senior colleagues, watched online tutorials and asked for feedback'. (Beginner, P03, Less than 4 years experience)

Resource-seeking was networked. Participants consulted colleagues, district subject groups, departmental websites and online videos. This explains the high interpersonal communication score: Self-direction included judgement about which person or resource might help with a specific problem and whether the proposed strategy could be adapted to the local classroom.

> 'In our Language Department, we have a district-wide teacher group; that is where I mostly obtain resources or support'. (Beginner, P02, Less than 4 years experience)

The same accounts also marked the limits of agency. Participants reported overcrowded classes, shortages of furniture and materials, inaccessible buildings and weak ICT infrastructure.

> 'Classes are overcrowded with fifty learners, and there are not enough desks or chairs for everyone'. (Beginner, P09, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'There are no ramps or accessible toilets; learners with mobility aids struggle just to reach class'. (Beginner, P12, Less than 4 years experience)

> 'I want to integrate ICT, but budget limits, poor infrastructure and no training block the way'. (Beginner, P09, Less than 4 years experience)

Taken together, the qualitative evidence supports a bounded interpretation of agency. Participants initiated learning and acted on professional goals, but their capacity to enact inclusive and technology-supported practice was mediated by relationships, expertise, time and material conditions. Self-directed learning enabled purposeful professional action; it did not remove the structures that produced many of the difficulties.

Discussion

Preparedness, praxis and the theory–practice gap

The theory–practice gap in this study is not a claim that teacher education provided no useful preparation. It is the empirically observed mismatch between stronger self-reported preparation for subject content, assessment and academic improvement and comparatively weaker preparation for discipline, behavioural and physical support needs, parent engagement and work–life balance. Interview accounts explained that participants had limited opportunities to rehearse these relational, inclusive and organisational practices before appointment. The gap therefore concerns the translation of formal knowledge into situated action under non-ideal conditions (Jeram & Davids 2020; Massouti 2021).

This finding also clarifies the place of agency. Beginner teachers were not simply recipients of a preparation deficit. They interpreted incidents, sought advice and experimented with responses. Yet the need to improvise after an appointment should not be romanticised as evidence that individual initiative can compensate for insufficient practice-based preparation. Agency was achieved through a combination of personal purpose, learning resources and workplace affordances.

Self-directed learning as one resource for agency

The high SDLI means describe participants' perceptions of their motivation, planning, monitoring and interpersonal learning. The interviews show how these dimensions were enacted through goals, online courses, templates, departmental groups, feedback and reflection. This convergence supports the interpretation that SDL was a resource for professional learning agency. It does not establish that SDL is the whole of teacher agency, nor that it independently reduces challenges. Agency also involved classroom decisions, adaptation, communication and participation in school life, all of which depended on contextual possibilities.

The social character of the findings is important. Participants' most highly rated SDLI dimension was interpersonal communication, and their accounts repeatedly involved mentors, colleagues and subject networks. This challenges an individualistic reading of self-direction. The teacher initiated the learning process, but expertise and meaning were often co-constructed. Vygotskian mediation and ecological agency are therefore complementary in this study: relationships expanded what participants could understand and attempt, while institutional arrangements determined whether such support was reliable or incidental (Priestley et al. 2015; Vygotsky 1978).

An ecological framework for self-directed learning-enabled beginner teacher agency

Table 2 translates the integrated findings into a framework that retains the core elements of SDL while locating them within an enabling ecology. The framework is not presented as a tested intervention. It is an empirically grounded proposition that can guide the design and evaluation of future induction and professional learning initiatives.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of the study is the explicit connection between survey patterns and interview prompts, which enabled the qualitative phase to explain rather than merely repeat the quantitative results. The integration also prevented high self-reported self-direction from being interpreted without attention to the material and relational conditions of teaching.

There are several limitations to the study. The purposive and context-specific sample from one district (94.1% of whom taught in township or rural schools) does not allow for statistical generalisation or a rural–urban comparison. The qualitative subsample was volunteer or convenience, and the data were self-reported. The cross-sectional design does not provide information about change over time or causation. The exact calendar lag between phases was not separately recorded. In addition, the available source report did not state the subgroup sizes or precise recoding rule used for the exploratory lower versus higher SDL *t*-tests; those comparisons are therefore interpreted cautiously and are not treated as confirmatory evidence. Future research should use longitudinal designs and pre-specified analyses, including correlation or regression where assumptions and sample size permit.

Recommendations

The findings suggest that teacher education institutions could pilot and evaluate more practice-based preparation for discipline, inclusive education, parent communication and wider school roles. Simulations, case-based learning and placements across diverse contexts may help candidates connect conceptual knowledge with situated judgement, but their effects should be assessed rather than assumed.

Schools and districts could similarly test structured, multi-year induction pathways in which early survival support develops into pedagogical refinement and increasing professional participation. Mentor training, protected observation and feedback time, and facilitated professional learning communities are plausible supports arising from the data; intervention studies are needed to determine which configurations improve practice, confidence and retention.

Professional development providers should consider differentiated activities that begin with teachers' diagnosed needs and include modelling, rehearsal, classroom application and follow-up feedback. At the same time, policy responses must address overcrowding, inaccessible infrastructure, unreliable connectivity and delayed resources, because these conditions shape the scope of feasible professional action. Future studies could evaluate the framework in Table 2 through longitudinal, quasi-experimental or design-based research.

Conclusion

The study examined how SDL functioned as a resource for beginner teacher agency during the transition to classroom praxis. Participants perceived themselves as motivated, planful, reflective and willing to learn with others. They set goals, sought digital and collegial resources, tried strategies and reviewed their practice. These processes supported purposeful professional learning and action.

TABLE 2: Ecological framework for self-directed-learning-enabled beginner teacher agency.

Framework element	Self-directed learning and agency process	Empirical need identified	Institutional response to be tested
Reflective diagnosis and goal-setting	Identify a classroom or professional problem; formulate a specific learning goal and intended professional action.	Participants set goals around behaviour management, lesson planning, engagement and inclusion, often after experiencing uncertainty.	Use structured induction conversations, case analysis and reflective logs to help teachers diagnose needs without individualising systemic problems.
Selection of human and material resources	Identify mentors, peers, specialists, digital resources and formal learning opportunities suited to the goal.	Teachers relied on colleagues, district groups, online courses and departmental resources, but access was uneven.	Professionalise mentoring, protect PLC time and curate accessible, context-relevant digital resources.
Planned enactment and adaptation	Implement a strategy in classroom praxis; exercise pedagogical and relational judgement; and adapt to learner and school conditions.	Participants experimented with interactive tools, planning templates and management strategies but wanted more rehearsal and modelling.	Strengthen practice-based teacher education, simulations, coaching and supported classroom experimentation.
Monitoring, feedback and reflection	Observe consequences, seek feedback, evaluate progress and revise the learning goal or strategy.	Participants used daily reflection and feedback, while confidence grew through guided experience.	Build observation–feedback cycles and evidence-informed reflection into multi-year induction and professional development.
Enabling and constraining conditions	Sustain purposeful action through time, support, accessible infrastructure and adequate resources.	Overcrowding, inaccessible facilities, resource shortages and weak ICT limited inclusive and innovative practice.	Address resourcing and infrastructure alongside professional learning; evaluate whether support expands teachers' feasible scope of action.

PLC, professional learning communities; ICT, information and communication technology.

At the same time, agency was neither unlimited nor reducible to SDL. Participants reported comparatively lower preparedness for discipline, inclusion, parent engagement and work–life balance, and their actions were shaped by mentoring, specialist support, school culture, infrastructure and resources. The study therefore supports an ecological conclusion: beginner teacher agency is strengthened when SDL processes are combined with practice-based preparation, sustained relational support and conditions that make professional action possible. The proposed framework offers a basis for interventions that should now be tested rather than treated as established solutions.

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Competing interests

The authors, Jan T. Mnguni; Gideon P. van Tonder and Nozi Kgati, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Jan T. Mnguni: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Gideon P. van Tonder: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Nozi Kgati: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Gideon P. van Tonder, upon reasonable request. The data were stored securely on an encrypted device that was accessible only to the researcher and supervisors and will be destroyed irretrievably at the end of the approved retention or use period.

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