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Transition to the teaching profession: Report on focus group research on the needs of novices

Summary

The aim of this article is to describe and understand the contexts related to identifying and meeting the professional needs of novice teachers (up to five years of work experience). The theoretical basis was the concept of basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Needs were defined as necessary and universal constructs – common to all individuals regardless of social context, requiring satisfaction for proper functioning. The theory of needs suggests that without identifying needs, it is not possible to satisfy them and thus improve working conditions in Polish schools and improve relations between school communities. Focus group research and selected projective techniques were used. The research was conducted in 2025 in five groups of teachers with up to five years of experience in primary and secondary schools. A semi-structured interview scenario was used. A two-stage thematic analysis was performed on the basis of the transcripts. The conclusions of the study refer to the possibility of organising a supportive environment for teachers in schools, in which their most important professional needs are met. However, Polish teachers still operate in environments characterised by the creation and maintenance of unequal interpersonal relationships, causing them to feel powerless and disappointed. Novice teachers clearly signal the need for systemic solutions, which are lacking in Poland. The conclusions of the study may therefore contribute to the creation of systemic support in the form of a formal (state-certified) transition to the profession, based on the identification of the needs of novice teachers.

Keywords: novice teachers, professional needs, transition to the profession, work environment, systemic support

Introduction

The context of our research is related to the small percentage of novice teachers in Poland and the departure of beginning teachers from the profession (Dobkowska et al., 2025). The loss of the social status of the teaching profession, linked to the decline in the social respect previously attributed to this profession, is strongly experienced by teachers. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (hereinafter: SDT) by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, the loss of social status undermines all three basic needs simultaneously: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Low professional prestige undermines the sense of competence – society communicates that teachers do not work hard enough, which is contrary to their actual contribution. The lack of respect from parents and society undermines the need for relatedness – teachers feel unaccepted and misunderstood. Low pay and lack of appreciation limit autonomy by forcing teachers to work in conditions that do not correspond to their values and aspirations. The basis of all theories of needs is the belief that an unmet need is a source of tension and an (un)defined sense of lack.

The aim of this article is therefore to describe and understand the contexts related to identifying and meeting the professional needs of novice teachers (hereinafter: NT) with up to five years of work experience. This objective is related to the point of view that without identifying needs, it is not possible to satisfy them and thus improve working conditions in Polish schools and relations between school and non-school communities.

Theoretical context of the study of needs

The concept of "needs" is defined differently depending on the theoretical concept adopted and the discipline within which the definition was created. Their common feature is the recognition that needs are objective deficiencies or states of deficiency in the body or psyche that must be satisfied for proper functioning: "[...] needs concern what is necessary for a person to exist as an organism, develop as a person and be mentally free" (Obuchowski, 1995, p. 13). They are necessary and universal in nature. They are common to all people regardless of context and are not always conscious (Kocowski, 1982; Obuchowski, 1995; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Many different classifications of needs have been developed, or rather their extensive lists, because humans feel hundreds, if not thousands, of needs. Any attempts to categorise needs are more of a typology than a classification, as needs are not separate. The classification of needs is usually "conventional and relatively authoritarian due to the numerous links between needs and interdependencies in the system" (Kocowski, 1982, p. 143).

The most basic division of needs results from their distinction into biological and social needs. Due to the subject matter of the research, we will focus further on social needs, which we will treat as a starting point for discussing the professional needs of novice teachers. According to Tomasz Kocowski (1982), the creator of the only Polish systemic concept of human needs,

> [...] social needs have numerous and strong reflections in the human psyche, and some authors even consider them to be the most important part of needs. It seems likely that the most common cases of chronic and profound dissatisfaction with life in our culture have their source in the failure to satisfy social needs (p. 130).

Kocowski distinguished the following categories within the group of social needs, which are related to the general conditions of coexistence and cooperation in a group: the needs for belonging, communication, organisation and emotional bonds. The conditions that a social group should ensure in order for coexistence with it to be beneficial to the individual are related to the needs for social gratification, social acceptance, participation, protection and autonomy (Kocowski, 1982).

The use of his concept of needs to study the identification and satisfaction of teachers' social needs has made it possible, thanks to factor analysis, to narrow them down to a few of the most important ones. Teachers need: a positive working atmosphere, good work organisation, autonomy, a close friend, and professional development (Zbróg, 2011). However, there is a lack of research conducted using a qualitative approach based on teachers' experiences, especially during group discussions.

In analysing the research results, we will also use the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), which is part of the broader Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). BPNT assumes that different forms of external support and social context influence the fulfilment of an individual's needs and their activity (including professional activity) and current functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The three basic needs (autonomy, competence, social connection) are considered universal for all people, cultures and stages of development. Quantitative research conducted in 27 European countries as part of the European Social Survey (ESS) has shown that the needs described in BPNT are interrelated and determine human well-being (Martela et al., 2023).

In the BPNT, the need for autonomy is described as the need to experience oneself as the source of one's own actions and to make decisions in line with one's personal values. It is identified with the pursuit of self-fulfilment and self-determination.

The need for competence is the need to experience oneself as effective in interactions with the environment and in achieving intended results. It is also the

awareness that a person can undertake a task because they have the appropriate knowledge and skills. This belief causes a person to take on daily challenges and have a desire to improve their skills. The need for relatedness is the need to experience bonds with others, to be accepted, understood and supported (Deci, Ryan, 1985; Ryan, Deci, 2000). The fulfilment of this need requires the support of the social environment, acceptance and attention from others.

A recent review of research findings from selected European countries on the professional needs of newly qualified teachers showed that, on the one hand, the professional needs of teachers are similar, but on the other hand, due to different research methodologies, they are very fragmented (Zbróg et al., 2024). If we accept the definition of needs as a state that must be satisfied, then it can be said that some researchers write about teachers' needs while studying other categories, such as desires or expectations.

Needs are a category that is very rarely studied, as is the group of novice teachers (Kopik, 2024; Żytko, 2023). Dominika Walczak (2012) conducted research among a group of novice teachers, but she did not focus on identifying their needs (the main theoretical categories were challenges and expectations). In 2024, a report was published based on a diagnostic survey on the departure of newly qualified teachers from school (Dobkowska et al., 2024), but it mainly examined the motivations of novice teachers, which cannot be equated with needs.

English-language studies, on the other hand, are most often conducted using a quantitative approach and are typically psychological in nature, referring to non-European cross-cultural comparisons. Studies in Europe have been noted, but they do not concern the specifics of teachers' work (Martela et al., 2023).

We recognise that there is a lack of qualitative research on teachers' needs. Previous studies (Zbróg, 2011) prove that teachers' needs fall within the BPNT concept. Therefore, we will use this approach to provide a condensed description of the results of our own research. A more in-depth interpretation, with particular attention to the experiences and feelings of teachers, will be possible by taking into account Kocowski's more precisely categorised social needs.

Methodology

The subject of the study in this article is the fulfilment of the basic professional needs of NTs from the perspective of the respondents. The aim of the study is to describe and understand the contexts related to identifying and satisfying the professional needs of NTs based on their experiences in the school environment. The main research problem is therefore encapsulated in the following question:

How do NTs' needs manifest themselves during their professional experience and how are they met in their work environment?

Research method

The focus group method was used (Barbour, 2007). Projective techniques commonly used in social research were selected for this purpose: (1) star/association map; (2) SWOT analysis; (3) Chinese portrait (Lisek-Michalska, 2013). Interesting data were obtained through the implementation of the "Chinese portrait" technique, which is based on divergent thinking and the generation of associations enabling the use of comparisons and personification. Through the creation of metaphors, respondents reveal their views and emotional states in terms appropriate to a completely different element or entity/figure. Projective techniques thus make it possible to access data that are not always consciously recognised.

This article presents the results of the research based on discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the process of learning a profession in the workplace. The participants reflected on what facilitated this process and what definitely hindered it or was associated with high costs (e.g. emotional). They gave examples of various situations they had experienced.

The research was conducted in 2025 in five groups of teachers with up to five years of experience in primary and secondary schools. The groups consisted of four to nine people. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The research was cross-sectional in design – all groups were studied at a similar time. A semi-structured interview scenario was used (Lisek-Michalska, 2013).

Sample selection for the study

The selection of participants began with contact with former students of Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce. Through email communication used for graduate tracking studies, it was possible to reach NTs (novice teachers) from various fields of study. After obtaining preliminary consent for participation in the online study, the snowball sampling technique was applied (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Through this method, other NTs were recruited, who were also invited to participate in the study.

The fundamental criterion for selecting participants in focus group interviews is "possessing appropriate knowledge or experience in the given matter" (Daniłowicz, 2007, p. 36). In the present study, participant selection was determined by two conditions: (1) employment in a primary or secondary school (high school, technical school, first- and second-degree vocational schools) in the city of Kielce;

(2) work experience of up to five years; (3) voluntary consent to participate and audio recording. Exclusion criteria included: (1) holding the position of school principal (due to differences in perspective and hierarchy that could affect group dynamics), (2) employment in a non-public school (different organisational context), (3) direct collaboration with the researchers (avoiding conflict of interest).

A total of 49 individuals consented to participate in the study. In accordance with research practice, optimal focus groups consist of six–nine participants (Morgan, 1997). Given the number of volunteers, the formation of five equal-sized groups was planned, with the awareness that not all would attend the study sessions. Ultimately, 31 women took part in the study. Based on basic information obtained via email, maximum diversification of each group was ensured: teaching different subjects, varying work experience, different schools.

Data collection procedures

The research was conducted between January and March 2025, adhering to ethical principles applicable to social research. With regard to focus group interviews, attention was given to:

- expressing gratitude for responding to the research invitation;
- providing detailed explanation of the meeting format;
- furnishing participants with complete information about the planned course of the session, including the role of the moderators;
- reiterating the research objectives;
- providing information about full anonymity and confidentiality of obtained data;
- informing participants about the use of discussion fragments in academic publications;
- recording audio only;
- allowing space for questions and requests for clarification of unclear elements;
- obtaining informed consent from participants – oral, recorded confirmation of consent to participate in the research (detailed explanations about the research procedure could have changed participants' decisions). Teachers who wished to withdraw from the study could disconnect; however, none did so. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time – yet none of the NTs exercised this option.

Both researchers served as discussion moderators. They focused on careful management of dominant and silenced voices to ensure representativeness of the collected narratives in relation to the diverse experiences of NTs. They balanced between moderating the interviews and allowing space for spontaneous interactions

that reveal deeper layers of meaning inaccessible in individual interviews. They endeavoured to build trust within each focus group. The moderators informed participants about the passage of time and the possibility of leaving the session. Participants continued the discussion.

Data analysis and interpretation

When reviewing individual statements, in accordance with the recommendation of Uwe Flick (2007), the most important thing was to document the group context and the entire course of the discussion, focusing less on individual statements and more on collecting textual material representing the different perspectives of the respondents. The most important thing was therefore to agree on meanings within the group of respondents, which is related to "the social perception of various issues" (Krzyżanowski, 2011, p. 256).

Efforts were made to understand participants' experiences without being influenced by the researchers' own assumptions and the content of other publications. An attempt was made to create a complex picture based on presenting different perspectives, discussing various causal forces/elements of the school environment affecting participants' experiences, and subsequently delineating the emerging broader dimensions of the problem.

Based on the transcriptions, a two-stage analysis of the obtained data was conducted: Stage 1 – thematic analysis; Stage 2 – in-depth analysis (Krzyżanowski, 2011). Inductive data analysis was applied – detailed information was combined into categories/thematic domains. The thematic analysis, grounded in the theoretical orientation of BPNT (Basic Psychological Needs Theory), was organised around the recognition of the socio-emotional context of the examined issue. Focus was placed on identifying so-called deviant cases, i.e., those contradicting general tendencies, or negative cases, i.e., those altogether violating the study structure. Both researchers independently coded the same material. Subsequently, coding results were compared, differences were identified, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. Through the identified differences, an in-depth analysis of the research material could be conducted. Efforts were made to construct a comprehensive picture based on presenting different perspectives, discussing various causal forces/elements of the school environment affecting participants' experiences, and subsequently delineating the emerging broader dimensions of the problem. The exploration carried out made it possible to identify and name the characteristics of an environment that reinforces the fulfilment of basic human needs, as well as those that weaken or even suppress the natural tendencies towards self-determination in a new social environment.

Research results

The description and analysis of the research results will be presented according to the classification adopted in BPNT.

The need for autonomy

Manifestations of the satisfaction of the need for autonomy

NTs were satisfied with the opportunity to make independent decisions in various areas, e.g. related to managing their own activities or organising their work. The opportunity to make methodological decisions and flexibility in implementing the programme, enabling the adaptation of materials to the needs of students, illustrates the sense of satisfaction of the need for autonomy:

This independence means, among other things, that I can do things on my own... I can manage everything myself.

We... we don't teach, we don't just rely on the textbook, but here we can tailor the material to each child individually.

Freedom of decision-making can also refer to a certain organisational flexibility at school or the lack of a rigid framework or guidelines in everyday teaching activities.

When it comes to decision-making in this regard, how we conduct lessons (...) there is a kind of calmness. There are no deadlines, everything is not so rigid and there is, I would say, a certain freedom.

The respondents emphasised the need to find their own style of work, which they associated with freedom of action. They stressed the need to find their place in the profession.

[...] but I just wanted to work in my own way. In my own way, so that I could also feel good in this job and find my place. I found it, I think I found that place.

The respondents emphasised that finding one's place in the profession is one of the most pleasant states, associated with finding meaning in life. Working *in their own way* is not only a source of joy for them, but also a powerful source of internal motivation and professional satisfaction.

Manifestations of frustration with the need for autonomy

Group discussions on the blocking of initiatives and the inability of NTs to innovate due to the reactions of experienced teachers provoked strong emotions. The generational conflict evident in some schools resulted in newly-qualified teachers being deprived of all their basic needs, not just autonomy.

I sometimes have ideas. I'm not saying they're any kind of mega ideas, but they're different from what's usually done at school. And instead of saying, "Great, you can do that", there's silence or... "We don't do that here." So they clip your wings right from the start.

Everyone is nice and friendly, but as I say, if you want to bring something new to the lessons or whatever... You're pushed aside... don't push your way in... we don't do that, we work traditionally here.

Novice teachers therefore experience frustration with autonomy through open or covert criticism of attempts to introduce changes in the way they work. They clearly feel pressure to conform to existing patterns, including during "mentoring". I have a mentor who, unfortunately, evaluates my work, so I'm really afraid... because

I have to get at least a B in June this year to continue my professional advancement, so I just try to back off. I do what he tells me to do politely.

In the Polish education system, we do not have mentors formally trained to support teachers. There is a system of "supervision" for novice teachers, in which the supervisor-mentor does not always understand their role if they act as a controller and a dominant or even authoritarian figure. They are not a supportive person if the beginning teacher is afraid of them, does not ask questions and does not engage in discussion. Combining a supportive and evaluative (controlling) role while being a mentor is not conducive to learning in the workplace and even destroys the autonomy of NTs, because, fearing negative evaluation, they withdraw from presenting their own ideas and submit to the "recommendations" of an experienced teacher. Another projective technique used in the study showed a regression in the autonomous identity of the subject:

When I entered the teaching profession, I thought I was a lioness. I thought I could do so much, I could contribute so much to it all. And then someone comes along and stops me... Sometimes I feel like I'm just a lost, stupid calf. (...) Instead of going up, instead of using my energy, instead of growing, it's like fading away.

The BPNT context allows us to interpret the above description of the experience as frustration of autonomy leading to a loss of a sense of agency, internalisation of negative self-esteem (*stupid calf*), and a dimming of internal motivation. It is worth noting that such negative effects occurred only 2-3 years after starting work as a teacher.

The need for competence

Manifestations of satisfying the need for competence

The fulfilment of the need for competence was evident when teachers talked about successes related to their work. In all examples, they referred to the particular satisfaction they derive from working with children and young people. An example of this is the success in working with a child on the autism spectrum:

> I was entrusted with an autistic child. He was taken from a special school where there was zero response (...) After 3 months, I managed. The mother was overjoyed (...) Today, I am proud that she can learn with everyone else. I will say honestly and openly that it is worth it. Once again, it is worth giving your all to achieve your goals. Yes, I am proud of myself. (...) The child (...) does not speak, there is no verbal contact with her (...). And I managed.

Satisfying the need for competence leads to pride in one's achievement, a sense of agency (*I did it*) and an increase in internal motivation (*it's worth giving it your all*). All the more so because in the case analysed, there were visible results of the work, which is not always the case. Another example of fulfilling the need for competence is success in building a child's self-esteem:

> I had a girl who had very low self-esteem. She had no support at home. Such a small success after three semesters is that she doesn't start crying when she's with me, that she doesn't shut me out. For me, it's such a big success, a big one, that she has changed, because if I wanted her to learn to read or count, for example, we would have to start with her trusting me and believing in herself.

The teacher's sense of agency is also confirmed by her certainty about the effectiveness of her strategy. A positive element in meeting this need is consciously adopting the right attitude towards a child with SEN – starting with building a relationship based on trust. The teacher's statement also shows that she understands the process of systematic work with the child, which gives her a sense of professionalism. The need for competence also includes the feeling of taking appropriate action in relation to pupils, parents and the school management, which manifests itself in the appreciation of the teacher's work. In such situations, Kocowski distin-

guishes the need for social acceptance, which concerns the psychological gratification necessary for a teacher: recognition, respect and approval.

Parents write to me to thank me very much because, really, the children are doing great and currently have the highest averages in the school in this class. And I constantly get text messages saying that it's all thanks to me.

On National Education Day, the headmistress said that even though I haven't been here long, she wants me to know that she appreciates my work.

The need for social acceptance is satisfied as a result of positive feedback. Recognition expressed by other people, confirmed by objective indicators of success, increases the sense of effectiveness and thus internal motivation, inspiring the teacher to continue their work. Gaining experience combined with the certainty of getting better and better at work over time is also a source of satisfaction of the analysed need.

I think I am a little more confident. Perhaps because I know the school, I know the children and the teachers. I feel more confident within these walls, because I know what to expect at every council meeting, at the end of each semester. What documents to prepare and what to write in them.

Manifestations of frustration with the need for competence

Some participants associated professional initiation with the need to prove one's competence, and even a kind of "testing" of novice teachers by experienced teachers.

Right at the beginning, I was... so to speak... "gently" accustomed to life at this school... that I am not yet a teacher. First work, see how it is, and only then can you enter our circles.

The generational conflict was particularly evident when NTs, aware of their capabilities, wanted to introduce innovations and work in a non-standard way, and older teachers informally blocked innovative activities by exerting pressure to maintain the status quo. Most often, this consisted of belittling the value of new ideas and discrediting them on the basis of lack of experience.

(...) we clash with the older ones... the older generation... where they really should retire and give the younger ones a chance to shine, because times are a little different now. (...) We've been working for 30 years and we know how it's done. And it's still the same.

One would like to prove oneself with something new, to bring something new to education. It's always... don't step out of line and... it was a bit demeaning.

In my own research, one of the most common themes of dissatisfaction resulting from the inadequate training of future teachers was repeated. The gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, too few hours for learning in the workplace, and the improper organisation of internships result in novice teachers being unprepared for basic functioning in school.

Because we go with knowledge, but then how do we use it in practice? All in all, we learn a lot at university... but there is also stress and fear that knowledge is one thing, but the point is to be able to function at work in this school, to find your place.

I did really well at university because I was a very diligent student. But when I came to school, I really had this feeling: I know that I know nothing and that I have to learn everything. I had to learn everything myself from my colleagues, from everywhere.

The feeling of confusion and, at the same time, frustration at the need for competence stems from a lack of knowledge of the procedures and organisational functioning of the school. All these issues are covered in the internship programmes, but their implementation probably requires a more thorough approach (Zbróg, 2014; Żytko et al., 2018). Beginning teachers need better preparation for real challenges, starting with issues such as keeping records, electronic registers and the proceedings of the teaching council. Support in acquiring practical skills is therefore insufficient. This causes unnecessary stress and a feeling of inadequacy, a lack of competence to meet the requirements of the situation or the social role for which they have been preparing for five years of study.

Newly-qualified teachers also find it frustrating to deal with internship supervisors or mentors who perform these functions solely out of a sense of duty, without providing them with any support.

My mentor is quite passive (...) I don't get any tasks from my mentor, she just comes and says that everything is OK. So I came to observe. She doesn't say anything and you don't really know if it's cool or not cool.

The lack of feedback on the quality of their work, as well as the lack of any recommendations to help them develop professionally, causes frustration with the need for competence and the need to learn on their own. Without help from the person appointed to do so, beginning teachers are left to their own devices. They do not satisfy their need for social acceptance.

The need for relatedness

Manifestations of satisfying the need for relatedness

In some schools, female teachers experienced acceptance and kindness from the very beginning of their employment. Despite their lack of experience, they received support from the management and the teaching council, who were understanding of the NTs' questions and doubts.

I encountered great kindness at the very beginning and during the interview with the headmistress and at the first staff meeting. Everyone had to start somewhere... You can do it.

During the discussion, individual teachers talked about their supportive relationship with their school mentor.

My colleague was really so helpful to me, she guided me by the hand and I will always be grateful to her for that, because really, I told her many times that it was thanks to her that I managed. She introduced me to all of this, and it's great to meet people like that on your way, because I think that if I had ended up in a different environment, perhaps with different people, it would have been difficult in terms of the whole introduction process. Really.

An example similar to the above, but not directly related to the teacher in question. However, it clearly shows what novice teachers need at the beginning of their transition to the profession.

She has a mentor who, in my opinion, is excellent. She tells her everything very directly. They are of a similar age, which may be why it is easier, but everything is said directly and immediately, such as, listen, don't say that, don't do that. She says it in a friendly manner. Of course, this mentor does not try to be the smartest person in the world, but simply to give good advice.

Fulfilling the need for relationships and increasing the sense of belonging to a team of teachers requires directness and honesty in relationships, despite differences in experience, as well as equality. NTs praised the principle of not putting on airs and the friendly nature of professional contacts.

The team of other teachers can also be a supportive community for the teacher:

I have my friends, who are so close to me, some of whom are also newbies, so we support each other in being newbies and in various problems of newbies, to put it colloquially. But I also have experienced colleagues who always listen, and even if I don't report a problem, if they notice it or know that I should do something and haven't done it yet, they report it themselves and tell me directly.

For NTs, establishing good, trust-based relationships with students is also a source of satisfaction of their need for relationships, belonging and connection.

They consider it a success to create a class as a harmonious group. And to maintain their trust.

I was given a class of individualists. They had never formed a team before. Now, after two years, I think we like each other very much, and I can feel it. They didn't feel that trust before, but now they tell me everything. I think we treat each other very collegially because they really tell me a lot of things. I don't spread it around or pass it on.

NT emphasise that students are a source of energy for them, thanks to which they work in this profession and which counterbalances the unpleasantness they experience from adults:

This positive energy radiates from them, from the children, and that's a great benefit. For me, it's probably the biggest one, outweighing all the disadvantages for now.

I constantly feel this very positive energy emanating from children, I repeat, from children, because sometimes from teachers, colleagues, it is not necessarily positive energy.

Sincere, authentic relationships with students, their reciprocity (*we like each other very much*) based on a sense of security, a belief that the other person will not let me down (*I don't spread it around, I don't pass it on*) is also related, according to Kocowski, to satisfying the need for emotional connection, thanks to which mutual kindness can come to the fore.

Manifestations of frustration with relational needs

NTs felt very acutely their exclusion from the group of teachers. The examples given during the discussion provoked either excitement combined with disbelief among the other discussants, or agreement and support with similar examples from their own experiences. Some forms of exclusion from the group of teachers took on a symbolic character, related to being physically prevented from sitting on the teaching council where everyone else sat, or in the staff room on a chair among the "old guard". It is worth mentioning that superiors were aware of these practices and either did not react to the visible signs of violence or participated in them.

When there was a council meeting or an assembly... or some other... just a ceremony... I couldn't sit on a chair among my current colleagues. I just had to stand somewhere.

Some of the examples shared during the discussion are dramatic because they prove the existence of ostracism and exclusion rituals in some schools. Some participants could not believe that this was really happening.

At every turn, I was corrected at some point [...] you're not a teacher yet, there's no place for you here yet, because you can't sit here with us, only a little further away in the room, sometimes in the corridor...

This is an extreme example of the frustration of the need for relationships. The novice teacher could not even sit among her experienced colleagues from the school, and during the staff meeting her place was at the back of the room or in the corridor. There is no doubt that the headteacher, who was chairing the meeting, did not react. Spatial segregation also applied to the staff room – the beginning teacher was not allowed to sit on a chair, even though it was empty.

The seats in the staff room are not marked, and some of the chairs are supposedly reserved for someone. No one talks about it, but when someone is new, how are they supposed to know whose chair it is? They even told me: you should know.

Instead of support and help in the transition, she received a denial of her professional identity from her "colleagues" (*you're not a teacher yet*). The tools for excluding "newcomers" were based on unwritten rules accepted by the management. Membership of the group was limited for all NTs. In a relatively large number of schools, NTs notice an unhealthy atmosphere, rumours, gossip, false kindness combined with a reluctance to support young people.

Formally, everything is fine (...) but what bothers me a lot is the gossiping, the talking behind my back... When I enter the staff room, they suddenly fall silent. So you can guess what the conversation was about, right?

Everyone smiles at you, which is nice, but in reality, behind your back, they don't necessarily speak positively about you. So for me, it's shocking that as a teacher, as a profession... people should be open and honest. But this honesty is lacking.

The frustration of relationship-based needs manifests itself mainly in a lack of authenticity in communication and prevailing hypocrisy. In teams built on false relationships, it is impossible to meet any needs at a sufficient level. Another example concerns the feeling of loneliness, of being left by "colleagues" with a problem without any support. There is also isolation, frustration of the needs for communication, organisation and participation. Requests for help remain unanswered. I had a situation where I went to work and thought I would get help from experienced colleagues. I didn't get any support at all. I had to cope completely on my own, and the truth is that

I had practically no idea about anything, because, you know, it was my first encounter with work after university... and it was very, very...

I feel completely out of my depth and I am learning from third-hand sources rather than from her [mentor]. I would be grateful for any advice.

It was quite symptomatic that the teacher asked her fellow discussants for help, for tips on how to deal with a group of very lively students. However, it was clear that she did not expect anything, because her experience told her that she could not expect anything. She quickly changed the subject. She had therefore internalised the belief that she could not count on others and had to cope on her own. NTs often cannot count on support from their colleagues or from the institution:

When I had such a serious situation with my parents. I didn't get any help from anyone, especially from the management, even though it was a situation that should have been resolved at school... it was as if I didn't get any help, I just got the information that I should go to the psychologist and resolve the situation, that it was my private matter.

According to Kocowski, the frustration of relational needs in the difficult situation described also concerns the needs for protection, organisation, social gratification, group belonging and emotional bonds. You are new, we don't have any relationship with you yet, you can't ask us for help. The complete lack of professional solidarity and the shifting of responsibility onto the individual reflects poorly on the school's culture at the institutional level.

Discussion of results

Analysis of group interviews leads to the conclusion that a friendly and supportive environment, accepting the initial difficulties of a teacher starting work in a new place, is a place where needs are met. It takes into account the needs of belonging to a group and relating to others, recognising that NTs have the right to learn, become familiar with institutional rituals and customs, and communicate freely with others. Approaching with understanding the need to feel one's own agency, giving the opportunity to make decisions according to one's own intuition, satisfies the needs for autonomy and competence. A novice teacher gradually gains confidence that they will cope in the profession thanks to what they already know and can do.

As noted in the literature review, most studies did not directly address NT needs, especially in the BPNT approach, but quantitative studies with teachers of a psychological nature were often conducted, to which our own research can be related.

According to the BPNT, autonomy refers to experiencing oneself as the source of one's own actions and making decisions in line with one's own values. Ameri-

can research shows that teachers need a sense of professional autonomy because a sense of agency increases their motivation and job satisfaction (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005) . Meanwhile, in our own research, the need for autonomy proved to be most strongly frustrated by the school environment, especially one dominated by unfavourable older teachers who use strategies to block NT initiatives. Particularly worrying is the mechanism of intergenerational reproduction of dysfunction demonstrated in the study, in which today's NTs, participants in a specific school organisational culture, may in the future become teachers who block the professional development of the next generations of teachers, in the absence of systemic intervention.

It has been shown that in a toxic school environment, the phenomenon of compensation for the deprivation of NTs' basic needs occurs. The source of this compensation is the passion still alive in NTs and the positive, life-giving energy of students. Norwegian research has also shown that teachers need conditions conducive to relationships with students, as positive interactions are the foundation of their job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). This may encourage NTs to remain in the profession thanks to their students, but despite a system that systematically destroys their intrinsic motivation, rather than because of it.

In an unfavourable environment, the deprivation of autonomy would require a comprehensive change in the organisational culture of the school. In the new school model, NTs would be encouraged to be independent and appreciated for their fresh perspective. They would have the right to make mistakes as part of learning and mentoring that supports autonomy, rather than controlling and evaluating. Changing the mentality of experienced teachers requires recognising that finding one's own way is a value, as is diversity of pedagogical approaches. A Warsaw research team came to similar conclusions, emphasising that care should be taken to "create and strengthen a democratic school culture based on trust, [...] combined with a democratic and participatory management style and diversification of responsibility" (Dobkowska et al., p. 107). It is unacceptable for superiors to support the actions of senior teaching staff who dampen the enthusiasm of NTs. Norwegian research has confirmed that all teachers need stable organisational and substantive support from the management, which reduces stress and improves well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

Work in which teachers are not appreciated, in which they have limited opportunities to achieve even minor successes, will not bring fulfilment. This is all the more true when the lack of satisfaction also includes needs related to acceptance among the teaching staff and belonging to a group. Peer support and access to training are essential for developing competences over time.

The needs for competence and relationality are partly satisfied and partly frustrated. The source of frustration is also working in an unfavourable environment, but also systemic deficiencies. The most important thing is the gap between theory and practice. It has long been known that university studies do not prepare students for work in schools. The lack of structural support and chronic underfunding of professional internships means that any efforts to improve this situation are the result of grassroots activity by academic teachers and internship supervisors (Zbróg, 2014; Żytko et al., 2018). Research on NTs leaving their jobs also notes the poor quality of practical training and recommends "integrating theoretical training with the analysis of experiences, introducing academic tutoring focused on developing the personal competences of teacher candidates related to cooperation and establishing relationships" (Dobkowska et al., 2024, p. 108). NTs cannot develop their professional identity if they are deprived of opportunities for cooperation and exchange of practices, which increases their involvement in the process of learning the profession and continuous improvement (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Limitations of the study and directions for further research

The study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, all respondents are women, which reflects the feminisation of the teaching profession in Poland, but at the same time makes it impossible to examine whether the experiences of male teachers are qualitatively different.

The study is cross-sectional in nature – focus interviews were conducted at a single point in time, which limits the ability to track actual transitions over time. A longitudinal study involving the same teachers would allow for a more precise understanding of the mechanisms of change.

The study provides rich data on subjective experience. Ethnographic research with long-term participant observation could provide a complementary perspective on the mechanisms of inclusion (or exclusion) of novice teachers.

Further research should also consider the perspective of experienced teachers who currently block the initiatives of their younger colleagues. Understanding their own experiences of frustration and defence mechanisms could help to develop interventions aimed at breaking the intergenerational cycle of dysfunction. Intervention studies could also be applied to this issue, allowing for the analysis of the effectiveness of various models of systemic support (e.g. peer mentoring, supervision groups).

Comparative studies (different types of schools, urban vs. rural environments) would also be possible. Different organisational contexts could deepen the conclusions obtained in our own research.

Conclusions

Newly-qualified teachers in Poland enter the profession with high intrinsic motivation (vocation, passion, desire to change the world) and three basic needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness).

Our own research shows that the satisfaction of these basic needs is a matter of chance. It depends on the work environment in which NTs begin their work. Differences in the organisational cultures of individual institutions are related to the types of support provided by the environment, mainly by the management and other teachers.

A social environment that supports NT transition is one that embodies autonomy on a daily basis, regardless of systemic solutions, provides systematic feedback on competences and offers supportive relationships based on kindness and mutual respect. However, a positive environment is not guaranteed by the system. The challenge for Polish education policy is therefore to develop standards for transition to the teaching profession that would provide NTs with protective conditions for starting work in the profession. This is not an impossible task, as such solutions exist in other countries (Okraj & Lenihan, 2024).

The systematic frustration of all three basic psychological needs in toxic environments leads to a transformation of internal motivation into external motivation and a loss of initial professional enthusiasm. A dysfunctional school culture offers control instead of autonomy, a lack of support in competencies, and ostracism instead of acceptance. This has adverse effects, such as dampening motivation or persisting in an unfavourable environment.

We believe that a significant contribution of our research is the enhancement of participants' self-awareness and emancipation regarding their professional functioning. This may carry the potential for real change in NTs' attitudes, the direction of their professional activities, or their pursuit of support.

Our recommendations may pertain to "bottom-up" actions, within which the initiative to change factors causing dissatisfaction of certain needs among novice teachers can be implemented directly within the institution. This depends on more experienced colleagues employed in a given institution, rather than on systemic solutions, whose implementation is slow and not always effective.

Furthermore, we are of the opinion that systemic changes cannot rely on the efforts of individual persons, such as supportive colleagues, good mentors, or benevolent principals, and ultimately on ad hoc and uncertain modifications. Although the culture prevailing in a given institution certainly depends on its managers: cooperation and support or hierarchy, subordination and oppression. A learning culture based on supporting novice teachers in acquiring competences, creating

solutions and sharing knowledge is not common in Polish schools, and in some institutions it does not exist at all. It would be helpful if mentors fully understood their role. In Poland, however, mentors are not formally trained for this role, but are simply selected from among teachers with more experience. Therefore, the use of mentoring is also random.

Finally, it should be noted that any ideas for change will be very difficult to achieve given the entanglement of education in the political interests of successive ruling parties and ideas at opposite ends of the spectrum of autonomy, competence and relationality.

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