A Case Study Exploring the Concept of Reality Shock Through the Perspectives of Beginning Primary Teachers in the East of England

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To cite this entry:

Link to the article online: https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/392416

Published online: November 2025

A Case Study Exploring the Concept of Reality Shock Through the Perspectives of Beginning Primary Teachers in the East of England

Jo Milton

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

ABSTRACT

Since the 1950s, the transition from trainee teacher to classroom teacher has been extensively researched and reported to be challenging, with many teachers reported to have experienced a phenomenon referred to as 'reality shock' (describing the difference in beginning teachers' expectations of the teaching profession and the reality they experience). Recent policy initiatives have focused on teacher retention, since many teachers leave the profession early on in their careers, with 'reality shock' argued to contribute to these figures. Much of the 'reality shock' research has focused on secondary teachers and has taken place outside of the UK. This study aimed to address this gap, investigating the perspectives of first- and second-year primary teachers who had successfully completed their initial teacher education course (PGCE) in the East of England. As part of the study, nineteen beginning teachers completed a questionnaire, and five participants took part in a semi-structured interview to explore their views further. The data was analysed thematically. The beginning teachers experienced 'reality shock' to different extents and at different times. Three themes were perceived to have a mediating impact on participants' experiences of reality shock: realistic expectations, love of teaching and a supportive environment. Four themes were identified to have a negative impact and could be argued to have exacerbated reality shock: student and parent demands, lack of support, feelings of inadequacy and additional pressures. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of beginning teachers, arguing that the term 'reality shock' was unhelpful as it does not conceptualise the ECTs perspectives and experiences. Implications for initial teacher education and insights for myself as a teacher educator have been suggested, with areas for future research highlighted.

Introduction

This research aims to examine the perspectives of early career teachers (ECTs) as they join the teaching profession in England. It is often highlighted how trainees are not prepared for the "reality" of the profession. After qualifying, it is argued that ECTs often struggle (Gordon, 2020), feeling underprepared for the reality of the job (Botha & Rens, 2018). Evidence suggests that ECTs experience a difference between their expectations of the teaching profession and the reality they experience – a phenomenon widely referred to as reality shock (Wagenschein, 1950 cited in Caton, 1973). This "concept is used to indicate the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life" (Veenman, 1984, p. 143). It is argued that it is this phenomenon which can lead to ever-growing and widely publicised retention problems (Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

Recruitment and retention are increasingly huge concerns in the teaching profession. Data indicate that those who qualify to teach often do not stay in the profession for long. 12.5% of ECTs who qualified in 2020

were not teaching one year after qualifying, whilst 17.3% were not teaching two years later (Long & Danechi, 2022). It can be argued that there is currently a significant teacher recruitment and retention crisis (McLean et al., 2023).

Research has shown that the first year of teaching (ECT 1) is a critical period for teachers, where they face many demands (Ergunay & Adiguzel, 2019; Wanzare, 2007). It is important that ECTs are successful, building their confidence (Weasmer & Woods, 1998) and skills (Totterdell et al., 2002), ultimately enabling them to stay in the profession (Gold, 1996). It is well documented that ECTs will face many challenges (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Kozikoglu, 2021; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007), leading to a greater prevalence of reality shock amongst beginning teachers.

Research has previously focused on: secondary trainees (Voss & Kunter, 2019), those outside England (Botha & Rens, 2018) and beginning teachers as a generic group (Kim & Cho, 2014). Based upon my own systematic review, a gap in the literature exists surrounding beginning primary teachers' experiences within an English context. This research project aimed to contribute to the important and seemingly underdeveloped dialogue surrounding the phenomenon of reality shock.

How reality shock is defined

Reality shock is discussed in the literature dating back to 1950, when Wagenschein (1950, cited in Caton, 1973) described the transition of moving from being a student to a teacher. Veenman's (1984) seminal study emphasised that use of the word "shock" was somewhat inappropriate, in that it may describe a short-term incident, arguing instead that the term reality shock is "the assimilation of a complex reality which forces itself incessantly upon the beginning teacher, day in and day out" (p. 144).

It should be recognised that this phenomenon is not unique to teachers in England; it is a concept referenced across international literature (Botha & Rens, 2018; Kim & Cho, 2014). It is also worth reflecting on the idea that this phenomenon is described as highly personal and subjective, so it may not be the case that reality shock is experienced in the same way, within the same period, for any one individual. From this, it can be inferred that whilst definitions of the term reality shock do exist, they are not consistent, and questions surround the way in which this term can speak for the experience of everyone.

Factors that contribute to reality shock

Veenman's (1984) seminal work examined 83 other studies exploring this phenomenon, identifying problems ECTs face, internationally, based on empirical data; including both primary and secondary school teachers. Veenman (1984) identified 24 perceived problems which the teachers faced and ranked these issues by reporting their frequency. Veenman (1984) identified that many of these 'problems' were not isolated to ECTs, but issues that experienced teachers also face.

Whilst Veenman's (1984) study focused on problems ECTs faced, Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., (1978) argue there are five indicators of reality shock:
1. Perceived problems and pressures
2. Change of attitude, such as towards teaching methods
3. Changes in teaching behaviour due to external pressures
4. Personality changes that could be linked to their belief in themselves
5. Leaving the teaching post/ profession.
   Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., (1978) grouped the causes of reality shock into two categories:
   - personal (i.e., related to themselves as a person) and;
   - situational causes (i.e., those due to the environment they are in).

Figure 1

*Personal and situational causes of reality shock (Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., 1978)*
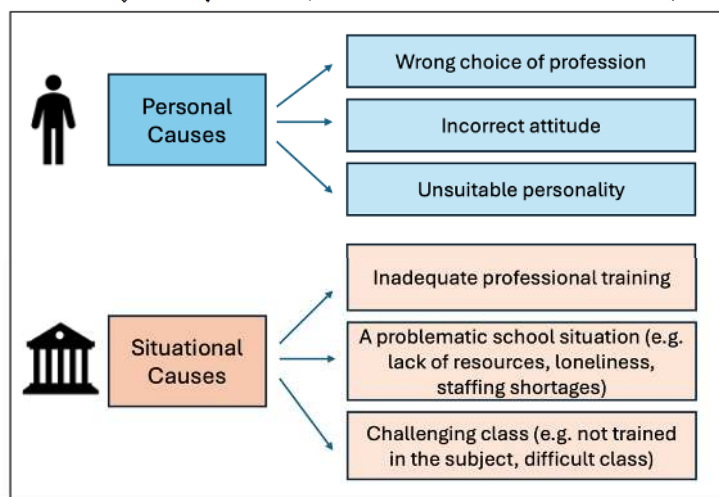
An interesting distinction between Veenman's (1984) and Müller-Fohrbrodt et al.'s (1978) work is that, the factors identified by Veenman (1984) appear to sit entirely within the 'situational causes' for reality shock identified by Müller-Fohrbrodt et al. (1978). This would indicate that, according to Veenman (1984), the ECTs studied all focused on the role of the teacher (planning, teaching etc), rather than the 'personal causes' such as their own character, personality or individual circumstances.

Further evidence surrounding the challenges ECTs face is provided by Wanzare (2007), shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Challenges faced by ECTs, taken from Wanzare, (2007, p.351)
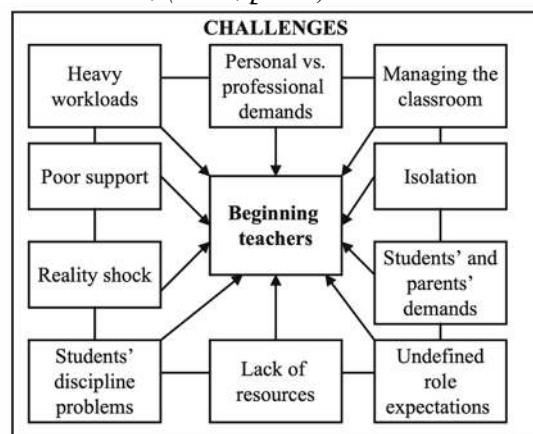
Wanzare (2007) lists reality shock as one of the ten challenges ECTs face. The other challenges are conceptualised as separate to reality shock, whilst Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., (1978) and Veenman (1984) see these 'challenges' as a cause of reality shock rather than a separate concern. Again, this reveals an interesting distinction between the ways in which the phenomenon is understood across the field.

Two key analogies are used across the literature. Huberman states that the early years of teaching are characterised by a period of "survival and discovery" (1993, p. 244). Survival, here, could be understood as coping with the reality shock of beginning teaching. Another analogy used is the Robinson Crusoe approach or the 'sink or swim' approach (Lortie, 1966). Again, this raises concerns that ECTs are expected to manage this transition without support, with Lortie (1966) describing how they need to focus on 'survival' alone. The focus in these analogies is on 'survival', as well as doing it alone. This is interesting as ECTs are supported in

their early career through the Early Career Framework (ECF) (Department for Education, 2019), which allocates all ECTs with a mentor, so they should be supported.

Research so far has focused on issues that lead to reality shock. There has been limited research into factors that help reduce reality shock. Stokking et al., (2003) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study, found that the role of the mentor being established in the school, the beginning teacher being able to choose their placement, and the school context as a whole were all important factors to help reduce reality shock. Voss and Kunter (2019) found both personal (enjoyment of the subject) and social factors (support from peers and mentors) helped buffer reality shock.

Considering the previous discussion, I would argue that ECTs are experiencing reality shock as they are not feeling supported by the system (ECF) created to support them. As such, their sense of self-efficacy will be affected. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation (Bandura, 1977). It could be argued that self-efficacy could be strongly linked to reality shock.

Methodology

Analysis of the research available indicates that the phenomenon is a deeply personal and subjective phenomenon, which we need a more contemporary understanding of in England for primary teachers today.

Therefore, the following research questions have been devised:
1. What are Primary ECTs' perspectives of reality shock?
2. What are the factors that result in reality shock for Primary ECTs?
3. What are the implications for a) myself as an ITE practitioner, b) the course I work on and c) the wider Primary ITE sector? Case Study

An embedded single-case design was followed (Cohen et al., 2018) - a case study of a group of teachers who completed a one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course. These teachers had all passed and were in their first (ECT 1) or second year of teaching (ECT 2). Table 1 provides a summary of the interview participants' characteristics.

Table 1
Interview participants' characteristics

Pseudonym	Year received QTS (qualified teacher status)	ECT 1/ 2	Age
Annie	21-22	ECT 2	22-27
Georgie	22-23	ECT 1	22-27
Laura	22-23	ECT 1	22-27
Sarah	22-23	ECT 1	22-27
Sonia	21-22	ECT 2	22-27

Non-probability, convenience sampling was followed. It is acknowledged that this does not represent the wider ECT population, but was an exploratory sample instead of a representative cross-section (Denscombe, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

At all stages of the research, ethical considerations were reflected upon and steps taken to mitigate any issues, guided by the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018 prior to April 2024; 2024 from April 2024 onwards). Before carrying out the research, ethical clearance was gained from the University by submitting an ethics form for approval, including consent forms, information sheets and a privacy notice. These documents were shared with the participants, as well as following the BERA guidelines (2018 prior to April 2024; from April 2024 onwards), listed below:
- Voluntary, informed consent
- Participants were aware they could withdraw their consent at any time without any consequences

- Reflected on power relationship with former PGCE students (dual role of ex-tutor and researcher)
- Transparent in the study and use of data
- No incentives were provided
- Participants would not be harmed by taking part
- Data was confidential and anonymised
- Data was stored in line with GDPR guidelines
- Any disclosures made would follow University safeguarding procedures.

Research Methods

A major strength of case studies is the opportunity to use different sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). A questionnaire was used to gain an understanding of the key issues, and then interviews were carried out to understand these perspectives in-depth. Questionnaires were chosen as they asked the same standardised questions without the researcher present (Munn & Drever, 2004). A web-based questionnaire was written (Qualtrics) and emailed out via the ITE course distribution lists. This meant ECTs could be contacted anywhere, could complete it at any point, therefore, gathering a sample from a variety of contexts and improving completion rates alongside keeping the time to complete it to the minimum (Denscombe, 2021). Furthermore, they were a time-efficient way of collecting data, and it was anonymous, so respondents would be more likely to respond honestly.

A number of questionnaires were started but not completed. To ensure reliability, only the 19 questionnaires that were completed fully were used for data analysis. During the questionnaire, respondents could opt to take part in a follow-up interview. Five respondents opted in, so all of these were interviewed.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the case, interviews were carried out, allowing an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. This knowledge-building exercise is important, as findings (e.g. from the questionnaire) can be corroborated in an open-ended way (Yin, 2018), as well as allowing participants to expand on previously limited answers (Oppenheim, 2006). A semi-structured interview format was followed to ensure the same topics were covered.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were collated, generating frequency tables and graphs. These tables were analysed, identifying patterns of key themes that could be followed up on at the interview. Participants' answers were shared with them during the interviews to check for validity through respondent validation, triangulation, and to gain a more detailed perspective on their answers (Denscombe, 2021).

The data was then inductively coded by research question to identify common themes (Cohen et al., 2018). These were then grouped into main themes, identifying key features and providing analytical insights into the data (Denscombe, 2021).

RQ3 focused on the implications from RQ1 and RQ2, so these were identified both through the data analysis stage described above, as well as by generating them from key ideas in the discussion.

Findings & Discussion

Following the collation of the questionnaire and thematic analysis of the interview data, the key findings are presented for RQ1 and RQ2. RQ3 will be answered across both sections.

RQ1 "What are ECTs' perspectives of reality shock?"

The main themes and subthemes that were generated are shared in Table 2 and will be discussed in turn.

Table 2
RQ1 main and sub-themes after coding

	Main theme	Sub theme
	Response to reality shock	*Is it a shock?*
		What it was like
RQ1 Main themes	Duration	
	When it happened	*Incident*
		Timing
	Analogies to support understanding	*Survival & discovery*
		Sink or swim

ECTs' Responses to Reality Shock

The questionnaire asked if the trainees felt it was "a shock moving from the PGCE into the classroom": 58% of respondents did; 2/5 of the interview participants identified it as a shock in the questionnaire. This data suggests that reality shock is experienced by some ECTs, but not all. However, during the interview, the definition of reality shock was shared, upon hearing this, Laura reflected, *"I think hearing now that I answered that it wasn't a shock…I guess it wasn't a shock in theory, I knew what I was getting into, but of course, what you just described"*. This finding emphasises the argument explored in the literature, that the term is problematic (Veenman, 1984) and does not denote the phenomenon that many ECTs experience.

One of the reasons for exploring reality shock in beginning teachers was to help understand the challenges they face and therefore consider ways to reduce attrition rates (Long & Danechi, 2022). Interestingly, only 26% of respondents saw themselves staying in teaching for at least 10 years, highlighting that the profession is perceived as a short-term career by many and supporting McLean et al's., (2023) argument that there is a recruitment and retention crisis.

Concerningly, Georgie stated she had actively looked for another job during her first term, *"that's how bad it got…how am I actually going to cope with it?"* From this, we can infer how much of a shock and a challenge that first term was for Georgie. Leaving the profession was an identified indicator of reality shock (Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., 1978; Wanzare, 2007), supporting the evidence that Georgie was experiencing reality shock at this time. It could be argued that more significant and robust support should be put in place early to ensure ECT 1s can navigate what Georgie's example illustrates as a significantly challenging time.

Duration of reality shock

During the interview, participants were asked how long the shock lasted if they experienced it. For both Laura and Annie (ECT 2), they felt it lasted throughout the first year.
From this, it can be inferred that some of the shock comes from lack of experience. Again, this reinforces the idea that reality shock is not a single event, but a prolonged experience (Veenman's 1984). Building upon this, Sarah's reflections suggest that this prolonged reality shock may, in fact, fluctuate over time, *"It was a comfortable shock. And I almost think the first term was better. And then I started, I guess the more I knew and the more responsibilities I was getting, then I started to think, oh my goodness, this is actually a lot."* An implication as an ITE practitioner could be to teach the trainees about reality shock and how it could present as a challenge.

When it happened

All of the ECTs, except Sonia (who perceived that she did not experience reality shock), discussed times and incidents that made them feel shocked. 3/5 participants referred to the start of the academic year as a particularly challenging time. They identified the perceived huge responsibility of managing the class independently, which the questionnaire data also signposted, with three respondents identifying the start of the year as the time when they felt the responsibility of the class and the independence, which led them to be shocked. These ideas are supported in the wider literature, with Wanzare (2007) identifying managing the

classroom at the start of the year as a key issue for beginning teachers. Therefore, ECTs need to feel as best prepared as they can for the start of the year, but also reinforcing the message that the two-year ECT programme should be seen as a starting point by themselves and those who support them. However, the interview and questionnaire data demonstrates that ECTs do not appear to understand this and that more could be done to help them navigate this challenging phase. In turn, this could improve the ECTs' teacher-efficacy, as they will believe they are capable of carrying out their role (Swars, 2005).

Analogies to understand reality shock

During the interview, participants were asked to reflect on the analogies of becoming a teacher. 3/5 ECTs felt they connected with the phrase 'sink or swim' for the transition from ITE to the classroom. Georgie commented, *"Yeah. I think in terms of like you either throw in the towel or you just sort of plod along like sort of like **winging it**. I feel like maybe like in terms of, like, the swim part is you've not really got a choice, you just have to."* It is interesting here how Georgie comments on "winging it", which would suggest she did not feel confident in her teacher role. Furthermore, she says she did not have a choice in terms of 'swimming'; it was up to her to succeed, and she had to.

Interestingly, the language of swimming/drowning came up in both interviews with the ECT 2s, prior to being introduced to the 'sink or swim approach', *"last year I was just trying to keep **afloat**"* (Annie) and *"I didn't feel like **drowning**. I'm prepared for it"* (Sonia). Using this language suggests how they viewed the transition in this way, even when they were unaware of the analogy used across the literature. Furthermore, this language was useful to them both, even though they had different perspectives on reality shock.

All the ECTs interviewed felt Huberman's (1993) "survival and discovery" analogy was true for themselves, with Laura stating, *"100% that's those two words, very much encapsulate my experience".* This demonstrates that analogies could be a useful tool to allow the ECTs to reflect on their experiences.

RQ2 "What are the factors that influence ECTs' experiences of reality shock?"

When analysing the main themes, it was clear that these presented both positive and negative influences, so the main themes were grouped under these two headings, see Table 3.
Negative influences are positioned as factors which appear to exacerbate the experience of reality shock, with positive influences being factors that appear to mediate/ help the ECTs navigate reality shock. Within these, references are made to Muller-Fohrbrodt et al.'s, (1978) personal and situational causes framework, as it provides a useful analytical lens.

Table 3
Representation of the codes into main themes, sub-themes and causes for RQ2.

R	Influence	Main themes	Sub-themes	Causes
Q	Positive	Supportive environment	Well supported	Situational
2	Influences	(home and school)	Positive workload	
		Love of teaching	Desire to improve	Personal
M			Making progress	
a			Liking a challenge	
i			Passion for teaching	
n		Realistic expectations	Prior experience	Personal
			Realistic expectations	
t			Ability to see the bigger picture	
h			ECT 2 perspective	
e	Negative	Additional pressures	Responsibility/ pressure	Both
m	influences		OFSTED	Situational
e			High expectations of self	Personal
s		Student and parent	Parents	Situational
		demands	Student needs/ SEND	

CERJ 12

	Student issues	
Lack of support and experience in managing the role	Lack of understanding of school systems	Situational
	Lack of experience/ preparedness/ unknown	
	Lack of support	
	Lack of communication	
	School environment	
	Heavy workload	
Feelings of inadequacy	Lack of confidence	Personal
	Negative view of self/ negative personality	
	Blaming self/ at fault	
	Self-critical	
	Unrealistic expectations	

Negative influences

Lack of support and experience in manging the role

All participants reported that a key situational cause was the levels of support available to them. Analysis of the interview data revealed that ECTs felt this way because of the situation they were in, their lack of experience in school, and of how schools work and their workload. As ECTs, they are in the classroom by themselves and are expected to be able to 'run' the classroom independently. Even with significant classroom experience on placements, participants did not feel prepared for what was expected of them. It appears as though participants' feelings were confounded by schools being busy places, new things always happening and every school being different. Furthermore, it appears as though ECTs are acutely aware of the extensive workload of their colleagues, with many of the ECTs expressing that they felt unable to ask for help. They felt they should know what they were doing, but they did not, nor did they feel comfortable to ask for help. The implications from this are for ECTs to understand the mentor role so they feel able to ask for support.

Student and parent demands

In the questionnaire, student and parent demands were referenced as being the biggest challenge; a total of 12 times. In the interviews, parental demands were raised by three participants, and students' needs by all. Diverse student needs, including SEND, was a significant issue, including the administration related to children's SEND, such as writing individual plans.

This finding is supported by the recent report 'Outcomes of the review of ITT CCF and ECF' (Department for Education, 2024), which recognises that beginning teachers need additional training with supporting children with SEND. Furthermore, the interview findings suggest that further development is still needed to support the ECTs with the administrative responsibilities of supporting SEND pupils. Sarah explains, *"So my ECT time last week, I spent the whole afternoon working on just three children and their needs and making resources for them. I was like I've spent a whole afternoon and I've done nothing for the other 25 children."* This identifies that ITE needs to provide further experience and support in managing the SEND needs in the classroom and SEND administration.

Additional Pressures

Except for Sonia (ECT 2), all other participants discussed the pressures and responsibility they placed on themselves personally, and on themselves as teachers. This is both a personal cause (the pressure they put on themselves) and a situational one (the pressure they perceived to come from their school). Personally, they put pressure on themselves to be the best teacher they could be, *"my expectations were I think almost too high for myself which is understandable"* (Sarah). All the participants identified that they felt high expectations from the PGCE course and as such, placed high expectations on themselves. This idea will be explored further under the theme 'inadequacy'.

Additionally, the ECTs expressed that they felt pressure from being solely responsible for their class.

Responsibility was also highlighted in the questionnaire five times as being one of the biggest challenges in moving from the PGCE into the classroom. Laura likened being a teacher to that of a parent, *"the responsibility…the continued pressure across the year, you know being the main sort of person with the responsibility for these children….So I think just the feeling like a parent of 24 children"*.

The pressure of responsibility that all participants felt, supports Veenman's (1984) argument that the first year of teaching is "an initiation into the adult world with its responsibilities" (1984, p. 6). From this, it could be inferred that the ECTs (all less than 27 years old) may have lacked wider responsibilities in their everyday lives, so being in the charge of the class is the first time they experience this responsibility. The implications are that trainees need to be well-prepared for whole class responsibilities, so it does not come as a shock. Furthermore, realistic expectations of what they can achieve as an ECT need to be encouraged.

ECTs' feelings of inadequacy

All interviewees reported feelings of inadequacy as teachers, and these personal causes emerge as significant factors in reality shock. The trainees reported struggling as a teacher, *"I didn't appreciate how difficult it would be and as a consequence I've struggled all year"* (Georgie).

This supports the concept of self efficacy - from the data it could be inferred that these feelings of inadequacy that the ECTs felt would impact their self-efficacy during their ECT years. As Bandura (1997) reported, these beliefs affect teachers effort, resilience, stress levels and how long they will try to overcome these challenges. Considering this, it is concerning that all participants expressed feelings of inadequacy. Hoy and Spero (2005) found teachers' self-efficacy decreased during their first year. It could be tentatively suggested this could be happening with these ECTs, which could then result in them experiencing reality shock more significantly.

All the ECTs discussed the high expectations of the ITE course and how this became a pressure to meet this high standard. Sarah explains, *""I felt like the PGCE was brilliant for how the ideal of teaching should be and* **setting us high expectations for our practice**, *but I don't think it was always realistic".* This implies that ITE tutors need to be more explicit in communicating that they are teaching 'best practice' but often there are barriers/ systems in schools that might constrain how the ECTs need to plan and teach.

Positive influences

The ECTs reflected on these themes positively and from analysis of the data, it is probable that these factors supported them to cope with the challenges they encountered, therefore reducing or eliminating the feelings of reality shock.

Realistic expectations

All participants spoke about managing and coping well at times; again, supporting the idea that reality shock is a fluctuating phenomenon. According to Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., (1978) this would be a personal cause, focused on themselves as a person. Upon analysis, it was clear that the positive influences helped the ECTs cope with the challenges they were facing due to an increased belief and confidence in themselves and their realistic expectations of the profession. This can lead to high self-efficacy, helping them to overcome challenges and be resilient (Bandura, 1997).

Experiences in schools prior to, and during the course were discussed by all participants and identified as helping them to have realistic expectations. The trainees reflected that their placements showed them how different schools operate. This view is supported by Kim and Cho (2014) who argue that trainees need extensive practical, classroom experience to understand the realities of teaching.

It appears that underlying this realism of the profession, is the ECTs resilience, optimism and understanding of the bigger picture. Sarah said, *"Like, currently I'm not being the best teacher, but I'm doing my best, and that's ok, and I've been trained in a way that I am confident I'm still doing a good job"*. This view of 'doing their best' was shared by all participants, referring to one of their lecturers saying "good is good enough". This view ran throughout all the interviews, and was directly quoted in three, showing how this message was received by the ECTs and how they still remind themselves of it, allowing them to see the bigger picture. An implication here is ITE needs to share and enact these realistic expectations so that ECTs know that "good is good enough", they can celebrate their successes, are optimistic in their approach and understand the limits of the profession.

Love of teaching

Despite all the participants discussing the challenges they had encountered, they all discussed their passion for teaching, which can be labelled as a personal cause. The different themes that were identified here were a desire to improve their teaching, liking the challenge of the role, seeing children's progress and a passion for teaching.

All of the ECTs wanted to do their best. Laura discussed the importance of seeing the successes each day, and underlying this is a feeling that the job is hard, so succeeding each day is something to celebrate. Alongside this, for all the trainees, there was optimism that things would improve over time. All of the trainees shared feelings for their love of teaching. This passion helped them get through the trickier times along with their commitment to the role, wanting to do their best for their class. This finding supports Voss and Kunter's (2019) findings, that beginning teachers' enjoyment of teaching their subject helped them overcome challenges they face. Therefore, trainees need to be supported to: find their love of teaching; celebrate successes; and be optimistic about improving their practice.

Supportive environment

Every participant identified how beneficial a supportive environment was. This included the school, staff, PGCE course friends and other networks. All these groups helped the ECTs cope with the challenges they faced. As Laura explained, *"I have many friends from the course, so I'm always comparing and we're always sharing notes on how we're doing. **So we're all seeing the scale of what it can be"**.* Laura's reflection demonstrates that she can see the bigger picture. I have highlighted part of this quotation, this 'scale' helps her perspective.

Kim and Cho (2014) and Voss and Kunter (2019) identified the importance of ECTs building supportive teaching networks with their cohorts, so they can share their experiences – this is exactly what the ECTs have done and see its benefit. Secondly, 2/5 participants (both ECT 2s) discussed having a manageable workload which allowed them to have time for themselves. Workload could be argued to be a situational cause, relating to the school context. However, the ECTs were clear that they had specifically chosen their schools due to particular factors. Annie explained how she had chosen her school to reduce her workload, as planning was already in place. Therefore, it could be argued to be a personal cause, due to the ECTs' attitude and perspectives. It should be noted here that both were ECT 2s, so they were more experienced. Sonia did discuss how last year was a different experience for her. This evidence could imply that they have built up their strategies for managing their workload, considering the differences in perspective of ECT 2s compared to ECT 1s. Moreover, this suggests that ITE should ensure that trainees are clear about choosing a school that fits with their values, as it can impact their success as an ECT.

RQ3 "What are the implications for a) myself as an ITE practitioner, b) the course I work on and c) the wider Primary ITE sector?"

Throughout the discussion, I have identified implications for myself as a teacher educator and the ITE course that I work on. Many of these suggestions could be followed by other ITE providers, schools and ECT mentors; however, due to the small-scale case study, only "fuzzy generalisations" can be made and detailed specifics have been provided to allow readers to compare with similar groups (Bassey, 2001, p. 10). I have collated and summarised the implications from RQ1 and RQ2 in Figures 3 and 4.
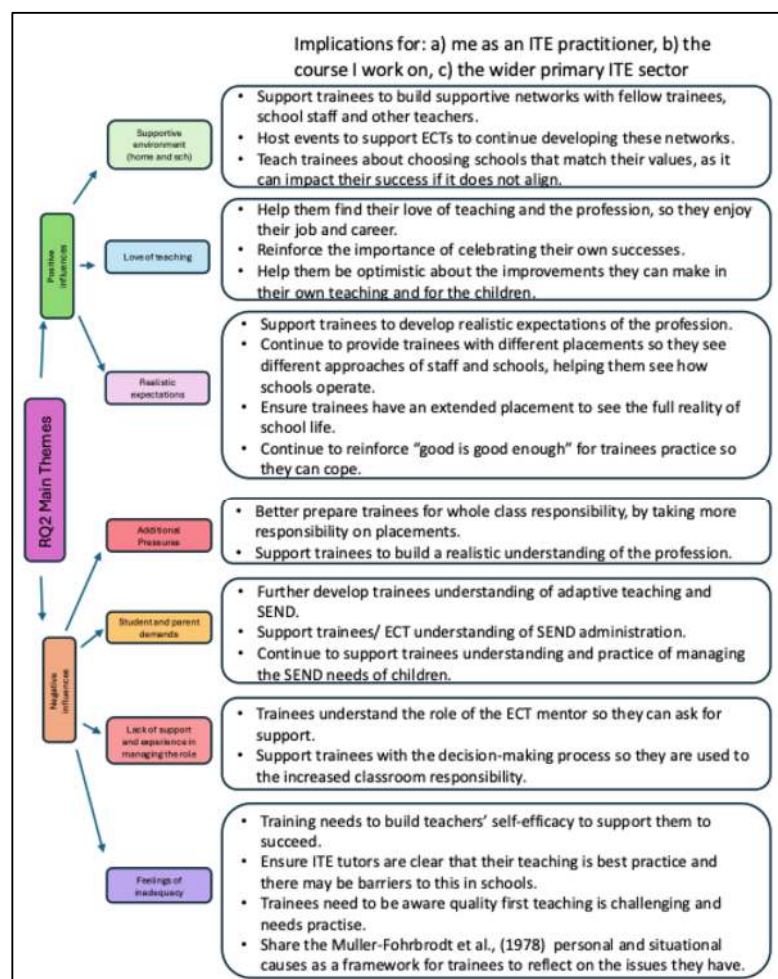
Figure 3

RQ1 summary of implications
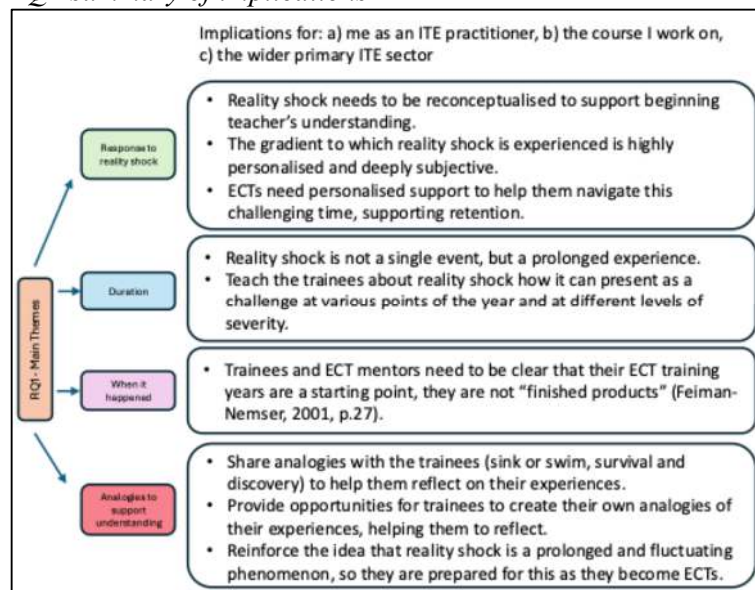

Figure 4

RQ2 summary of implications

Conclusion

This qualitative case study investigated ECTs' perspectives on reality shock and the factors that influence reality shock. It has focused on a small group of ECTs from a specific ITE course and tentatively draws the following conclusions from the findings.

ECTs experienced reality shock to different extents and at different times. However, 'reality shock' as a term was found to be unhelpful as it does not conceptualise the prolonged, fluctuating experience that the ECTs reported. As such, a new term is proposed: 'waves of disturbance'. Waves can come in many different sizes/ severities and be caused by different reasons (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

*Summary of different types of waves*
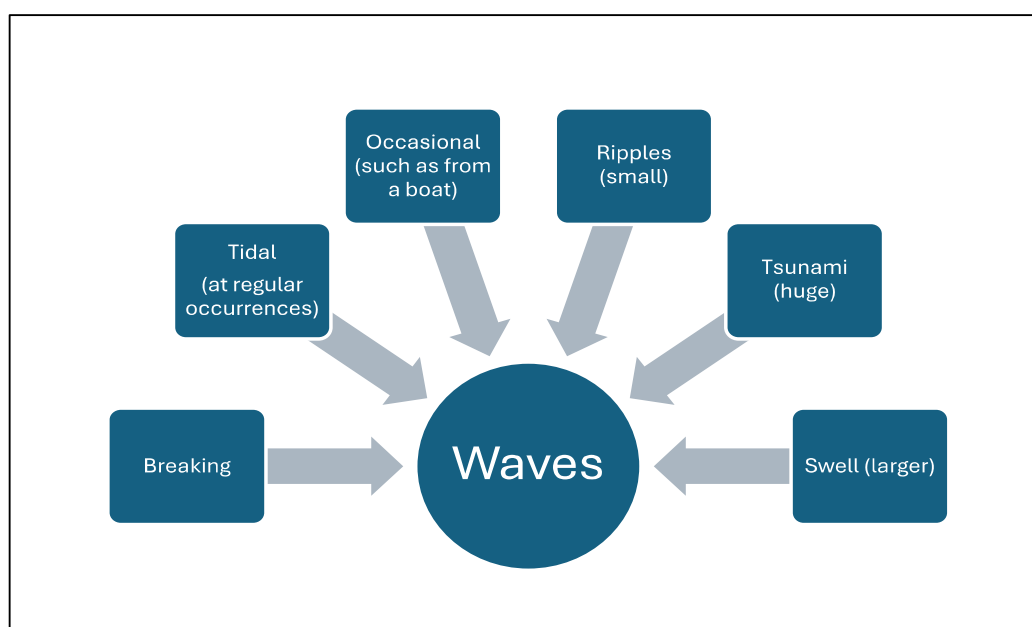
'Shock' implies a surprise event; however, the ECTs expected to find teaching challenging, so the word 'disturbance', meaning interruption of a settled condition, is more appropriate. By making the term clearer, beginning teachers can understand it better and use it to reflect, discuss and make sense of their experiences. Trainees need to be taught about 'waves of disturbance', so they understand to expect it, understand what it entails and how to cope with it. Alongside this, teaching them the different analogies is helpful for their understanding and reflection.

Research has identified many factors that influence reality shock (Veenman, 1984; Wanzare, 2007). However, the findings (see Figure 6), specific to primary ECTs at one institution, identified four significant factors that increase the influence of reality shock (in orange), and three factors that help to reduce the influence of reality shock (in green).

Figure 6

Factors that lead to reality shock and factors that help buffer it.
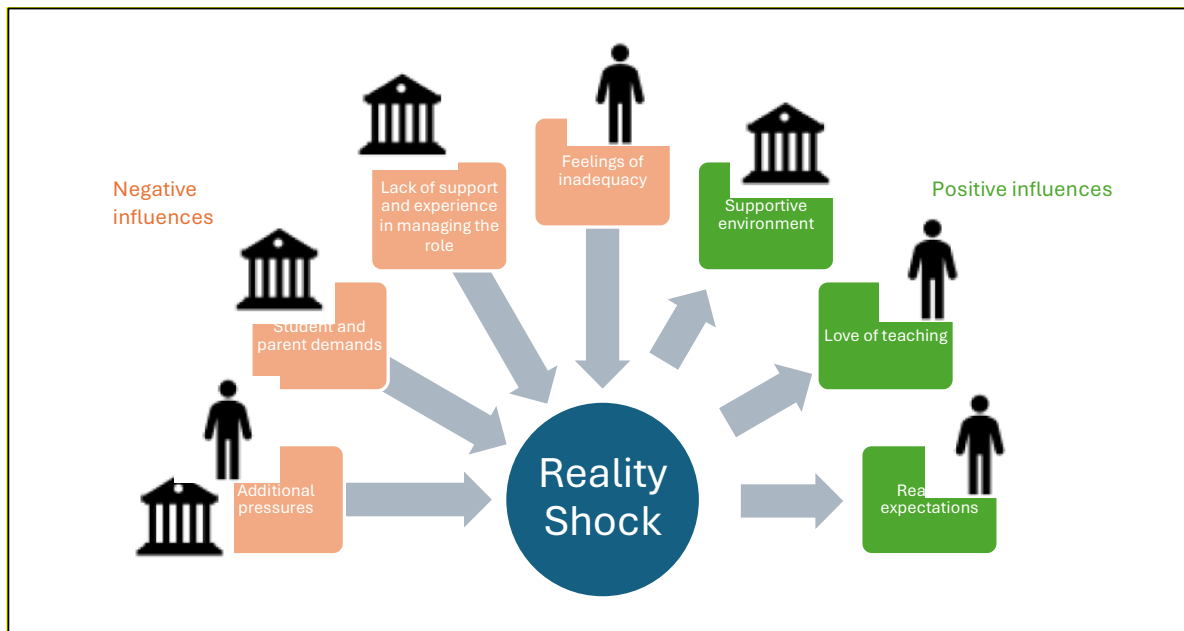
Wanzare (2007) saw reality shock as one challenge that beginning teachers face, along with other challenges. The findings of this study dispute this; the other challenges lead ECTs to experience reality shock. Figure 6 was created to exemplify this, showing how the negative influences lead to reality shock, whilst the positive influences help buffer the experience of reality shock. The causes are both personal (👤) and situational (🏛) (Müller-Fohrbrodt et al., 1978).

Key implications are identified in Figures 3 and 4 for the Primary ITE course I work on, for myself as a teacher educator and are also useful to the wider ITE community. These implications are focused on empowering beginning teachers to understand the concept of reality shock or 'waves of disturbance'; and to support them to reflect on their own practice with optimism, perspective and pragmatism.

As a teacher educator, I am empowered to share the concept of reality shock/ waves of disturbance with the beginning teachers I work with, so they are not surprised when they encounter challenges but know these 'ebb and flow' throughout the year. With a supportive environment, realistic expectations and their love of teaching, they can get over these waves and remain in the profession. Whilst these findings are specific to the ITE course that I work on, these findings may be useful for other ITE course providers to reflect on as well as secondary ITE, as they are issues that affect both primary and secondary beginning teachers.

Limitations

Whilst this study was carefully planned, as with any piece of research, there were several limitations that may have affected the quality of the data collected. For example:

- The sample size was small, with 19 questionnaires fully completed and five interviews conducted. A larger sample size would improve reliability, validity and generalisability.
- The data collection took place at one point in time and required the ECTs to reflect on their past experiences on one single occasion. As such they may not have remembered their experiences accurately or may have offered richer data had they been interviewed over time with space in-between to reflect.
- ECTs were contacted and asked to take part; only those who volunteered shared their perspectives. This could mean that those ECTs who were struggling with reality shock chose not to take part as they

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did not have the capacity, with the possibility that the true extent of reality shock may not have been uncovered within this study.
- The results were focused on the ECTs' perspectives, but it may also have been useful to have included the perspectives of other staff supporting them who might have a different view of their challenges.
- There was confusion with the term 'reality shock', so participants may have responded differently to questions posed had this term been explained earlier.
- The joint role of being a teacher-researcher meant that participants may have been influenced by this and/ or by our previous relationship.

Future Research

This study was focused on ECTs at one ITE institution, so future research could further the findings and continue to address the gap in research in this area. Based on the evidence provided within this study, the following are ideas for future research:
- A longitudinal study of ECTs' experiences of reality shock
- The different perspectives of reality shock of beginning teachers in their first and second years
- The perspectives of those supporting beginning teachers

Beginning teachers' perspectives on the usefulness of 'waves of disturbance' as a concept to help them understand the challenges they face as beginning teachers.

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