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Encounters of newly qualified teachers with micro-politics in primary schools in Zimbabwe

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This article demonstrates, through the example of Zimbabwe, the complexities of micro-political learning during induction. It reports on the experiences of ten newly qualified teachers with micro-politics or power relations in their schools during induction and locates these experiences within the broader context of their professional development. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, and analysed using an abridged version of Hycner's (1985) framework for phenomenological explication of interview data proposed by Groenewald (2004). The findings revealed that the beginners' micro-political experiences mainly revolved around themes such as exploitation and marginalisation, lack of respect and recognition, lack of access to information about the scheme-cum-plan and dealing with the micro-political realities. Furthermore, the findings suggest that although the newly qualified teachers (NQTs) displayed some micro-political literacy, the strategies they adopted to counter adverse micro-political actions were limited. Findings reflect an inability by schools to contain micro-political activity, which in some instances might have been so rabid that it distracted the attention of the beginners from the process of learning to teach. We conclude the article by suggesting areas for further research on micro-politics and new teachers.

Keywords: beginners; micro-political learning; micro-political literacy; micro-politics; newly qualified teachers; professional development; teacher induction

Introduction

Scholarship on teacher professional development has recurrently shown interest in the first years of teaching for beginning teachers. This career stage represents a transition from student to actual practice. It has been characterised as a difficult and at times traumatic period for beginners as they are confronted with the complex realities of the classroom and of the profession in general (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Schollaert, 2011; Veenman, 1984; Williams & Prestage, 2002). The early years of teaching have also been described as a time of complex behavioural and conceptual professional learning, thus a time of intensive professional development (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b:106). In cognisance of the significance of this career stage, many countries (such as Australia, United Kingdom and United States of America) have made induction a mandatory requirement for acquisition of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The induction process, which normally extends for a period of one to three years, entails supporting newly qualified teachers in areas that are pivotal to learning their new roles and enhancement of teaching quality. It focuses on providing both professional and organisational socialisation (Tickle, 2000; Wang, Odell & Schwille, 2008) with the latter aspect encompassing micro-political learning. Research, however, shows that most induction programmes have tended to concentrate on issues affecting the beginning teacher in direct classroom teaching but organisational socialisation, which is an equally important element of the process of teacher professional development, and has often been neglected (Ehrich & Millwater, 2011; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Few studies have investigated how NQTs grapple with, comprehend and are affected by the micro-political realities of their new workplace during induction (Curry, Jaxon, Russell, Callahan & Bicais, 2008; Ehrich & Millwater, 2011; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b). Yet it is widely acknowledged that beginning teachers are often not conscious of school politics (Schein, 2004) and ill-equipped to deal with the political dimension of schools as organisations (Kuzmic, 1994, cited by Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b:106).

This article reports on the everyday experiences of NQTs in Zimbabwe with micro-politics, as they found a place in schools. It should be noted that Zimbabwe, like some low-income countries (namely, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, and Trinidad and Tobago), as cited in a study on teacher education policy and practice by Cobbold (2007), still lags behind in recognising the significance of induction to professional teacher development. The country has no formal induction policy. Instead, NQTs are required to serve a one-year probationary period (Public Service Statutory Instrument (SI) 1 of 2000) during which schools and Education Officers from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education determine whether the new teacher is able to meet the standards and expectations of the teaching profession. Emphasis during this period is on assessment of standards and technical specifications of performance criteria and monitoring rather than on specified targets for professional growth. Such an approach to mediating the entry of the beginners into the profession raises questions about the adequacy of the professional support afforded to them.

Furthermore, in Zimbabwe, limited research has been conducted on issues relating to the induction and professional development of NQTs in general (Hove, 2006; Magudu & Moyo, 2008) and by implication, the

(micro) political in teachers' professional development is an equally under-researched area. This study is an attempt to bridge this gap. It seeks to provide some insights into the nature of the micro-political activities experienced by NQTs, and how the new teachers deal with these micro-political realities. The article is also an attempt to motivate stakeholders in teacher education to reflect on teacher professional development holistically. Albright and Ismail (2006) observe that teacher professional development is a global conversation. We contribute a contextualised Zimbabwean perspective to that conversation by highlighting the complexities of a dimension of professional learning, which Ball (1987:8) classifies as "what we do not know about schools."

The article firstly examines key concepts and related literature on beginning teachers and micro-politics of schools. Next, we present the theoretical framework that informed the study, and which was applied in our analysis of data. Thirdly, we discuss the research methodology employed to collect and analyse data. Then we present and discuss the data, and provide conclusions.

The Beginning Teacher and Micro-Politics

The term micro-politics can be defined as small organisational politics (Scherer, 2007). More elaborate definitions of micro-politics highlight the role of formal and informal power in organisations and power strategies that are employed by individuals and groups to accomplish their goals (Blase, 1991; Blase & Anderson, 1995; Hoyle, 1986) to influence others and to further and protect their goals and interests (Smeed, Kimber, Millwater & Ehrich, 2009) and to influence decisions that allocate scarce but valued resources within organisations (Johnson, 2001). The resources referred to above could be real or symbolic (Blase, 1988) and encompass such things as power, time, materials, personnel and territory (Ball, 1987). Other concepts related to micro-politics include control, dominance, conflict, participation and interpersonal relations (Blase, 1991; Malen, 1994; Smeed et al., 2009). While most definitions seem to underscore the negative dimension of micro-politics, scholars generally acknowledge that micro-political relations do not necessarily have to be conflictual, but can also be positive and consensual (Achinstein, 2002; Blase, 1991). They also observe that conflict in organisations is a natural phenomenon, and could create a context for learning and change (Achinstein, 2002).

Several authorities depict schools as organisations as political systems (Hoyle, 1986; Malen & Cochran, 2008) characterised by complex intra-organisational politics and play of power (Brosky, 2011; Smeed et al., 2009). Similar to actors in any political set-up at site level, schools have to manage pervasive conflict and make

distributional choices based on power exercised in several ways and in a variety of arenas (Malen & Cochran, 2008). Consequently, schools are arenas of struggle characterised by actors using their power to advance their interests and ideals, the co-existence of conflict, competition, cooperation, compromise and co-option and organisational priorities, processes and outcomes being shaped by both public and private transactions (Malen & Cochran, 2008). Political activity, therefore, is a significant part of the day-to-day routines within schools and permeates all spheres of school life, such as the classroom, the staffrooms and interactions with colleagues, parents and children (Blase, 1991). The power dynamics operational in these organisations impact on teachers in a variety of ways (Malen & Cochran, 2008).

With specific reference to induction of NQTs, scholars have highlighted the interconnectedness of the process of learning to teach and micro-politics. Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1996) are of the view that micro-political processes are best studied during significant career moments and the induction phase is one such stage. Along the same lines, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002b) argue that micro-politics is an issue in teachers' experience of the induction phase and is relevant in enhancing teacher education and induction programmes and strategies. Indications are that understanding of the realities of teaching and the school requires the beginners to have knowledge of politics and the development of a political orientation to their work (Blase, 1991). Literature also portrays the process of learning to teach as a difficult political endeavour for beginning teachers, which involves traversing of complex the social and political culture of the school with multiple actors who may not be receptive to the ideas of new comers (Curry et al., 2008; Hebert & Worthy, 2001). Hence, it is essential for beginners to have knowledge of aspects of institutional life, school practices and interpersonal relations that are likely to facilitate or inhibit their development as professionals (Cherubini, 2009).

The need for knowledge of politics is further underscored by Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002b), who note that issues of power, influence and control are dominant in the interactions between the novice and other members as well as the organisational context within which teacher learning occurs. Part of learning their new role, therefore, requires the beginning teachers to understand the multidimensional nature of the concept of power in relation to micro-politics in schools. Malen and Cochran (2008) cite three ways in which power finds expression in schools, of which beginners need to be aware. These are the overt manifestations, which are demonstrated through the influence (or lack of influence) in significant decisions, and covert manifestations,

which are evident in the “suppression of dissent, the confinement of agendas to safe issues, the management of symbols, and the suffocation of demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges” (Malen & Cochran, 2008:149). The third dimension is whereby power is used as a tool for influencing aspirations and defining interests through indirect but noticeable processes of socialisation and indoctrination. All this underscores the need for the beginner to learn to understand the various vantage-points from which power is exercised within the school culture (Schempp, Sparkes & Templin, 1993).

From the above perspectives, it is apparent that micro-political learning is part of teachers’ professional learning and a significant factor, not only in facilitating the NQTs’ effective assumption of their professional role as teachers, but also in their general professional development (Blase, 1991; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Consequently, some scholars have advocated for the deliberate and systematic inclusion of micro-political aspects in the curricula of induction programmes.

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by a theoretical framework developed by Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a, 2002b) to analyse NQTs’ micro-political realities and which illustrates the development of micro-political literacy among beginners. In this theory, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a) suggest that the behaviour of organisational members is determined by interests defined as “desired working conditions” (or conditions that are essential for them to properly perform their professional tasks). They suggest five categories of professional interests that give impetus to teachers’ behaviour (actions and thought). These are: material (availability and access to teaching materials, funds, infrastructure, and structural time facilities); organisational (issues concerning roles, positions or formal tasks in the school as an organisation); social professional (issues on the quality of interpersonal relations within the school); cultural-ideological (normative values and ideals about “good” teaching in the school); and, self-interests (issues of professional identity and its social recognition) (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b). In their view, teachers will employ micro-political actions to achieve the desired working conditions, to protect them when they are under threat, or to re-establish them when they have been lost. The theorists define ‘micro-political action’ as “those actions that aim at establishing, safeguarding or restoring the desired working conditions” and emphasise that the significance of this definition lies in that it facilitates the ‘reading’ or interpretation of particular behaviour in micro-political terms (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a:675).

Kelchtermans and Ballet’s (2002a) theory further suggests that the ability of teachers to deal with micro-political realities is a product of micro-political learning, which in turn leads to the development of micro-political literacy, that is, the ability to understand issues of power and interests in schools (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). According to the theorists, the concept of micro-politics requires the teacher not to just learn to ‘read’ the micro-political reality, but also to find a place in or ‘write’ themselves into it. They suggest that there are three dimensions to micro-political literacy namely:

1. A knowledge component, i.e. a political awareness of or basic knowledge about the school as an organisation to be able to identify and interpret power dynamics, roles and interests that underlay various micro-political situations;
2. An instrumental or operational aspect, which relates to the ability to take action and change a situation, demanding that the teachers to be able employ strategies that enable them to steer a situation to their advantage. This aspect makes it possible for teachers to establish, protect and restore desirable working conditions or interests for themselves in their respective schools; and,
3. The experiential aspect, which refers to the extent to which a teacher is satisfied with his or her position in the school or job satisfaction and the various emotions that teachers experience as they negotiate the micro-political environment.

Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002a) consider the acquisition of micro-political literacy as an important dimension of beginning teachers’ professional learning. In a nutshell, they view teacher professional development as entailing learning to handle the micro-political aspect of a teacher’s work or political learning (Kelchtermans, 2007).

In this article, we consider the encounters of NQTs with micro-politics in their schools in relation to the extent of their micro-political literacy and the various interests. The framework enabled us to understand the NQTs teachers’ politically relevant experiences and actions and the professional interests that gave impetus to the micro-politics or political behaviour in the schools, hence its relevance to this study.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study adopted an empirical phenomenological research design. According to Creswell (2006:58), the main purpose of phenomenology is “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence.” The design was deemed to be appropriate since the focus of study was on lived experiences, where phenomenology pertains to lived experience (Patton, 2002). The design would provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of micro-politics and the experiences of NQTs with it. It provided a structured approach to the study, gave a voice to beginning teachers to speak about their con-

textualised experiences and made it possible to reconstruct an accurate description of the experiences. Ten NQTs participated in the study. The sample size of 10 participants was considered to be appropriate because of the homogeneity of the population, and since the idea was to explore experiences and to generate rich data rather than to generalise. Creswell (1998, cited in Mason, 2010) suggests that for a phenomenological study, a sample size of 5 to 25 participants is adequate to facilitate the development of meaningful themes and interpretations. It was anticipated that saturation, which is a point in data collection when no new data is emerging (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), could be realised within the sample size. Sampling was purposive, as we deliberately sought participants with those unique qualities under investigation in our study. We sought beginners who were on their first teaching assignment and were likely to have experienced the micro-politics phenomenon by virtue of their professional role, were able to articulate the experiences and, therefore, were legitimate sources of data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Hycner, 1985). Potential participants were initially identified through deployment records at the Mwenezi District Education Office, which showed schools to which NQTs had been deployed. Five schools within the same cluster, in a rural setting and with at least three NQTs each were then identified as possible research sites, and it was from these schools that participants were drawn.

Semi-structured interviews (with individual beginners) and a one off focus group discussion (with six participants drawn from the initial sample of beginners used in individual interviews) were the main tools for collection of qualitative data related to the micro-political experiences. The interview format consisted of open-ended questions, whose main purpose was to introduce the topic and to enable the beginners to relate their encounters with micro-politics. Some of the questions sought to establish, for example, the typical challenges that are experienced by NQTs as they find a place in their schools and the patterns of interaction with senior colleagues. We also asked supporting questions, which were used as prompts to extend, elaborate, clarify, provide detail or qualify a response (Adamson, 2004; Cohen et al., 2011). The questions centred on what the NQTs had experienced and how they handled these experiences. The focus group discussion was pertinent in following up and further triangulating data collected through semi-structured interviews, as

well as generating and evaluating data from different subgroups of the population (Cohen et al., 2011). The interviews and focus group discussion were recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded. It should be noted that our intention was not to come up with new theories about micro-politics in schools, but to depict the essence of the phenomenon of micro-politics as experienced by NQTs.

The data analysis (or explication) protocol employed in this study was a simplified version of Hycner's (1985) framework for phenomenological explication of interview data proposed by Groenewald (2004). He suggests five phases of data explication, i.e. bracketing and phenomenological reduction; delineating units of meaning; clustering units of meaning to form themes; summarising each interview; and, extracting general and unique themes from all interviews and making a composite meaning. The processes of delineating units of meaning with political relevance (i.e. highlighting significant statements and words in the transcripts that provided an understanding of how NQTs experienced micro-politics) and clustering them (Hycner, 1985) resulted in the systematic categorisation and classification of data and development of codes and three core themes. The themes were used to construct detailed descriptions of the participants' encounters with micro-political processes, which were compared and compiled into a combined general description. Table 1 below illustrates the process of data explication with two interview excerpts on an emerging theme.

Each of the interviews was subjected to the above data explication process. To minimise intrusion of researchers' bias during data analysis, efforts were made to maintain the literal data as closely as possible in the creation and development of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Trustworthiness of data collected was further enhanced through triangulation (of participants, sources and methods), peer review or debriefing, bracketing, member checks and rich thick description.

Consistent with ethical procedures, permission was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, and the parent Ministry of all schools to conduct research in selected primary schools. The researchers also secured informed consent from the participants and the participants were assured that the information provided would be treated with confidentiality.

Table 1 An illustration of the data explication/analysis process

Participant	Interview excerpt Main Question: what are the typical challenges faced by new teachers?	Units of meaning	Clusters of units of meaning	Theme/Category
1.	There are classes reserved for new teachers. A new teacher is usually allocated a dead class, which they killed totally and which a teacher with knowledge of the school will not accept to teach, because there is no likelihood of achieving anything with the pupils. That class is dumped on you and you find that some pupils in that class cannot read simple words like 'the' and 'to'. So you go back Grade One work although you are teaching Grade Threes. Once they see that you are hard worker and you have been able to turn the class' performance around, they whip you so that you can be under them. [all sic]	Classes reserved for new teachers - allocated a dead class - no teachers in the school will accept - no likelihood of achieving anything with the class - some pupils cannot read simple words - class dumped on you - whip you so that you can be under them	a. Class allocation	1. Marginalisation and exploitation
2.	You are required to coach netball, volleyball or women's soccer, yet I am not familiar with the rules of these games. You are assigned a task like being health master when you don't even know what that responsibility entails. When you don't discharge of that task well, you are criticised by other staff members and labelled as useless. Such things are very demoralising. [all sic]	- required to coach - not familiar with the rules of the games - assigned a task when you don't know what the responsibility entails - you do not discharge the task well - you are criticised and labelled as useless - such things are demoralising	b. Co-curricular activities	1. Marginalisation and exploitation

Findings

Four themes that illustrated the micro-political experiences of NQTs during induction emerged from the data. These were: a) exploitation and marginalisation; b) lack of acceptance and recognition; c) access to information on the scheme-cum-plan; and d) dealing with the micro-political realities.

Exploitation and Marginalisation

Pillay (2004) argues that micro-politics at educational sites is not restricted to the centralised use of power as implied by literature, but include unanticipated arenas (i.e. areas that are not traditionally associated with power). Consistent with this we found that micro-political activity was evident in such basic processes as class allocation, assignment of co-curricular duties, and selection of teachers for workshop attendance.

Class allocation

Several NQTs questioned the manner in which they were assigned classes to teach, as they seemed to be allocated difficult classes in terms of indiscipline or pupils' performance. One beginner claimed being assigned a class that was renowned in the school for being what she described as *a problem class with many unruly pupils, especially the boys (who) miss school or play truant, many of them hide their books and do not do the written work*. Another gave a more detailed description experiences with the politics of class allocation.

There are special classes reserved for new teaches. A new teacher is usually allocated a 'dead class' - which they killed totally - and which a teacher with knowledge of the school will not accept to take because there is no likelihood of achieving anything with the pupils. Then that class is dumped on you and you find that some pupils in that class can't read simple words like 'the' and 'to' ... So

you have to go back to Grade One work although you are teaching Grade Threes. Once they see that you are a hard worker and you have been able to turn around the class's performance, they 'whip' you so that you can be under them. [all sic]

The NQTs' reservations about taking the allocated classes were not always heeded, and they seemed to be denied a voice from the onset.

We are not free to say what we feel. When I got here I told the Head that I would have problems with teaching the grade I had been allocated, but he told me that's what was there and I would have to learn to work with that.

A different dimension to the issue of class allocation was found where some senior teachers manipulated the process to ensure that they were assigned to teach classes with their children. A NQT explained how this played out:

Here they (senior teachers) emphasise on their children, when my child is doing Grade Two, I will fight it out that I am going to teaching Grade Two. Then I will drill my child from home, school, and he or she will excel. Everyone wants to teach their own child, even up to Grade Seven. [all sic]

Co-curricular activities

The NQTs indicated that during their first year of teaching, they were assigned various co-curricular responsibilities. While some NQTs made reference to achievements realised in sporting and co-curricular activities, others, however recounted some negative experiences with inequitable workload distribution.

You are required to coach netball, volleyball or women's soccer, yet [...] not familiar with the rules of these games. You are assigned a task like being a health master, when you don't even know what that responsibility entails. When you don't discharge of that task well, you are criticised by other members of staff and labelled as useless. Such things are very demoralising.

Along the same lines, another beginner recounted how seniors avoided involvement in co-curricular activities and left the new teachers unsupported in undertaking these.

These activities (co-curricular) are supposed to be done by all teachers, but the 'old guard' does not always attend. The new teacher cannot be absent and this can be burdensome. I am also in charge of the school choir and there is no one who assists me with that task ... as a new teacher you would need that kind of assistance.

The beginners could not ask for any relief with some of the activities as they were concerned about gaining acceptance and negotiating a place in their professional communities as explained:

New teachers should be seen to be participating in all events that take place in the school and not to make excuses, if you show that you have problems with work, you won't portray a good picture ... we have no power over anything that happens in the school.

Hence, the NQTs recognised the importance of not only portraying a positive self-image, but also their limitations in influencing decisions in schools.

Some beginners alluded to being side-lined in decision-making and in assuming leadership of sports teams at higher level competitions. The basis of this perception was, for example, the decision by a school to assign experienced teachers to take charge of a team that had been successfully coached by a NQT for a competition:

In allocation of duties like in sports, you may not be considered for significant duties or higher-level competitions, even if you are good at that activity. Because you are a junior, you are just looked down upon. I think there is an issue of not recognising other people's abilities. [sic]

Such a practise could negatively affect the beginners' integration into school communities as well as their sense of belonging, as implied by the statement from one of them that you feel accepted and as an asset to the school if you are allocated a duty.

Workshop attendance

Most NQTs indicated that they attended workshops during their first year of teaching, but that these were mostly school-based workshops. Consequently, NQTs felt that they were marginalised when it came to the attendance of external workshops held at provincial and national levels.

It's like external workshops are only meant for particular experienced teachers. NQTs are usually asked to attend workshops which are local, either at their schools or at neighbouring schools, which require them to walk to the venue and have no monetary benefits, and which are usually poorly planned, whereas senior teachers attend big workshops, which would involve the boarding of buses.

A justification advanced by schools for restricting beginners to attending local (cluster-based) workshops was that they *are still young and can walk*. A related experience was reported by a beginner from a satellite school in assignment of an invigilation duty.

For the past two weeks I have been walking to the mother school, which is eight kilometres away, to escort Grade Seven pupils to the examinations venue as well as to invigilate the examinations. I indicated that the distance was too long for me to walk for the duration of the examination [period]. But I was told there was none in the school who could walk that distance, and that I had to do the duty since I was the youngest person there.

The beginners felt that such practices as described above reflected unfair treatment, as well as their vulnerability. Hence, the conclusion by one of them that: we don't feel we have rights ... *We are like cattle roaming without a herd boy which can be driven in any direction and which at times can even have dogs set on them.*

Lack of Acceptance and Recognition

The above aspects were depicted through the moderated professional and social status accorded to NQTs.

Professional status of NQTs

The new teachers spoke about being ascribed a lower professional status than their seasoned colleagues and experiencing what De Wet (2014) describes as a professional status attack. This micro-political activity was expressed through trivialisation of beginners' professional knowledge and views, as indicated in such statements as:

There can be a problem of this disease called seniority, it may mean that we know everything, we are seniors, the juniors they don't know anything; Here they don't accept that we (NQTs) know and we are specialists, they just think what they were trained is good for everybody now; and, The new teachers need to be listened to in meetings ... if you have got an input, it can just be rejected ... It would be good for our education system to just give knowledge to the leaders that a teacher is a teacher, he is not a threat. [all sic]

The lack of confidence in and recognition of the competencies of the NQTs by their senior colleagues was further demonstrated through, for instance, having a *bright pupil being removed from your [a beginner's] class and being replaced by a poor-performing one*. This lack of confidence was again reflected in the tendency by senior teachers to remove their children from certain classes.

They [senior teachers] usually move their children from some classes especially if these are being taken by new teachers. In this school, we have at least two classes of each grade, so the children will be taken to classes of teachers who have been in the school for some time.

According to one beginner, the thinking amongst senior teachers was: *If I am not going to teach a class where my child is, then my child should be taught by a teacher who I think is competent*. Consequently, the school had some classes that are known for being 'reserved' for children of teachers. The perceptions about NQTs' competencies were even reflected by school administrators, whom they claimed *underrate us new teachers pointing out that we are inexperienced and know nothing*. The beginners felt that schools could acknowledge that they were professionals, as explained:

It would be good that when new teachers come into a school their input is accommodated, not to be drilled on the way you should do things as if I am a temporary [untrained] teacher and to come and say do this [dictating], as if we are in an army barrack;

and,

The new teachers should also be accepted, they are not empty vessels, they may possess certain knowledge that experienced teachers may not necessarily possess.

Social status of NQTs

Blase (1988) suggests that micro-political activity can manifest through favouritism or unfair use of authority. Consistent with this view, in this study some beginners felt that school administrators were insensitive to social issues affecting them, and accorded preferential treatment to their senior colleagues.

Some teachers are allowed to be away for a whole week, yet when you miss only one day from work because you are attending a funeral, on your return you are reprimanded. Such treatment is unfair and it seems NQTs are not considered as human beings.

Another beginner recounted a similar experience of unequal treatment at their station.

I was denied permission to attend my husband's graduation ... but as I speak, a colleague was granted permission to be away for a week to attend her sister's wedding. I then approached the Head to inquire what criterion is used in making decisions to grant leave of absence. He claimed that I had insulted him, but I pointed out that some teachers should not be treated like they are more important than others.

The paradox to the beginners was that the same teachers who were given special treatment *will not take on extra duties in the school and will always give excuses*.

Some NQTs alluded to being scapegoats whenever there were social conflicts schools.

If there is a problem in the school, fingers are first pointed at the new teachers ... if you are a newcomer it is easier to be blamed because the old-timers know how they relate.

The labelling of beginners as trouble causers seems to have affected them negatively as indicated: *It's not proper, you may carry on with your work but you will have been affected by being labelled as a source of problems in the school*. A beginner explained a possible result of the labelling:

This results in formation of cliques, as teachers will form groups according to when they joined the school. There is no harmony amongst these groups, it's like they ever biting each other.

Access to Information on the Scheme-Cum-Plan

Several NQTs indicated limitations in accessing some information vital to performing their duties in schools especially information to do with planning for instruction. The source of the problem was that during training, the new teachers had been taught to scheme and plan separately and they were not familiar with the scheme-cum-plan, the composite document which schools viewed as practical. However, the way in which the issue was addressed in some schools degenerated into a play of power. One beginner received conflicting expectations about the format of a scheme-cum-plan.

The senior teacher, who was in charge while the School Head was on leave, showed us how to scheme, and we schemed likewise. But this term when the Head returned he said this is not a proper

way of scheming. You are told, after scheming, that you didn't do it properly, yet you would have copied the format from teachers who are currently in the school system. We should have been told when we first got here how we should conduct our work and how to scheme.

Another new teacher could not get assistance with the scheme-cum-plan at her station.

I requested for a scheme-cum-plan from other teachers in my school and I was told no one in the school had such a document. I had to go to a neighbouring school to borrow a scheme-cum-plan and learn how it's done. I am using that but fellow teacher told me that what I was doing was scheming and not scheme-cum-plan. I reminded her that I had asked for assistance with the document and no one in the school had offered to teach me how to do it.

In the absence of precise guidelines on how to compile the document, a beginner stated that this resulted in them resorting to *doing whatever you think is appropriate ... I have continued to do that, which was said to be wrong or inappropriate, because I don't have the information.*

Dealing with the Micro-Political Realities

The NQTs appear to have derived some lessons from the negative experiences and devised some strategies for dealing with micro-political actions directed against them. One beginner explained:

It doesn't help to be quiet about an issue that is nagging you. You have to talk, you have to be firm and be truthful ... If you don't talk like that, and they [senior colleagues] will never know that you are somebody who is important here. They [senior teachers] work on somebody, they don't do their work, and they work on you as an individual [perhaps referring to forcing new teachers to conform] [all sic]

Another strategy entailed avoiding being caught up in conflict as described below:

What I learned is that there is need to restrict interaction in the school, because it seem as though there are some camps [cliques]. I have to stick to my work and not socialise with everybody so that it won't look like I am the one who is spreading gossip.

For another beginner, the strategy was to *study the situation and try to get to know the different people.* The last strategy cited was confrontational, and was employed by a new teacher who felt that their problem had not received adequate attention.

I faced a problem recently and I went straight to the Head because I was upset. The deputy head I had approached, who is also the teacher-in-charge (TIC) for the Infant section had ignored my problem, so I decided to go to the head straight. [all sic]

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to provide some insight into the nature of the micro-political encounters experienced by NQTs, and how they dealt with the micro-political realities. The narratives of the

beginners revealed several areas in which they encountered micro-political action, as well as some of the micro-political strategies employed to exert power over them. First, the beginners experienced marginalisation and exploitation in class assignment, co-curricular activities and workshop attendance. In class allocation, senior teachers used their influence and knowledge of the schools' contexts to manipulate the process so as to avoid giving the class a difficult assignment, and where possible, to ensure that they taught the same classes their children sat. In this way, senior teachers were able to safeguard their professional image and interests, but at the expense of the NQTs, as this meant that the difficult classes were 'reserved' for them. The new teachers viewed this as a deliberate ploy to frustrate. In co-curricular activities, the new teachers struggled with unfair load distribution, as they were overloaded with responsibilities, some of which they felt they were not competent to handle, while the veterans did not take up their fair share of these responsibilities. Furthermore, they were excluded from assuming leadership of sports teams (despite having coached the teams) at higher level competitions. It would seem that the main motivation for marginalisation of new teachers was the desire by senior teachers to protect their positions as they might have felt threatened by the new skills brought in by NQTs. They were also excluded from attendance of external workshops and restricted to local ones that mainly required them to walk to the venues. All these occurrences were consistent with what Bubb, Earley and Totterdell (2005) elsewhere describe as exploitation of new teachers in unethical ways.

The second theme that emerged was a lack of acceptance and recognition. The beginners described how their experienced colleagues were dismissive of their professional knowledge and skills and did not take them seriously as professionals. They cited such examples as the disregarding of their views in meetings and use of terms like 'temporary or unqualified teachers', 'blank slates' or 'empty vessels' by senior teachers to describe new teachers as reflecting that their knowledge was devalued and discounted. This is consistent with McCormack and Thomas' (2003) view that the ideas of NQTs may be devalued by School Heads and veteran teachers. The lack of professional confidence in beginners on the part of senior teachers was further expressed through such practices as removal of bright pupils or children of senior teachers from classes assigned to NQTs. The lack of acceptance as professionals was a source of dissatisfaction amongst new teachers, and clearly undermined the NQTs' motivation and confidence (McCormack & Thomas, 2003; Smeed et. al., 2009).

A related issue was the moderated social status accorded to NQTs. They expressed dis-

satisfaction with the inconsistencies displayed in the handling of social problems of senior teachers and their own, where the former appeared to be accorded preferential treatment. Furthermore, the beginners mentioned being labelled as source of disharmony in schools, and that they found their treatment vicious, humiliating and inhuman, and demonstrated their powerlessness. Such labelling seemed to be one of the many strategies employed by their senior colleagues to regulate and guide them to conform to procedures and to suppress dissent among them (Malen & Cochran, 2008). This illustrates what Hoyle (1986) refers to as the 'dark side' of school politics, a situation in which members employ illegitimate and manipulative strategies to achieve their goals. The unequal treatment and alienation that the NQTs were subjected to would have made integration into their professional communities difficult.

Scheme-cum-plan is a composite document in which teachers schedule and plan their lessons (Magudu, 2014). The beginners were not familiar with this document. The third theme pertained to access to information with respect to it. The beginners highlighted the issue of planning for instruction, where schools required the scheme-cum-plan, as during training they had been taught to scheme and plan separately. The manner in which this issue was handled turned into a play of power. In the first instance, senior teachers seemed to deliberately withhold information about how to compile the document. In another one, new teachers received conflicting messages from different people in positions of authority in schools about the format of the document. This suggests a show of the hierarchy of power, but at the same time, illustrates the underlying conflicts and power struggles that characterise schools.

Finally, the narratives of the beginners revealed that they recognised when they were subjected to micro-political actions, as evidenced by their repeated reference to being unfairly treated, discriminated against, regarded as lesser professionals, marginalised, maligned, vulnerable, voiceless, powerless and without rights. They adopted both passive and aggressive strategies (which relate to the operational aspect of the theoretical framework) to cope with and shield themselves from micro-political action. The strategies employed included taking on extra responsibilities in co-curricular responsibilities, even where this would work to their disadvantage, avoiding being involved in gossip, and speaking up about issues that affected them. These strategies might have been an indication of development among the new teachers of an understanding of the political dimension of their work (Blase, 1991). But what is in question is the effectiveness of the strategies in countering the micro-political actions, some of which appeared to be quite vicious.

In conclusion, our findings show that NQTs encountered micro-political activity in most aspects of school life and day-to-day routines, which manifested through exclusion, exploitation and lack of recognition. They reflect an imbalance of power between the NQTs and their senior colleagues, and the powerlessness and vulnerability of the new teachers to internal forces within schools (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1996; Smeed et al., 2009). Consistent with results of other studies elsewhere, the findings reveal that beginners were ill-prepared for the micro-political realities in schools and largely unsupported as they grappled with these. The findings suggest an inability by schools to contain micro-political activity, which in some instances, might have been so pronounced that it distracted the attention of the beginners from the process of learning to teach, leading to a form of 'praxis shock'. However, it should be noted that the findings focused mainly on the negative aspects of the phenomenon. Future studies could consider positive micro-political relations as well as the role of NQTs in propelling micro-political activity in schools. The study focused on rural schools and another study could include both rural and urban settings to allow for contrasting of experiences as well as broadening the sample facilitate generalisation of findings.

Note

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