

Becoming a Teacher on the Job: The Hidden Socialization of Untrained Teachers

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Abstract

Across many education systems, the growing teacher shortage has led schools to rely increasingly on individuals who have not completed formal teacher training. While quantitative studies have explored teacher attrition, motivation, and efficiency, far less is known about how untrained teachers become familiar with their professional role when they enter schools. Grounded in an interactionist perspective (Becker, 1982; Schön, 1983) and theories of professional socialization (Doucet & Viviers, 2016; Lima, 2015), this doctoral study examines how teachers without pedagogical training are socialized to their professional role within the complex social world of schools. Methodologically, the project adopts a collaborative research approach (Morrissette, 2013). Through facilitated discussion groups, untrained and trained teachers will be invited to collectively reflect on situations drawn from their everyday work (Chell, 1998; Mucchielli, 1968). This collective inquiry will not only generate empirical data, but create a space for professional critical reflection, positioning research as a resource for ongoing professional learning. By focusing on processes rather than outcomes, this study addresses both empirical and methodological gaps in the literature. It sheds light on how untrained teachers become familiar with their role in contexts characterised by limited institutional support. More broadly, it raises questions about what it means to become a teacher today, at a time when professional socialization increasingly occurs outside traditional teacher education pathways.

Keywords

Untrained teachers, teacher induction, interactionism, professional socialization, collaborative research

Teacher shortages and the hire of untrained teachers

A widespread teacher shortage

Over the past years, many countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have experienced an unprecedented shortage of teaching staff (OECD, 2025). According to a recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, an additional 44 million teachers will be required worldwide to ensure universal access to primary and secondary education by 2030 (UNESCO, 2024). This shortage has far-reaching consequences. In 2022, nearly half of school administrators surveyed by the OECD reported that teaching and learning were hindered by staff shortages (OECD, 2025). The phenomenon is generally attributed to two interrelated dynamics: a decline in the attractiveness of the teaching profession and high levels of staff attrition.

The erosion of the profession's attractiveness is linked to multiple factors, including low social status, stagnant salaries, deteriorating working conditions, reduced professional autonomy associated with educational reforms, and increasing violence directed at teachers (OECD, 2025). Taken together, these conditions contribute to a declining interest in teaching among secondary and postsecondary students. In countries such as Switzerland and Germany, fewer than 2 % of 15-year-olds report aspiring to become teachers (UNESCO, 2024). As a result, the pipeline into the profession remains limited, and in several regions, enrolment in teacher education programs is insufficient to meet labour market needs (UNESCO, 2023).

Attrition begins early, even among those who enter teacher education. In the province of Québec (Canada), for example, nearly half of pre-service teachers report having considered withdrawing from the teacher education program (Tardif & al., 2025). Attrition also persists beyond graduation. Research in Lithuania finds that only 15 % of teacher education graduates reportedly accepted a teaching position after completing their training (UNESCO, 2024). Entry into the profession represents a particularly vulnerable period. On average, 34 % of teachers who resigned during the 2022-2023 school year did so within the first five years of their teaching career (OECD, 2025). In addition to the attrition of novice teaching staff, retirements are weighing heavily on the teacher

shortage. Voluntary departures among experienced teachers who have not yet reached retirement age are also increasing, accounting for approximately half of trained teacher departures in the countries examined by UNESCO.

Recruiting untrained teachers as a means of ensuring education for all pupils

In response to these shortages and their perceived impact on student learning, education stakeholders have increasingly turned to alternative recruitment strategies. More than half of the 28 countries surveyed by the OECD have introduced alternative pathways into teaching, often with the goal of attracting second-career entrants who have no pedagogical training (OECD, 2025). In Québec, for instance, they represent more than one-third of the teaching workforce (MEQ, 2025).

Literature that overlooks the experience of “learning by doing” in school settings

An expanding body of research examines the situation of untrained teachers. In the United States, where access to the profession has been widened for several decades, this literature is particularly well developed and has influenced international scholarship. Much of this research is situated within an evidence-based management paradigm and relies predominantly on quantitative methods, with findings intended to inform policy decisions. These studies are valuable in that they document the scope of the phenomenon, especially in contexts where administrative data are scarce. For example, several studies report attrition rates up to 3.7 times higher among untrained teachers than among their trained counterparts (Chambers Mack et al., 2019; Dupriez & Mahiat, 2023). To better target recruitment, some studies have focused on the motivations of untrained teachers entering the profession and have identified a wide range of motivational profiles (Coppe & al., 2021; Varadharajan & al., 2020). However, these studies offer limited insight into long-term retention, and the diversity of profiles makes it difficult to identify clear patterns. Other research has documented correlations between job satisfaction, a sense of personal efficacy, low stress levels, and professional perseverance (Beaudoin & al., 2024; Chambers Mack & al., 2019). Qualitative findings nevertheless suggest that intentions to remain in the profession depend less on individual motivation than on local working conditions and school climate (Dadvand & al., 2024).

Another strand of research compares the effectiveness of untrained with that of trained teachers, often using students' academic performance as an indicator (Backes & Hansen, 2023; Boyd & al., 2011). Findings are mixed and highly dependent on context and measurement strategies, making it difficult to draw strong conclusions. Moreover, the use of isolated outcome measures raises methodological concerns. For instance, untrained teachers may adopt more lenient grading practices due to limited assessment training or may teach to the test to protect their sense of competence. Studies relying on self-assessment have reported higher perceived competence and lower stress among untrained teachers compared to trained teachers (Granger & al., 2024; Schwartz & Dori, 2020). Researchers point out that these findings may reflect an incomplete understanding of the professional role or strategies aimed at preserving an image of competence that is sometimes challenged by colleagues.

Other research documents the challenges faced by untrained teachers, often in comparison with student teachers or with the aim of informing short qualification programs. These challenges are most frequently associated with core professional tasks such as lesson planning, teaching, and assessment (Bar-Tal & al., 2020; Dufour & al., 2023). Interestingly, despite these difficulties, untrained teachers do not consistently identify pedagogical issues as their primary concern (Coppe & al., 2022), suggesting that other dimensions of the role may be more pressing. Complementary studies indicate that untrained teachers tend to rely on personal resources or on individuals outside the school when seeking support (Girinshuti, 2019; van Heijst & al., 2023), pointing to discomfort in seeking help within their immediate work teams. Although the reasons for this discomfort remain insufficiently documented, some report that it may be due in part to relational tensions (Coppe & al., 2023).

Research conducted in Belgian Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) schools further illustrates these dynamics. Coppe and his team (2023) show that increased interaction with colleagues supports untrained teachers' socialization to the professional role. At the same time, such interactions remain infrequent and largely confined to homogeneous groups, with untrained teachers primarily interacting with one another. Additional work highlights a hierarchical structure within TVET schools, in which trained teachers assigned to general education occupy a dominant position, while untrained vocational teachers are relegated to the lower end of the hierarchy (Coppe & al., 2023). These studies also document gatekeeping practices aimed at protecting the job of the teacher being replaced. In the absence of formal teacher education and practicum experiences, and in a context potentially marked by professional tensions, a question emerges: what happens when teachers are socialized to their role mostly through daily interaction?

The benefits of interactionist theoretical insights to understand teacher socialization

Interactionist sociology of work emphasises that practising a profession does not depend solely on mastery of the specialized knowledge acquired during initial training (Demazière & Gadéa, 2009). It also involves the development of a practical and flexible understanding of work situations (Becker, 1982; Schön, 1983). Professional socialization is therefore central to the construction of professional practice. It unfolds in situated contexts where experience is continuously tested and adjusted (Doucet & Viviers, 2016; Lima, 2015) and is produced through interactions with a range of actors, including peers and school administrators.

Within this framework, integration into a peer community emerges as a decisive dimension of professional socialization (Wenger, 2005). Becker's (1982) work is particularly illuminating in this regard, as it shows that integration into a majority group, such as trained teachers, entails a confrontation between different normative systems. Through the concepts of worlds, collective action, and tacit agreements, he conceptualises professional activity as a coordinated endeavour sustained by shared routines, mutual expectations and cultural codes. Collective action relies on tacit agreements that make coordination possible, including shared understandings of tools, procedures, and expectations. Newcomers must learn to decode these tacit agreements and mutual expectations through everyday interactions, while established members play a key role in transmitting them. Through interaction and experience, aspirants eventually come to understand situations from within the profession's normative framework.

For untrained teachers, this process is embedded in everyday school life. Professional socialization therefore depends more heavily on access to peer communities, informal interactions, and opportunities to understand tacit agreements. Drawing on these interactionist insights, this research examines how untrained teachers are socialized into their professional role within the complex social world of schools.

Adjustment-inducing situations as a methodological lever

The interactionist tradition places strong emphasis on fieldwork. Many interactionist studies therefore rely on ethnography, a methodology grounded primarily in observation. While the phenomenon we propose to examine would lend itself well to an ethnographic approach, the current context in schools calls for cautiousness. School staff is experiencing significant workload pressures, and participation in research that offers no immediate or substantial benefit to their professional lives is unlikely to be perceived as meaningful. For this reason, we have chosen to adopt a collaborative research approach, conducted in partnership with schools (Morrisette, 2013). Through facilitated discussion groups, untrained and trained teachers will be invited to collectively reflect on situations drawn from their everyday work (Chell, 1998; Mucchielli, 1968). Our inquiry will focus on adjustment-inducing situations, that is, moments when events do not unfold as expected. Such situations are particularly revealing of how teachers adjust, improvise, and coordinate with their colleagues. The inclusion of experienced teachers in these groups is expected to support untrained teachers' understanding of situations that make visible otherwise tacit agreements, mutual expectations, and shared procedures.

In addition to producing empirical material, this collaborative inquiry contributes to participants' professional development, positioning research as a space for collective critical reflection that may extend beyond the duration of the study. In this sense, the approach may represent a methodological contribution to a body of literature that has largely relied on questionnaires, individual interviews, or homogeneous group interviews, often conducted without the presence of experienced practitioners. More broadly, by documenting processes over outcomes of professional socialization, it foregrounds how untrained teachers are socialized to their role in contexts marked by limited institutional support. In doing so, it also invites renewed reflection on what it means to "become a teacher" today, at a time when professional socialization increasingly occurs outside traditional training pathways.

Anticipated findings: a socialization through resourcefulness

Drawing on existing literature regarding untrained teachers, we anticipate a socialization process that centres largely on the tacit dimensions of the profession. This expectation echoes findings from studies conducted by Morrisette and her colleagues on teachers trained abroad, for whom professional socialization involved learning the values underpinning the education system of the host society. These studies suggest that adjustment processes are often concentrated around relational dimensions of teaching. One such dimension concerns the teacher-student

relationship. Participants described having to move away from an authoritarian model toward a more democratic one, in which students' respect is no longer presumed but must be built through the establishment of trust and mutual understanding in order to foster a calm classroom climate (Morrissette & Demazière, 2021). Adjustments were also observed in relations with colleagues, where teachers learned that work is organized around a tacit agreement of reciprocity. Colleagues who invest substantial time outside paid hours are willing to share their resources, provided that such exchanges are reciprocated (Morrissette & al., 2019). A further area of adjustment involves relationships with school administrators, who come to be seen not as punitive authorities but as potential allies with whom difficulties and professional development should be discussed (Gagné & Morrissette, 2024). While these studies offer valuable insights into the socialization of untrained teachers, an important distinction must be made regarding the population under study. The untrained teachers we focus on are not immigrants and have spent many years within local schools as students. As such, they may be considered privileged observers of teaching work prior to entering the profession. What remains insufficiently understood is how this prolonged exposure to school life shapes their modes of professional socialization once they assume the role of teacher.

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