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***Early career teachers' professional agency within school
structures and teacher unions***

Doctor of Philosophy (Education) Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Early-career teachers (ECTs) enact their professional agency in their school contexts and through their choice of teacher unions. Given the historical context of systemic inequities inherited from apartheid, there is an imperative for ECTs to act as agents of change within the education system. This study seeks to understand how early-career teachers involved in student activism during their university years navigate the tensions between their activist identities and prevailing educational practices. This study critically examines the extent to which ECTs assimilate easily into their schooling contexts and, if not, how they endeavour to transform the status quo. Drawing upon Bourdieu's field theory and Legitimation Code Theory's (LCT) constellation analysis, the research investigates how ECTs perceive their roles and navigate the complexities of school environments and the grounds on which they decide which of the teacher unions to join. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys and individual interviews with ECTs from various local teaching contexts.

The findings reveal that while many ECTs envision a transformed education system centred on equity and social justice, their expectations often clash with rigid institutional structures that inhibit their agency. In situations where there are conflicts, I identify teaching practices that ECTs either openly resist, accept, or comply with reluctantly. The study reveals that ECTs' choice of union is predominantly guided by four benefits they seek to derive from union membership: *seeking protection*, *seeking alignment* with personal values, *seeking strategic association* with powerful groups of teachers within their school communities, and *seeking opportunities for professional learning*.

Through a nuanced exploration of both activist and non-activist ECTs, I have captured distinct narratives that highlight not only differing motivations but also contrasting strategies in facing systemic dilemmas.

Key words: early-career teachers, professional agency, education transformation, social justice, activism, Legitimation Code Theory, constellations, teacher unions.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ANC: African National Congress

ATP: Annual Teaching Plan

CAPS:Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement

DBE: Department of Basic Education

DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training

ECT: Early career teachers

EFF: Economic Freedom Fighters

ER: Epistemic relations

FMF: Fees Must Fall

HEI: Higher Education Institution

ITE: Initial Teacher Education

LCT: Legitimation Code Theory

MRTEQ: Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification

NAPTOSA: National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa

PLC: Professional Learning Communities

PTS: Professional Teaching Standards

RTI : Radical Teachers Institute

SACE: South African Council for Educators

SADTU: South African Democratic Teachers' Union

SR: Social relations

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Musawenkosi Thando Melisizwe Hlatshwayo. A bright future lies ahead for you and future generations of the Hlatshwayo clan. Aspire beyond wena

Mhayise wakoLanga, Ngwanya, Siyendana, Cebisa kaMabhengeda, Ugid'gogweni ovala emnyango ngamakhanda amadoda, Mgogodlana, Nina enanqoba ibutho lakwa Gob'izembe,
Ngele!

DECLARATION

I, **PHILIP HLATSHWAYO (670477)**, declare that this research study is my own work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university. All the work taken directly from other works has been cited accordingly, and the full list of references has been provided. I fully understand that the University of the Witwatersrand will take disciplinary action against me if evidence suggests that this is not my own unaided work or that I failed to acknowledge the sources of the ideas or words in my writing.

.....
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

A major concern in South Africa has been to ensure that newly qualified teachers are well-prepared for the school system. The newest graduates completed their education during a major change and intense student protests. These graduates participated in country-wide movements demanding free, 'decolonised' quality education in South African universities. Consequently, they possess not only academic knowledge but also a critical perspective toward the education system they come from and to which they will be returning as teachers. A crucial question guiding this study was whether the schooling system is ready for the envisioned newly qualified teachers entering the practice with different backgrounds and priorities. A question is often asked whether newly qualified teachers are sufficiently prepared for the existing schooling system. However, in this study, I establish the extent to which early-career teachers (ECTs) willingly assimilate into the education system as it currently stands, and if not, what aspects they resist or seek to transform.

Growing attention to improving initial teacher education programmes, induction, and emphasising professional teaching standards has been at the forefront of the thinking. Teacher education has been touted as a critical vehicle for social transformation, equipping teachers to challenge inequality and uphold fundamental human rights within the classroom (Barnett & Teise, 2024). From this perspective, early career teachers are not necessarily being prepared for the existing education system, but rather as agents of change who can bring about transformation (Robinson *et al.*, 2024). While numerous research studies position new teachers as passive novices, policy-driven teacher-education programmes continually prepare these teachers for the transformation of an education system that is currently in crisis (Rusznyak, 2015; Robinson *et al.*, 2024). Two important ways that the education system can be transformed are through the improvement of knowledge practices and addressing exclusionary practices. As such, South African initial teacher education policy requires that teacher education programmes ensure that new teachers can address the teacher-knowledge shortcomings in the teaching sector and become change agents (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015). There have been deliberate interventions made at the policy level, in pre-service teacher education, and in in-service development programmes to address knowledge deficiencies and exclusionary practices in the education system.

The interventions can be seen in the implementation of the 2002 Act by the South African Department of Education, which declared teaching a graduate profession. This meant that prospective teachers would be prepared to draw on “various types of knowledge that underpin teachers’ practice” (RSA, 2015, p. 9). Accordingly, the interventions came through; firstly, the Minimum Requirements for Teachers Education Qualifications (RSA, 2015) policy governing teacher education in South Africa, which expects teacher education programmes to prepare new teachers who can “address the critical challenges facing education in South Africa—especially the poor content and conceptual knowledge found amongst teachers” (RSA, 2015, pp. 8-9). Secondly, the recently developed SACE Professional Teaching Standards (South African Council for Educators [SACE], 2019, p. 9) stipulates that teachers “have a responsibility to identify and challenge policies and practices that discriminate against, marginalise or exclude learners.” This has been done to address marginalising practices from apartheid education by creating inclusive education spaces for those who experience barriers to their learning. The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001, p. 24) states that “all children, youth, and adults have the potential to learn within all bands of education, and they all require support.” As such, policy requires that teacher education incorporate “situational and contextual elements that assist teachers in developing competences that enable them to deal with diversity and transformation” (RSA, 2015, pp. 8-9).

Having established these interventions, it is an opportune time to study the developing professional practices of recent teacher-education graduates who have been in university spaces during a time that has been charged with intense activism and calls for transformation. In particular, little is known about how these recent graduates adjust to the school contexts and how they reconcile their activism identity as students with being professional teachers employed by the state. In the case of transitioning into professional contexts, studies often construct ECTs’ agency as only concerned with confronting work-related contextual issues. It is also highlighted that new teachers’ agency is likely driven by their desire and capacity to foster change in “work-related phenomena” where they “take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities.” (Etelapelto *et al.*, 2015, p. 662).

Like all newly qualified professionals, ECTs may still find adjustments to the workplace and classroom life challenging (Gravett *et al.*, 2011). Given this, their assimilation into the profession demands that there should be structures of support and mentorship so that they can be fully integrated into the daily demands of the practice (van Niekerk & Dube, 2011).

In the case where the education system was inherently exclusionary and performance is still a concern, prevalent practices may not always align with the notions of best practice ECTs constructed during their teacher education. The difference in practices is a site of potential struggle. Indeed, there are many different sites for ECTs to enact transformation within the basic education system. These could be privately in their classroom spaces, through school structures and engagement with the school management, or reflected in their teacher union choices and activities.

Turning to the above, teacher unions are currently highly active in the South African schooling system. Unlike the government, unions do not employ teachers; joining them is often voluntary. Also, unlike SACE, unions do not have a statutory mandate to regulate teachers' work and hold them accountable to an established set of conduct guidelines (Code of Ethics) and professional teaching standards. Unions' statutory powers are provided in the Labour Relations Act, wherein the Department of Basic Education recognises their right to represent teachers in collective bargaining and other labour relations matters (The Labour Relations Act, 1995—Act No. 66 of 1995). The ECTs' choice of union is significant because it provides a potential platform for teachers' agency to support and enable their struggles for professionalism and professionalisation. Teacher unions offer an organised structure to achieve these struggles through participating and influencing policy-making, which in turn shapes the work that teachers do (Govender, 2015). Teacher unions offer a platform where teachers can challenge and confront power structures while protected from perceived or real marginalisation and victimisation by the state.

The unions can potentially provide a network of support, a shared vision, and a strategic mission for teachers. As such, one question facing ECTs as they start their career is whether or not to join a teacher union and, if so, which one to join. ECTs may potentially choose to join a union based on different motivations. For instance, they may default to the union of the 'old-timers' in their school as a way of gaining an advantage that buys them power in the school community. They may follow their peers, or they may choose a union that they believe offers the most benefit and/or that aligns with their aspirations for the profession.

This begs the question, how do new teachers envisage and enact their social and professional transformation agenda when they enter the field of practice? This study was premised on how ECTs conform to and/or resist prevalent practices in their school context, such as whether they choose to join a teacher union, and if so, which one. Through investigating these questions, I

hope to reveal how they envisage and enact their professional agency. In this study, I considered the decisions of ECTs to join a union (or not) and which one to join as a sociological issue. It is part of a pattern of social activity in which social actors seek to maximise their access to resources or status, or power in their field. For this reason, my interest was in the extent to which these choices were underpinned by a desire to extend and enact their sense of agency as professional teachers.

Teacher unions today represent one of the mechanisms through which teachers may actualise their political, professional, and educational visions for a better education system. Like established teachers, ECTs have priorities that may be part of a personalised quest (Korthagen, 2014) and/or a socially shared, practice-based obligation (Morrow, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2024). As such, teachers' mission can be closely linked to their core qualities, such as "enthusiasm, curiosity, courage, steadfastness, decisiveness, openness, flexibility, and so forth" (Korthagen, 2014, 76). ECTs may possess such qualities, which shape their priorities at the start of their careers. However, these priorities are shaped by an existing system of ideas, visions, and culture. While some of these priorities might find expression within the immediate context of the teachers' school, others may require the transformation of structures and solidarity between teachers. Accordingly, the school context presents one space for enacting agency, and this can be represented by the classroom space and internal school-based intervention channels. Another is in union spaces, which provide a platform for solidarity work amongst teachers. It follows that, on one hand, ECTs have to make choices about how to raise concerns, or not, within their school management structures. On the other hand, union spaces offer a different platform with different power dynamics because they are independent structures in and beyond the schools where ECTs work.

The study of reasons determining their choice is important, as this would shed some light on the priorities that ECTs carry into the profession and how they choose to exercise their professional agency on issues that inform their vision for a better educational system.

1.2 Problem Statement

A fresh wave of student activism since 2015 (e.g., #RhodesMustFall, #TransformWits, #FeesMustFall) has radically transformed the higher education system. In this study, I sought to investigate whether the same students who were activists in higher education go on to seek transformation in the basic education system in their early careers as teachers. During this time,

many students raised important questions about whether transformation in higher institutions has been effective. For this reason, ECTs may demonstrate a different kind of activism or agency that is associated with the issues they have had to grapple with as students and the ways of exerting and enacting their agency in the university settings. During these protests, students took a broader view of challenges in the higher education sector, which included fighting for the rights of the workers while advancing their own. As a result, the premise of my study was that activism for free, quality decolonised education may have an expression in different ways when newly qualified teachers occupy their first job as a qualified teacher. In their previous activism as university students, ECTs acted in a field governed by the universities' codes of conduct, which is different from being employed and having to adhere to obligations to serve the state. The question is: What form does activism take when students graduate and work in the schooling system?

In professional contexts today, existing sites for activism against power structures may occur in classroom environments, in relation to school-based interventions by the school management, and in union structures. This study reviewed the function of teacher unions in activism work and the role they play in the collaboration of teachers in their possible quest to improve teaching and learning in schools. Also, beyond 'activism', Mafisa (2017, p. 10554) asserts that the role of teacher unions is to "ensure that the learners accomplish their mission (learning) and that teachers act in accordance with their professional calling in ensuring that there is meaningful learning and teaching in a didactic situation". However, it remains unclear what priorities take precedence in different unions' activities in school contexts and which of these priorities appeal to the ECTs as they enter the practice. Seen this way, teacher unions may offer a place to organise and enact teacher agency. Therefore, exploring the choice of unions would be one way to discover how the activism of beginner teachers is understood and enacted independently of and in relation to their immediate managers (in the school), their employers (as the state) and regulators of their work (SACE). Since these stakeholders and entities have direct authority over teachers and their employment, teacher unions are there as organised labour to act on behalf of teachers and represent their interests.

Understanding how ECTs align themselves with teacher unions offers an opportunity to gain insight into their agency and the channels they choose to embody their mandates. It is, therefore, crucial to understand how they reconcile their priorities with the priorities espoused by different teacher unions and how this is reflected in their ultimate choice to align with one

teacher union over the other. My study is an important exercise considering unions have been positioned as spaces through which “teachers have a potential to effect changes to educational outcomes for learners” (Mafisa, 2017, p. 10558).

1.3 Research Aims

To investigate how ECTs understand and enact their conception of professional practice and how they align with existing teacher unions.

1.3.1 Research Objectives

- To investigate the dilemmas and opportunities that ECTs experience in their schooling contexts.
- To establish how ECTs envisage and enact their professional agency at the start of their teaching careers.
- To analyse the grounds on which ECTs choose to join certain teacher unions rather than others.

1.3.2 Research Questions

The central question of this thesis asks: How do early-career teachers envisage and enact their professional agency in the context of their school and beyond?

In particular, this thesis examined four investigative questions:

1. How do early-career teachers envisage a transformed education system?
2. To what extent do early-career teachers regard themselves as agents of transformation in the basic education system?
3. How do they enact their sense of agency?
 - In their private classroom spaces?
 - In the school structures in which they work?
 - In their choice of union and their involvement in unionised activity?
4. What are the implications of these findings for union recruitment and the induction of early-career teachers?

In this study, I adopted conceptual underpinnings from Bourdieu's field theory, professional agency, and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) as an analytic framework. Having established that ECTs enter the schooling system with their own prevalent practices, challenges, and histories, new teachers have to enact their notions of being professional practitioners in these spaces. To this end, my study moves from the premise that ECTs enter the teaching profession with a developing identity as professional teachers and come into the teaching practice where they have to make choices about teacher unions that may be driven by differently valued perceptions and knowledge in the field. Professional agency is seen to be at work when the professional community and individuals in it make deliberate choices, and "take stances on their work and professional identities" (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013). However, this account of professional agency presents an individualised account, which is driven by a psychological view, and I expand on this in the conceptual framework section.

Turning to a sociological perspective, LCT provides concepts and an analytic approach that enables analysis of struggles between groups of actors who hold different conceptions of what professional teaching practice entails and how to achieve it. In the case of communities, teaching may be a social practice legitimised by its "interaction with significant others" (Maton, 2014, p. 185). By employing LCT, the study aimed to reveal the underpinning logics of practice to establish "what drives fields to develop the way they do" (Clarence & McKenna, 2017, p. 14). The Specialization dimension in LCT enabled me to focus on the "underpinning organizing principles of a field that legitimate that field, and the knowers within social fields" (Maton, 2014, p.185).

While teacher agency and Bourdieu's Field Theory provide crucial theoretical foundations for understanding how ECTs navigate the South African education system, they offer a primarily descriptive or conceptual lens. Teacher agency frames the 'what,' the deliberate and creative actions of individuals. However, neither theory provides the granular analytical tools required to operationalise these concepts and make visible the specific principles that determine what is considered legitimate in practice. This is where LCT provides a critical, explanatory framework that links the meta theory with empirical data. It provides a means to systematically analyse the actors of the field, thereby surfacing findings that would otherwise remain hidden.

The Specialization dimension of LCT is particularly instrumental in providing this unique analytical power. It offers a precise framework for investigating the basis on which claims to knowledge and identity are legitimised within a field. This framework is built upon two key

relational concepts: epistemic relations (ER) and social relations (SR). These concepts operationalise Bourdieu's core ideas, enabling an analysis that goes beyond simply identifying the presence of habitus, capital, or a field. In terms of teacher agency, without LCT, this action is simply an exercise of agency informed by a particular habitus. With LCT, this action can be interpreted as being legitimised by organising principles. LCT thus makes visible the specific knowledge principles valued by the teacher, allowing for an analysis of how these principles interact with the prevailing norms of the field.

So, while teacher agency and Bourdieu's Field Theory provide a robust understanding of the social world, LCT offers the unique ability to unpack and articulate the specific principles that organise it. My experience of working as a teacher for nearly four years, my ambitions for transforming the education sector, led to my affiliation and alignment with South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU). This came after an understanding of how difficult it was to recommend changes in my school without the support of the dominant union structure. My affiliation was also inspired by my history of activism as a student and as the founding president of the Radical Teachers Institute (RTI). Radical Teachers Institute, as an organisation, was established as a response to the dire conditions of the teaching profession and the lack of agency from the state and the profession's members in addressing the shortcomings. Radical Teachers Institute's mission is to "create an auspicious and conducive environment of excellence for teachers to champion their noble duty with diligence in our society. Strive to foster change in the teaching profession through advanced pragmatic development of pre-service and in-service teachers" (RTI founding documents, 2017, p. 2). The organisation mainly attracted new teachers, establishing a student society at the Wits School of Education, which carries out a similar mission by supporting pre-service teachers in their preparation to enter teaching. Although I was a founding member of RTI, the organisation has no jurisdiction in the schooling context. Therefore, RTI could, at most, raise concerns and confront the Department of Basic Education on issues of public concern. As such, to address the daily professional concerns, such as stifled concerns over some teaching practices, I joined SADTU since it presented an appropriate platform to tackle such issues.

In my current role as a researcher, I consider professional agency to be essential to my identity. Reflecting on my past experiences, I am driven by a personal mission to support and empower new teachers so that they can make a meaningful impact in the field of education. Encouraging

early career teachers to embrace their professional agency can enhance their confidence and effectiveness in their teaching practice.

1.4 Rationale and Significance of the Study

The rationale and significance of this study are structured around its empirical and conceptual contributions, drawing upon my previous research findings and contributions to the basic education system.

1.4.1 Previous Studies and Conceptual Contributions

My study builds on my master's degree research report, which investigated how newly qualified and experienced teachers in township schools legitimise their teaching practices. The research findings indicated that ECTs and established teachers' identities considerably influence the network of ideas they hold about the teaching practice. Three central issues emerged from the findings: teachers' relations to the knowledge for practice; relations to power, authority, and control; and relations to teachers' responsibilities. Through the three, the research studied views teachers hold about the importance of the knowledge component in practice, how teachers understand their authority and its boundaries, and the roles teachers assume in the face of challenging contextual issues.

Findings revealed that ECTs' identities were influenced by different factors, which guided their network of ideas, in that ECTs relied on educational experiences and the knowledge base gained from their teacher education. ECTs' network of ideas was, therefore, prioritising knowledge on all three issues. On the contrary, the established teachers' identity relied significantly on individual experience in practice. Established teachers' network of ideas displayed their dependence on work experience gained over the years of teaching. The research study helped in revealing the underlying principles of issues that have been presented as generic and overarching in the ECTs' transition into the teaching practice. Through the findings, the study took a step toward demystifying some existing narratives and paved a new path of thinking concerning the challenges that ECTs experienced in the transition process. The new path forged by the thesis puts knowledge at the centre of attention. My current study takes a further step aligned with the debate that new teachers are not merely passive individuals when they enter practice. It is for this reason that a professional agency was central to the topic of this research study. As such, my study set out to investigate how professional agency finds expression in school practices found in the school structure and teacher unions.

1.4.2 Contribution to the Basic Education Sector

My study sought to provide insights into the priorities and practices of ECTs that could strengthen induction programmes. In this study, I aimed to achieve this by studying both the values, knowledge and professional agency of the ECTs as they made choices about which teacher unions to align with, which shifts from the predominant research (Correa *et al.*, 2015; Kardos *et al.*, 2001; Russell & McPherson, 2001; Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008), which mostly focused on the value-based issues. Understanding the central determinants was also integral to ensuring that the objectives of teacher education programmes in different universities begin to take into consideration other factors that contribute to the dilemmas faced by ECTs in their early years of adjustment in practice. Furthermore, the research study emphasises the government policies like MRTEQ (RSA, 2015), teacher education, and the emerging research position of early career teachers as potential transformation agents, agentic beings, and knowledge professionals. By doing so, the Department of Basic Education can better understand the teacher identities they will be working with, which will inform the ECTs' induction intentions.

Investigating how ECTs envision and practice their professional agency in the initial stages of their teaching careers can offer valuable insights into their aspirations, challenges, and opportunities for growth. By understanding how new teachers navigate their roles, make decisions, and advocate for themselves and their students, education stakeholders can develop targeted support programmes and resources to nurture their development and retention in the profession. My study has the potential to significantly contribute to improving basic education by shedding light on the factors that influence new teachers' alignment with teacher unions and how they perceive and exercise their professional agency at the beginning of their careers. Understanding why new teachers choose to join specific teacher unions can provide valuable insights into the motivations, priorities, and values that guide their actions.

By analysing the grounds on which ECTs select certain teacher unions over others, the study can offer important implications for how unions can better attract and support new teachers, thereby enhancing their representation and advocacy within the education system. This knowledge can inform union strategies and initiatives to engage and empower early-career educators. Overall, the findings of my study can inform policy decisions, professional development programmes, and union practices aimed at enhancing the experiences and

outcomes of new teachers, ultimately contributing to the improvement of basic education by fostering a more empowered, effective, and resilient teaching workforce.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 2 reviews the literature, wherein I establish that teaching is a social practice shaped by the collective actions and struggles of its actors. It challenges the passive depiction of new teachers by positioning ECTs as potential change agents. The review covers debates on the socialisation of ECTs, the politically charged nature of education, the concept of teacher professionalism, and the historical role and agenda of South African Teacher Unions.

Following this, the Conceptual Framework (Chapter 3) conceptualises teaching contexts as dilemmatic spaces and draws on the will to consensus and resilience to highlight how ECTs navigate these dilemmatic spaces. The crux of chapter 3 details the use of Bourdieu's theory to conceptualise the ECTs as social actors entering a field of practice, and then introduces LCT to move beyond description to the analysis of legitimation principles underpinning their actions and the prevalent practices they encounter. This chapter also dedicates a crucial section to defining and adopting a multi-faceted conceptualisation of practice itself—as professional work, a collection of practices, and in contrast to theory. The Research Methodology (Chapter 4) justifies the critical realism paradigm's ability to analyse the underlying structures and causal powers that shape agency, distinguishing between empirical observations and the real generative mechanisms. It explains the mixed-methods approach (surveys, individual interviews, and union document analysis), the instrumental case study design, the purposeful sampling strategy, and the three-stage data analysis process (thematic, analytic, and organisational coding). The empirical data then unfold across Chapters 5 through 7. Chapter 5 presents ECTs' perceptions of the conditions that enable and restrict their ideal teaching practices (policies, management, pedagogy, etc.). Chapter 6 details the five primary reasons for their union alignment: seeking Protection, Alignment, Strategic Association, Professional Learning, and Affordability. Chapter 7 synthesises these findings by examining the Basis of Legitimation for their choices and provides the three detailed portraits that connect individual narratives to the broader theoretical framework. Finally, the Conclusion (Chapter 8) provides a convergence of ECTs' union choices and prevalent practices, tackles the question of agency to drive education transformation, addresses the literature gap by detailing the study's contribution to new knowledge, and offers Implications for teacher preparation and induction.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a literature review that explores the idea that teaching is not merely an individual pursuit but a social practice constructed by communities of social actors in response to priorities in their context. This means that the actions of a group of practitioners, like early career teachers, represent patterns of social being and the activity of their struggles in the field of practice. The chapter begins by framing teaching as a professional practice. It then transitions to exploring debates on the effective assimilation of ECTs, emphasising the importance of teacher activism and the ECTs' potential as agents of change within their educational contexts. A critical examination of professionalism and professionalisation, including the influence of teacher unions and the state's role in defining teacher professionalism. The chapter then examines education as a political act, focusing on teacher activism and education politics in their work. Finally, it highlights key historical moves in South African teacher unions' formation and their agendas.

2.1 Teaching as a practice

MacIntyre (2013) defines a practice as a complex, organised activity where people work together to achieve goals that are specific to that activity. In the same breath, practice is viewed as the “various ways of being and doing” (Lave, 1996; Gess-Newsome, 2019; Philip *et al.*, 2019) within a specific professional field. In the context of my research, the primary practice is teaching. It is a complex activity socially established within institutions like schools and requires cooperative effort among teachers, students, and administrators. Consistent with this argument, Lampert (2010) posits that practice seems to “belong to a collective rather than to an individual” (p. 23). She distinguishes between these four practices can be seen as “that which contrasts with theory; as a collection of practices; [as a verb signifying that something can be] learned by being practiced or repeated”; [and practice as referring to professional work, for example,] the practice of teaching, what teachers do in common” (p.23). In this way, teaching can be viewed not just as a job, but as a discipline with an inherent moral purpose.

Crucially, MacIntyre separates the practice from the institution. Institutions are the necessary structures that house and sustain the practice, but they are primarily concerned with external goods, such as money, power, prestige, and protection (MacIntyre, 2013). While MacIntyre and Dunne (2002) strongly argue against teaching being a practice with its own intrinsic value, let alone a professional one. They posit that teaching has no ‘internal goods’ of its own and

functions merely as a conduit for sharing other practices. However, Morrow (2007) directly asserts teaching's professional status, defining it as the "professional practice of organising systematic learning" (p. 69). This definition aligns with the idea that professional work is a practice since it is a complex and organised activity. Dunne (2002), in challenging the anti-practice stance, affirms that teaching is "indeed a practice" (p. 353). He argues that reducing teaching to just "a set of skills and habits" is inconsistent with MacIntyre's own richer view of education found in some of his other writings (such as *After Virtue*) (Dunne, 2002, p. 345). Shulman (1987) disputed this claim when he identified pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) as the unique knowledge base exclusively for teachers. This thesis makes use of three conceptualisations: practice as contrasting with theory, practice as a collection of practices, and practice as referring to professional work (excluding cases wherein 'practice' is used as a verb). Since teaching as a professional practice is a contested academic debate, which directly relates to the third conceptualisation adopted by this thesis, practice as professional work. Table 2.1 provides a systematic overview of these practices in the context of this study:

Table 2.1 A Systematic Overview of Practices in the Context of the Study

	Individual (ECT) Perspective	Union Perspective	School Perspective
Practice as Professional Work (e.g., the practice of teaching)	Demonstrating the ability to make informed decisions, assert influence, and advocate for rights or interests. Not viewing themselves as “powerless social actors,” challenging the marginalised status portrayed in existing literature. Identity: Possessing a “new identity” shaped by individual priorities, foundational knowledge, and professional mandates. Transformative identity partially supported, leading to deep reflection on prevalent practices.	Offering services (the primary motivation for ECTs to join). Aligning with or contesting the professional status of teaching through their mandates, ideological stance, and activities. Providing a formal platform for confronting systemic dilemmas (though not the main driver for most ECTs).	The context where the professional practice of “organizing systematic learning” occurs. ‘Old-timers’ are expected to show ‘newcomers’ the ropes, perpetuating dominant practices. ECT Marginalization: A dilemma where ECTs’ professional status may be undermined or their input ignored (as per established literature). Dominant Practices: The established “ways of being and doing” that ECTs must navigate, resist, or adopt.
Practice as a Collection of Practices (Specific ways of being and doing)	Adopting/Resisting Dominant Practices: Transformative Practices: Entering the profession with an inclination towards change and deep reflection on current teaching norms. Specific Teaching Practices: The actual methods and actions (pedagogical, administrative, relational) employed in the classroom. Influence of transformative identity on teaching practices remains undetermined.	Addressing Specific Workplace Practices: Focusing on improving conditions of service, advocating for fair disciplinary practices, and ensuring adherence to employment regulations. Advocating for specific changes to practices within the schooling system (e.g., workload, resource allocation) based on their ideological stance.	Institutional Practices and Culture: Socialisation Practices: The process of inducting ECTs into the school culture and existing methods (Lave & Wenger’s ‘old-timers’). Administrative/Operational Practices: School-level rules, procedures, and expectations (e.g., lesson planning format, meeting protocols, assessment procedures).
Practice as Contrasting with Theory (Bridging the gap)	Navigating Foundational Knowledge: Utilising knowledge gained from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) against the realities of school complexity. Challenging the notion that ITE “makes little difference” by using their “foundational knowledge” to inform their transformative identity and decisions.	Informing Ideology and Stance: Basing their ideological stance and proposed systemic reforms on educational <i>theory</i> (e.g., critical theory, social justice) and contrasting it with the perceived failures of current practice.	Translating Policy/Theory into Action: The site where theoretical mandates (e.g., curriculum policy, professional standards) must be translated and implemented into daily classroom practice. The source of the “complexities in the schooling system” that ITE is often criticized for failing to prepare new teachers for.

A debate that was relevant for my study is the idea of professionalism and professionalisation, which contribute to the construct of teaching as a practice. A particular focus is the concept of accountability in professionalism. This was relevant for the study because the control exerted by the state shapes the demands on the teaching force. There are numerous attributes of professional practices that have traditionally been associated with the provision of quality services to the public. These have included a specialised knowledge capital which requires a long preparation for teachers, including consistent skill and an ethical orientation to the work (Shulman, 1987). To demonstrate this, the next sections delve deeper into the concepts of professionalism, accountability and professionalisation in teaching.

2.1.1 Professionalism

Professionalism and professionalisation, although related, are essentially different in objectives and outcomes. Professionalism entails “improving quality and standards of practice” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 152). The conceptualisation of professionalism is shaped by the contexts in which different agendas are located. Professionalism is also framed as “something that people—professionals—actually ‘do’, not simply something that the government or any other agency wants them to do, or mistakenly imagines they are doing” (Evans, 2008, p. 27). Similarly, de Clercq (2013) and Eggleston (2018) emphasises that professionalism is enacted by teacher interactions in practice. As much as Evans (2008) argues for the ideal, contexts bear different accounts of how professionalism is envisioned. Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) note that there is a lack of consensus in the meaning-making of the concept of professionalism. Consistent with this point, Fox (1992, p. 2) contends that “professionalism means different things to different people.” This idea is reinforced by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), who suggest that traditional qualitative investigators and critical education policy academics should adopt comparison to avoid foregoing a significant research advantage. Notably, if the conceptualisation of the idea of professionalism is variable, then the enactment of professionalism amongst teachers will be different. Consequently, the contexts may reflect a clash or match in ideals and goals related to professionalism.

Much of the focus and attention on professionalism by government, unions, and teachers themselves has been on “teacher accountability and performance” (Sachs, 2016, p. 414). This may stem from the fact that teachers’ accountability and performance are objects of control. Therefore, to claim the ‘control’ both the state and teachers’ representatives (unions) are likely to struggle for domination in these two aspects. In fact, there is a debate on the definition of

professionalism and the context's influence on shaping the idea of professionalism which run parallel. Sachs (2016, p. 414) argues that:

Teacher professionalism is shaped by the external environment and that, during periods of increased accountability and regulation, different discourses of professionalism will circulate and gain legitimacy and impact on how professionalism is conceived and enacted.

Government and teacher unions take different stances in relation to teacher professionalism. In the context of Norway, Mausethagen and Granlund (2012) highlight that in the conception of teacher professionalism, the “government emphasises teacher accountability, research-based practice and specialization. By contrast, the teachers’ union highlights research-informed practice, responsibility for educational quality and professional ethics” (p. 815). The different positions in the conceptualisation of professionalism could be motivated by the distinctive agendas each entity tries to fulfil. It comes as no surprise that the ideas of professionalism in teaching are underpinned by political endeavours that determine the acceptable definitions of professionalism (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012). Ozga and Lawn (1988) assert that the historical context influences the concepts of professionalism, which could be understood as control strategies (the state) and as a professional strategy (the teachers).

The Norway case only reveals that there are different interests between the state and teacher unions. Additionally, Mausethagen and Granlund (2012) highlight that there “is also a reason to believe that the government and the teachers’ union, with their different agendas and interests, engage in negotiations in a quest for the dominant discourse on teacher professionalism” (p. 816). Thus, it is argued that professionalism should be investigated in terms of how it is used as a control measure by the government and occupational strategy by the teachers (Ozga & Lawn, 1988). This is different for South Africa which has an education system that is characterised by a myriad of challenges, including poor facilities, overcrowding and poor working conditions.

2.1.2 Accountability

Accountability in this study is significant as it establishes the structural and policy-based tension that frames the ECTs’ navigation of the schooling system. The discussion distinguishing between professional accountability (grounded in teacher knowledge and affording autonomy) and bureaucratic accountability (driven by top-down compliance and

standardisation) highlights the core conflict at the policy level. This conflict directly interfaces with the fundamental identity of the ECTs, who enter the profession with a pronounced critical consciousness and a commitment to knowledge-prioritising practices forged during their activism and teacher education. Professional accountability is rooted in the assumption that knowledge justifies teachers' actions, thereby affording them a considerable degree of professional autonomy. This trust grants teachers power over their work, differentiating their professionalism and autonomy from accountability, which fundamentally serves the interests of the state. For most European and Asian countries and the United States of America (USA), accountability is said to be the dominant policy of action driven by the goal to improve the 'quality' of education (Fuller *et al.*, 2008). Gamble (2010) argues that the lack of professional autonomy disqualifies teachers as being true professionals. Gamble's argument contends that teachers, employed by the state, lack the capacity to be agentic, which represses their autonomy. It is a reductionist argument to think of teachers as passive agents in their work. Although their autonomy may be stifled on a greater level, it might be suggested that they exercise some degree of autonomy. Mausethagen and Granlund (2012) argue that the "introduction of new accountability regimes in education becomes an expression of public and political scepticism towards teachers and school management" (p. 818). As Smith and Benavot (2019) note, "largely absent in discussions of quality or accountability are the voices and views of those who work, learn, and teach in schools" (p. 195). This places a great challenge on teachers' autonomy and arguably propagates the de-professionalisation of teachers. Contrary to the policing types of accountability policies, Darling-Hammond (1989, p. 60) maintains that a meaningful accountability system should be able to

- (1) set educationally meaningful and defensible standards for what parents and members of the general public can rightfully expect of a school system, school, or teacher.
- (2) establish reasonable and feasible means by which these standards can be implemented and upheld; and
- (3) provide avenues for redress or corrections in practice when these standards are not met, so that ultimately students are well served.

The proposal challenges the existing system where legislative bodies want teachers to comply with everything the state wants. To further assist us to grapple with the idea of accountability, Darling-Hammond (1989) refers to different accountability mechanisms established to safeguard the public interest. The present study was particularly interested in professional accountability, where Darling Hammond (1989, p. 61) says:

Professional accountability—governments may create professional bodies and structures to ensure competence and appropriate practice in occupations that serve the public and may delegate certain decisions about occupational members, standards, and practices of these bodies.

Accountability in education includes professional accountability, bureaucratic accountability and public versus client accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989). Professional accountability involves a framework of commitments, policies, and practices aimed at increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes for students, minimizing the chances of harmful actions, and enabling mechanisms for redress and self-correction to identify, diagnose, and adjust ineffective strategies (Urbanski, 1998). Bureaucratic accountability entails teachers' adherence to policies that are crafted at the top of the system, which often includes rules and procedures that are used to standardise the practice (Darling-Hammond, 1989). On public versus client accountability, Darling-Hammond (1989, p. 65) highlights that the

... goals held by governments for public schools and the goals held by the clients of schools, for which different forms of accountability are needed. Because the needs, interests, and preferences of individual students and parents do not always converge with the needs, interests, and preferences of state or local governments, the question of accountability in education must always be prefaced by the questions “to whom?” and “for what?”

There seems to be a tension between accountability and teachers' autonomy in the manner in which professionalism is conceptualised by different stakeholders in education.

2.1.3 Professionalisation

Professionalisation entails “improving the status and standing” of the teaching practice (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 152). In South Africa, professionalising teaching has been marked by the establishment of a council, requirements for a degree, and a teacher-led development of professional teaching standards—where teachers are accountable to others in the field rather than to the state that owns and regulates practice. The state does not control teaching but allows teachers to be regulated through established councils—for instance, in South Africa through the establishment of the South African Council of Educators (SACE). On the list of efforts to professionalise teaching, my study primarily focuses on the component of specialised knowledge of teaching. This is because the literature on the transition of ECTs in school

contexts is knowledge blind—it fails to acknowledge new teachers' knowledge capital as they enter the field of practice. In addition, teaching fails a test to be acknowledged as a profession because it cannot “lay a claim to distinctive expertise based on esoteric knowledge” (Gamble, 2010, p. 25).

The emphasis on professional knowledge for the teaching profession is significant, as this is the foundation of claiming professional practice. It must be noted that although there is an idea of professional practice, practice itself “is not [a] fixed or static container but, rather, a dynamic flow produced and reproduced by professionals” (Dall’Alba, 2004, p. 680). Therefore, the continual production and reproduction of practice indicate the constant evolvement of practice knowledge and skills required to meet recent educational challenges. Consistent with this thought, Hordern (2015) argues that the “processes by which knowledge is selected, appropriated and transformed for practice (i.e., recontextualised) are particularly important for the constitution of professional knowledge” (p. 435). This argument further supports the idea that practice is acted upon as much as it acts on its constituents.

One cannot engage with the topic of professional knowledge in the teaching profession without highlighting the work of Shulman (1987, p. 8), who classifies the various components as teaching knowledge as follows:

- content knowledge;
- general pedagogical knowledge, with special reference to those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter;
- curriculum knowledge, with particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers;
- pedagogical content knowledge, that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding;
- knowledge of learners and their characteristics;
- knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures; and
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds.

Shulman's outline of the bodies of knowledge for teaching is not an exaggerated idea, but an indication of the complexities involved in the body of knowledge that informs teachers' work. In South Africa, this is reflected in recent developments on the policy that determines the minimum requirements for teacher education qualifications. The MRTEQ (2015) policy marked an important turnaround in how the state envisions the importance of a knowledge base in teaching. The ultimate endeavour of this exercise was to show that 'knowledge utility' is the basic element that informs teaching decisions aimed at addressing the "primary concern for student welfare" (Darling-Hammond, 1989, p. 71). Fundamental to the State's policy stance on teachers' knowledge is how this component could help address poor content knowledge and improve inclusive practices in the education system. Teachers' knowledge is placed at the centre of education transformation with the expectation of "improving exam results, improving behaviours and discipline, extending opportunities to all, and ensuring pupils are well prepared for all aspects of their future lives." (p. 436). As such, the main idea of teachers' professional knowledge and skills is to address the challenges the learners face, and, secondary to this, is the implication of the possession of this knowledge on teachers' professional status.

Specialised teachers' knowledge is integral to advancing teaching as a practice. If the teaching practice is "conceived as routine, requiring levels of judgement and decision-making that are relatively easy to acquire, then an argument can be made that problems are straightforward and can be simply met through the application of suitable knowledge resources, packaged appropriately for the practitioner" (Hordern, 2015, p. 436). The reasoning here is essential to elucidate further that teachers are not just engaged in regurgitating their knowledge capital but are involved in a deliberate and intricate process of grappling with the practice's demands and the appropriate response. Clearly, the knowledge in teaching is not merely the application of protocols in a routine and technical manner but also requires professional judgement for proper application in practice. The public and some literature have held the view that the teachers' role is to implement "policies and initiatives, with little meaningful contribution apart from efficiency, competence and industry" (Hordern, 2015, p. 438). It is also noted there "can be no doubting the difficulties involved considering how governments are keen on using education instrumentally, to achieve specified objectives which articulate uneasily with long-held societal professional conceptions of education and its practice" (Hordern, 2015, p. 442). Highlighting the involvement of the governments in the debates about professional practice brings us to the discussion of how politics constantly influences and shapes the work of teachers, their identity, and the way they are perceived by the public. The influences are seen through policy

enforcement and enactment, which is often at odds with teachers' views and ideals arguments in education literature.

2.2 The Transition of ECTs from Higher Education into School Communities

In this section, I show that students move from one field of practice (the university setting) into another (the teaching profession), which is governed by different 'rules of the game'. The change marks a clear transition: the focus shifts from gaining insight into education through academic knowledge at university to the professional task of organising systematic learning that meets the demands of the current national curriculum. The capital changes as they adjust to a new field and learn to interact with a different set of stakeholders and power relations. I argue that this transition leads to a view of ECTs as underprepared, passive neophytes who do not have agency. I shall then review literature in which teacher education is intended to give future teachers a set of concepts, tools, and skills to help them understand the ethical orientations of the practice. In this instance, I shall argue that although ECTs are not prepared for every eventuality, this position conceives of them as having grounding, priorities, and agency. My argument is that the first position takes a reductionist view of ECTs as social actors who potentially bring a knowledge base and a sense of agency to their first-position school.

2.2.1 Socialisation of New Teachers into Practice

Much of the literature on new teachers' assimilation into the schooling context focuses on how newcomers are underprepared for the realities of the workplace and face dilemmas and difficulties. The dominant stances in the literature purport that new teachers come in a community of practice where 'old-timers' are expected to show the 'newcomers' the ropes (Lave & Wenger, 1991), initial teacher education makes little difference in preparing teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), that teachers' first experiences on the job reveal a mismatch between their expectations and the demands of teaching, they have inadequate knowledge to fulfil their tasks and duties (Flores & Day, 2006; Ulvik & Langorgen, 2012); that there is inadequate induction of novice teachers (van Niekerk & Dube, 2011), and that teacher education institutions fail to prepare new teachers for the complexities in the schooling system (Gravett *et al.*, 2011). Consistently, Harju and Niemi (2019, p.54) argue that new teachers "encounter many new situations and practices that differ from their experiences in initial teacher education." It is also noted that new teachers experience positive attitudes during the first few

weeks of teaching, which in less than six months begin to wane, and the phenomenon is labelled “the curve of disenchantment” (Ryan, 1986, p. 8, as cited in Cherubini, 2009). Like all novices facing transitions to the workplace, new teachers are likely to experience a reality shock because of the new field of practice. In response, the possible outcome is that the new teacher will endure the reality shock (DiCicco *et al.*, 2014) by falling back on the knowledge and skills obtained during training. At the beginning of their career, new teachers essentially strive to strike a balance between survival and discovery (Huberman, 1993). Huberman argued that the fulfilment of discovery enables new teachers to persevere and work through stressful times for survival. These authors position new teachers’ transition into the profession as solely being acted upon by various factors in the field of practice. New teachers are often depicted as subject to the notions of the daily practice and the system's shortcomings. Cherubini (2009, p. 93) critically notes that

New teachers [are] situated as passively active subjects of a much more aggressive conceptual force that drives their enculturation to the profession. How the novice first sinks or swims and second adapts to the respective culture, and it, to them, significantly influences their professional and social stability.

Ulvik and Langorgen (2012, p. 43) argue that “research on beginning teachers often focuses on the problems they encounter.” Similarly, Botha and Rens (2018) and Steyn (2004) situate new teachers as compliant and passive subjects in their transition. The prevalent positions do not seem to consider that, although there are demands and dilemmas, perhaps the new teachers’ aim is not to assimilate existing practices or fit into existing communities. For example, it is highlighted that “experienced colleagues are described as typically ignoring beginning teachers after their initial welcome to the school community” (Cherubini, 2009, p. 86). Whitelaw *et al.* (2008) refer to school communities as ‘pseudo-communities of practice’, arguing that they reflect less communal characteristics. While they appear to offer ECTs an induction and orientation, there are also abuses of power where new teachers are exploited, silenced and victimised for voicing their dissatisfaction (Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008). The abuse of organisational power, victimisation and “institutionalised bullying” is done to dismiss, suppress and put new teachers in their place (Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008, p. 33). According to Renard (2003, p. 63), new teachers are also

... immersed in a hierarchical organisation of schools which have a ‘pecking order’ and [that] the profession’s newest members must ‘pay their dues’ in terms of ‘surviving the

first few years [to facetiously earn] a badge of honour' before being accepted into the school's culture.

Instead of valuing dilemmas and disharmony as an opportunity for meaningful growth in the communities of practice, these are often masked to present the illusion of a unified voice. This leaves a small room for new teachers to raise concerns or to hold differing opinions. To deal with the marginalisation and stress, which was the opposite of the focus of my study, new teachers in their research created some 'modicum of autonomy' where they avoided staffrooms and reverted to their classrooms as safe havens (Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008; Wood, 2003). Consistent with this view, Berliner (1988, p. 2401) also notes that socialisation for new teachers can be fragmented because it does not always provide the necessary frameworks to navigate the classroom. This can lead to new teachers' isolation and struggles with "separating the forest from the trees." Whitelaw and others maintain that instead of building genuine communities of practice, pseudo-communities perpetuate the 'suppression of conflict' where there are differing voices, and this is achieved through an "illusion of consensus and [the requirement for] the participants to 'play community'—to perform identities that the participants think will please the group" (Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008, p. 28). Whitelaw's position shows that there is a force working against new teachers' self-determination.

Over and above the physical consequences, the "impervious school cultures can figuratively drown beginning teacher idealism, suppress their enthusiasm, consume their emotional resiliencies, and inhibit their potential to cope with the challenges of the classroom." (Cherubini, 2009, p. 89). Researchers point out patterns of little support and reports of work-related stress, which is often attributed to workload and other demands of teaching. The success of new teachers is critical since being "overwhelmed by the requirements of a profession that one felt prepared to enter can generate self-doubt, frustration, and anxiety as novice teachers scramble to understand the fundamental requirements of the role of [a] teacher" (Russell & McPherson, 2001, p. 3). For some beginner teachers "feelings of isolation, a perceived mismatch between idealistic expectations and classroom reality, as well as lack of support and guidance have been identified as key features of their experience." (Kim & Cho, as cited in Botha & Rens, 2018, p. 2). According to Amitai and Van Houtte (2022), a novice's experience is negatively impacted "when support from experienced colleagues and school leadership is lacking" (p. 8). Isolation seems to be an expected end in most of the literature that covers the new teachers' socialisation, leading to consistency in stances about the struggles of transition.

In contrast, Robinson *et al.* (2024) suggest that strong theoretical frameworks enable student teachers to critically analyse their observations and experiences within the current school system. This process allows them to envision practical ways to improve teaching both in their own schools and in broader contexts, positioning them as potential agents of change. This argument is important as it shifts from the passive view of new teachers to one that acknowledges new teachers as role players with transformative potential. New teachers' identity in the professional space does not only depend on their induction but also on their initial teacher education programmes and social histories. William (2010) argues that existing professional cultures in schools influence the new teachers' participation in various aspects of the school. Consistent with this view, Achinstein *et al.* (2004) maintain that two elements, namely professional culture and 'levels of capital,' influence new teachers' socialisation. From this perspective, it is argued that new teachers are socialised into complex professional communities in schools. In the state policy environment, the state's educational policies and programmes that determine how teachers should teach have a bearing on the socialisation of new teachers (Achinstein *et al.*, 2004). This perspective disregards the powerful experiences of South African pre-service teachers both in terms of initial teacher education programmes and in terms of their political activism for free, quality higher education.

New teachers are expected to fully transition from a theory-informed pre-service to a well-rounded practice-informed teacher in the early years of full-time teaching (Botha & Rens, 2018). However, my study has taken a different conceptual move in that I take into account the conceptual and ideological resources that they come in with, that they are not merely 'blank slates' who have to be assimilated into prevalent practices. Nickel and Crosby (2021, p. 328) consistently argue that "engagement and relational ideals likely [draw new teachers] to the profession before university but reflection and support in teacher education sustained these ideals." This study acknowledges that the realities of new teachers in the current schooling context are ever-changing. In this study, I follow Priestley *et al.*'s (2013) positioning of teachers as agents of change, and they understand agency as not "something that people can have" but "something that people do" (p. 189). Priestley *et al.* (2013) argue that agency "doesn't come from nowhere, but builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action." (p. 190). New teachers come from the background of youth advocacy for the transformation of university policies and decolonisation of the curriculum. These new teachers come from the history of student activism against power structures. Among them are movements marked with

the hashtag (as they took shape in social media), #FeesMustFall, #TransformWits, and #RhodesMustFall.

2.2 ECTs as Potential Agents for Change

I have shown that many studies depict ECTs as passive actors who are powerless in their new fields of practice. This section explores literature that suggests that, as legitimate actors in a new field, ECTs bring with them a set of conceptual resources, their own priorities, and competencies they have built through their own social experiences and educational histories. In the South African context, these include their initial teacher education learning and their experiences as activists in higher education institutions (HEIs). Robinson *et al.* (2024, p. 778) argue that efforts to shape the development of teacher education policy, responsible for framing potential teachers, are characterised by contestations. These authors found that “stakeholders often hold differing views on how to address what they perceive to be a ‘problem’ of teacher education” (*ibid.*, p. 778). In this section, I argue that new teachers possess a distinctive identity contrary to the perception that they are just subjects acted upon by their environment and circumstances. For new teachers to successfully tackle issues in the profession and actualise their potential as agents of change, Cochran-Smith (1991, p. 280) proposes ‘teaching against the grain’ to achieve this goal. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, policy-driven teacher-education programs consistently prepare new teachers to be agents of transformation for an education system in crisis, a demand that starkly contrasts with research that often portrays these new educators as passive novices (Rusznyak, 2015; Robinson *et al.*, 2024). However, Cochran-Smith (1991) argues that it cannot be suggested that “teachers alone have the power or the responsibility to reform education by ‘teaching better’, or that teaching can be understood in isolation from the cultures of schools and communities or the historical and political contexts of school and society.” (p. 280). This means that teachers do not act in a vacuum, but that teaching contexts are defined by aspects such as the dominant cultures, dominant teaching practices, communities of practice, and politics of the day. Although these different aspects define teaching contexts, Cochran-Smith (1991), and later Gallo (2020) charge new teachers with the mandate of confronting existing practices and charting new paths within practices. Cochran-Smith (1991, p. 280) highlights that:

Teaching against the grain stems from, but also generates, critical perspectives on the macro-level relationships of power, labor, and ideology—relationships that are perhaps

best examined at the university, where sustained and systematic study is possible. But teaching against the grain is also deeply embedded in the culture and history of teaching at individual schools and in the biographies of particular teachers and their individuals or collaborative efforts to alter curricula, raise questions about practices, and resist in appropriate decisions.

Teaching against the grain is a deliberate action involving a critical outlook of existing practices, and where there are discrepancies, defying to be subjected to them. While dominant literature positions new teachers as passive participants in school communities, teaching against the grain recognises that new teachers have the potential to act on their teaching contexts. Cochran-Smith (1991) proposes two approaches to ‘teach against the grain’, that is, critical dissonance and collaborative resonance. My study took a special interest in the idea of collaborative resonance, which Cochran-Smith (1991, p. 283) says entails the development of analytical skills in order to

... critique standard procedures and connect theory and practice, but also the resources needed to function as reforming teachers throughout their teaching careers in diverse school contexts. The goal is to prolong and intensify the influences of the university and school experiences, both of which are viewed as potentially liberalising.

Unlike critical dissonance, which is widely concerned with broader social issues, collaborative resonance focuses on analysing existing teaching practices and teachers’ own practices, and critically engaging with policies that define their work. Critical dissonance entails new teachers’ defiance against the status quo, which is meant to “help them develop stronger, more critical perspectives that confront issues of race, class, power, labour, and gender, and to call into question the implications of standard school policy and practice.” (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 281). Gallo's (2020) exploration of rural teaching contexts reveals that teachers frequently contend with under-resourcing and challenging depictions—factors rooted in class and power dynamics—forcing them to defy conventional expectations. Critical dissonance transcends the educational mandates that new teachers may have and brings into question critical social issues.

Cochran-Smith (1991) believes that qualifying teachers can become agents of change in their teaching journey. The argument for teaching against the grain does not focus only on the

progressive ideas linked to broader social issues, but it strikes a balance between political or social mandates and the professional mandates teachers carry into the profession. This is an unavoidable path for new teachers because they will face both professional and political issues in their engagement with the teaching contexts. The fundamental conclusion of this discussion is that new teachers are not passive subjects, but rather possess identities influenced by previous experiences of activism.

The teaching against the grain principles can be useful in the South African context because there is an ongoing mission to address exclusionary practices. Given South Africa's history, many prevalent practices are still exclusionary. The exclusionary practices are first faced at the socialisation level of new teachers. However, there is a deliberate approach to influencing early career teachers' ideas into the profession to address the prevalent practices (Rusznayak & Walton, 2017). It is argued that pre-service teachers, upon qualifications, possess some pedagogical reasoning, which they use to assess the current practices and respond based on the knowledge and experiences they have accumulated in university learning (Rusznayak & Bertram, 2021; Walton & Osman, 2018). Robinson *et al.* (2024) contend that changes in policy and practice within education and teacher training have established conditions that enable organised learning for students across various social contexts, while also promoting equity. This attitude reflects resistance by ECTs to marginalising practices in schools. One study also highlighted that some pre-service teachers' "exposure to marginalising practices ironically seemed to strengthen their resolve to teach inclusively" (Rusznayak & Walton, 2017, p. 477). This evidence shows that, like teaching against the grain, ECTs do not merely accept dominant practices but act in ways that challenge the status quo.

2.3 Education as a Fundamentally Political Issue

Education is generally associated with knowledge, and the politics of education reveals that it is much more than this. The understanding could be attributed to society's need to preserve an idea of neutrality of education spaces and activities that happen within. Contrary to the surface understanding, research literature evidences that education is embedded with a political nature. Paulo Freire (1985, p. 17) states:

For me education is simultaneously an act of knowing, [and] a political act. While being a teacher demands that we be simultaneously a politician, [and] an epistemologist, -

education has politicity, the quality of being political. Because education is politicity, it is never neutral.

Freire's perspective shows the link between epistemological work being done at schools and the broader society's politics. His idea is that every pedagogical interaction is political and influenced by ideology. The central aspect concerning politics in education is what content gets taught, to whom, in favour of whom, and the manner in which it is transmitted. This is of particular interest because teachers' work has never been neutral. After all, education is the state's instrument of mass influence. To highlight how knowledge is selected and transmitted, Bernstein's pedagogic device offers a framework to understand how knowledge changes as it is produced, recontextualised and reproduced in different fields in the educational arena (Bernstein, 2000). The pedagogic device explains the power interplay involved in arenas of social struggles, which education spaces represent. For instance, prevalent ideologies impact what is selected and valued in fields. It is therefore in the interest of politics to get involved in education since "the people who control [epistemic pedagogic device] control the 'ruler of legitimacy' in key social arenas and secure the greatest reach and impact for their own location in status hierarchies" (Jackson, 2014, p. 132).

In the case of this study, the interest was in the competition for control of the capital within the field. The influence of politics on education is primarily seen in the proposed policies that influence the practice. One of the main interests of political interference in education is the values that inform the "prioritisation and distribution of resources, how society views difference, how schools are organised, how teachers view their work, the styles of their teaching and the nature of the curriculum" (Barton, 1995, p.156). It is quite explicit in both Barton's (1995) and Freire's (1985) position that education cannot be divorced from the exercise of politics. The relationship between politics and education can be attributed to the complexity of educational issues, which are underpinned by the convergence of power, socio-economic conditions and social agenda. As such, it is uncommon that education spaces could have an emergence of organised labour forces that seek to influence the occurrences in the education sector.

The intersection of politics and education in the case of teachers' work may lie in who controls the definitions of the expected professional behaviours of teachers. In addition to this is the teachers' assertive voice in matters concerning the direction learning ought to take and how they should be treated. The idea here is that dominant discourses are created and maintained

by social actors in institutions, and this is maintained by the propagation of specific stances, values and practices (Howarth, 2000). Therefore, both the state and teacher unions engage in the struggle to control the epistemic pedagogical device as a means to advance their agendas.

2.3.1 Teacher Activism

Where there are power relations between groups, there are struggles. South Africa has a history of teacher activism. It has stated that it “served as a catalyst for the redress intent of post-apartheid education policies which urged the interpretation and enactment of curriculum as a contextualised social process that is cognizant of the socio-economic, geo-political, and historical-cultural permutations of South Africa” (Perumal, 2016, p. 747). In the case of South Africa, teacher activism took shape through the medium of teacher unions, which sought to realise both the social and educational mandates. However, activism is challenging for teachers. Marshall and Anderson (2008) argue that teacher activism “and challenging creates trouble” (p. 5), while Paul and Smith (2000) say that teachers “who do not toe the line, who question policy, and creatively maladjust to school cultures that do not value all children, are often dubbed as ‘troublemakers’” (p. 137). Evidently, teachers’ activism is not an agreeable identity to embody because the spaces render the individuals who take this path as outcasts.

Undertaking activism work in teaching comes at a cost, and one of the greatest costs is that teachers tend to lose their “professional status in the face of increasing activist status” (Marshall & Anderson, 2008, p. 5). In certain quarters, activism is seen as counter-professional and neglects learners’ interests, a major ethical orientation underpinning the practice of some teachers. Perhaps the reason teacher activists are willing to undertake such a journey with dire consequences is the greater commission, which involves their identity as individuals who advocate for “the rights of minority groups, challenge widely held attitudes and assumptions about curriculum and teachers’ role, and work for change beyond the confines of their own classroom” (Macrae, 2008, p. 1). Teacher activism is regarded as a ‘selfish act’, on one hand, and a deliberate goal-oriented task on the other hand.

With an understanding of the convergence of conflicting identities, Cochran-Smith (1991) poses a question: “Can prospective teachers learn to be both educators and activists, to regard themselves as agents of change, and to regard reform as an integral part of the social, intellectual, ethical, and political activity of teaching?” This question is important since it reveals that there are no binaries in identity; it is not an ‘either/or’ situation. Additionally, Freire

(1993) argues that the collective rules of the game govern progressive teachers or teacher activists and conservative teachers' professional identity. Freire (1993, p. 23) states,

They both need to know what they teach... I do not want to say that four times four equals sixteen for a progressive educator and fourteen for a conservative teacher. What I want to say is that the very comprehension of what teaching is, what learning is, and what knowing is has connotations, methods, and ends that are different for one another.

Teacher activists are distinct in their disposition to struggle against the social order to achieve socially just ends, which (Mills *et al.*, 2019) argue could be understood in nuanced ways by differentiating between its affirmative and transformative forms. While affirmative activism focuses on addressing the effects of injustice without disturbing the foundational framework that creates inequity, transformative activism seeks to restructure the underlying systems that generate social injustice (Mills *et al.*, 2019). This distinction, drawn from Fraser (1997), reveals that a teacher's approach can be internally focused on school-based innovations like inclusive curricula or externally oriented toward broader social policies and structures. Activist teacher professionalism is therefore not merely about individual actions but is deeply concerned with wider issues of equity and social justice (Boylan *et al.*, 2023).

The view here is predominantly from an international context. Little is known about how prospective teachers or ECTs exercise their activism in South African teaching contexts. The subsequent section explores the history of key players in the politics of education, that is, teacher trade unions. The historical trail will strengthen the argument made by Freire (1985), by revealing that teacher trade unionism agendas are intertwined with social, educational and political pursuits, which find their way into education policies and eventually practice.

2.4 Teacher Trade Unionism in South Africa

The teacher union space has changed drastically over the years, and unlike in the past when SADTU and the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) were the main two teacher bodies, there are other players in the sector today. In the current landscape, South Africa has three large trade union players: SADTU, the South African Teachers Union (SATU), and NAPTOSA. There are other recent teacher unions in the South African education environment, such as the Professional Educators' Union (PEU) and the Natal African Teachers Union (NATU).

Due to the history of activism in the older generation of teachers, the legacy of activism against power structures may interact dynamically with the new teachers' quest for social justice and education reform. The subsequent subsection will provide a detailed examination of teacher unions in South Africa, focusing on their historical development, the process of their identity formation, and the priorities they currently champion.

2.4.1 Teacher Unions Formation in South Africa

Teacher unions have been integral role-players in the arena of teacher politics. The roots of teacher trade unionism in South Africa date as far back as 142 years ago, when the Native Educational Association (NEA) was formed (Govender, 1996). The establishment of teacher unions in South Africa, while sharing the common international principle of advocating for teachers' rights and establishing bargaining legislation, occurred under unique contextual circumstances. Carr and Beckett (2018, p. 3) state that unions in the United States, Canada, England, and Australia were created "to advocate and establish a bargaining legislation." While this is true for most unions globally, it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct history of South Africa. In this thesis, I focus on the priorities and functions of teacher unions in South Africa, considering the country's specific historical context. The establishment of the unions in South Africa was a response to Black teachers' need for "a collective approach to address common problems that affected them as a result of the historical economic marginalisation of black educators" (Mafisa, 2017, 10554). In the past, established and emergent teacher unions' divisions were "related to race and broad socio-political issues rather than educational beliefs" (Hindle, 1991, p.72). The teaching profession's history of political interference by the state took on a more robust form during the apartheid era. The state tried to exert control, which was enforced through inspections, but teachers as social actors equally tried to subvert this. Jansen (2004, p. 53) states that the

... core curriculum for all schools, white and black, was reinforced through [a] dual mechanism of state-driven inspections and the state-moderated examination system. Any deviation from the state curriculum would therefore be exposed in either the inspection process or in performance on state moderated examinations.

The apartheid state's modus operandi was by way of imposing rigid control over the work of teachers in the name of accountability (Jansen, 2004). Facing a growing resistance against the apartheid system, the Department of Education was left with no choice but to abandon these state apparatuses, which left a "legacy of suspicion and resentment against the state

involvement” (Jansen, 2004, p. 53). Post-1994, it became evident that regulation was “an intimately political act” and that politicians embarked on a campaign of “making teachers accountable as professional actors within public schools” (Jansen, 2004, p. 54). The government of the day identified teachers as professional actors and, to build on this, the government introduced teacher development initiatives to improve the quality of the Black teaching force (Jansen, 2004). These teacher development initiatives were implemented to level the playing fields in qualifications of White and Black teachers.

The rise of teacher trade unionism in South Africa occurred in response to poor working conditions, discrimination, marginalisation and segregation in the education sector. The first teacher trade union in South Africa was established in 1879. The Native Educational Association (NEA) provided a platform for Black teachers to adopt a “collective approach to address common problems that affected them as a result of the historical economical marginalisation of black educators” (Mafisa, 2017, p. 10554). The association was established “to deal not only with educational issues, but also with social and political issues of the day”, such as the oppression and economic marginalisation of Black people (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001, p. 223).

During the apartheid era, that is, post-1948, the political situation in South Africa at the time meant that teacher unions were established along racial, language and provincial lines (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001; Mafisa, 2017). The formation of teacher unions, especially Black teachers’ unions, “was to fight for the rights of teachers (e.g., to oppose strongly the implementation of the Bantu Education Act of 1953) and to pursue political interests of African teachers (e.g., the abolishment of the pass laws)” (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001, p. 223). The teacher unions’ formations reflected a political climate, and this attribute shaped their function.

Teacher unions’ resistance could be attributed to the fact that, before the apartheid era, the system was described as one with “benign neglect and paternalism for black teachers” (Jansen, 2004, p. 52). The enactment of the apartheid policy in 1948 saw an active control of Black teachers by the appointment of school boards that were responsible for the appointment, disciplining and dismissal of teachers (Hartshorne, 1992). The apartheid education department at the time appointed inspectors to ensure compliance with content directives in the apartheid syllabus, governance and administration of schools, and the enactment of its curriculum and assessments (Jansen, 2004). The Soweto Uprising of 1976 not only yielded the rejection of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for half of the school subjects but also allowed the Black

students and teachers to reject the entire control measures responsible for apartheid schooling (Jansen, 2004). The conditions of resistance laid a foundation on which resistance structures, such as teacher unions, could build and mobilise against apartheid and all its segregation laws.

By the 1980s, the political pursuits intensified and running concurrent to this was the young teachers' call for teacher unions to "confront the government head-on and use militancy if necessary." (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001, p. 223). The radical call opposed the implementation of Bantu education and, on a society level, the oppressive pass laws. Younger teachers had distinct advocacy in that their activism experience as students informed their proposed approach. Mafisa (2017, p. 10554) claims that teachers' unions formed in post-apartheid South Africa "retain the complexion of the historical character of the political culture of the period before the dawn of democracy in 1994." So, as groups of social actors, unions adopted different stances and priorities, and teachers chose to align with specific unions that best represented their struggles at the time. The current makeup of teacher unions in South Africa continues to reflect different philosophies and priorities.

Today, teacher unions in the South African education system play a role through their collective bargaining for education policies, advocacy for better working conditions, professional development for teachers, and advocacy for the rights of teachers. There are two sides to the debate on the role of teacher unions in the education system. Firstly, it is argued that teacher unions are meaningful role-players in education, who bargain for teachers and ensure "quality of education by means of engaging teachers in improving teaching approaches and maintaining a high standard" (Mafisa, 2017, p. 10553). Fredricksson (2004, pp. 17–18) strongly advocates for a strategic partnership between governments and teacher unions as a key approach to enhancing the quality of education. From this perspective, teacher unions are the central players in the promotion of teacher professionalism and improving the culture of learning and teaching (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001; & Mafisa, 2017). In this study, I contend that if teacher unions are integral players in the improvement of the quality of education, it is only logical that we pay attention to the types of messages they uphold and how these appeal to the new teachers who are presented as transformation agents for the education system. Secondly, teacher unions have also endured criticism over their strategies for addressing educational and labour concerns, both locally and worldwide. These strategies have consequently branded teacher unions as disruptive in the education system. For instance, in South Africa, a teacher union such as

SADTU has faced some negative criticism. It has been extensively accused of corruption and as a regressor in the improvement of the education system (Zengele, 2013). In the next section, I focus on the major teacher unions in South Africa.

2.4.2 Major South African Teacher Unions: An Overview

This study focused on the three main teacher unions that are the most influential and prevalent in Gauteng, where my study was situated, namely the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), the South African Teachers' Union (SATU), and the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) (Mafisa, 2017). There are other teacher union participants, such as the Professional Educators' Union (PEU) and the Natal African Teachers' Union (NATU) (Mafisa, 2017), which formed part of my data collection.

The current teacher unions somewhat reflect the historical character of the earlier teacher union formations (Mafisa, 2017). SADTU and NAPTOSA are currently predominantly Black teacher unions, each boasting 75% Black teachers' membership, although English-speaking liberals predominantly constitute NAPTOSA, while SATU is dominated by 90% White Afrikaner conservatives (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001). Mafisa (2017) argues that "though all these unions have more or less similar objectives, their policies and ideological orientations differ." (p. 10555). This part of the literature review will take a closer look at the three main teacher unions' objectives, policies and ideological orientations.

i. The South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU)

SADTU was launched on 6 October 1990 with the support of the liberation movements, such as the African National Congress (ANC) (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001). The establishment of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), which was endorsed by the leader of the African National Congress (ANC) at the time, Nelson Mandela, who said, "Organisations like the South African Democratic Teachers Union are an appropriate expression of the struggle against apartheid. They are also a means through which we entrench our opposition to apartheid." (SADTU, 1991a, p. 39). As such, SADTU's political position was also seen through its move to ostracise school principals, as they were "perceived as apartheid collaborators. Hindle (1991) asserts that SADTU's ideology is "influenced by the politics of its black membership and it sees no inherent contradiction between a strong organisation, able to defend and promote the rights and interests of teachers and the professional work of these teachers"

(p. 225). By such a declaration, SADTU aims to highlight that it upholds its advocacy in trade union matters, promoting its membership's professional aspect.

The political history surrounding SADTU (2001, p. 3) is reflected in its existing aim to this day, which states:

We teachers of South Africa, having committed ourselves to the transformation of education and dedicated ourselves to the development of an education system which is fully accessible, equal and qualitative, free of apartheid legacy and which is the just expression of the will of the people—as enshrined in the Constitution of the country – hereby proclaim the need for a single teachers’ union in our land.

It is quite evident that SADTU’s aim has a vivid socio-political agenda that they believe can be addressed through the transformation of the education system. SADTU’s affiliation with the liberation movement made things difficult for its recognition during the apartheid era, which delayed its official recognition. The history of SADTU “would be patently incomplete without reference to the high levels of inequality that characterised the socio-political state of affairs in South Africa, and its schooling system.” (Kumalo & Skosana, 2014, p. 3). The socio-political conditions at the time influenced the activities and resistance agenda of SADTU.

There is much debate about the current role SADTU plays in the education system. Some education analysts (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001 and Jansen, 2004) maintain that SADTU is characterised by teacher militancy, and this is attributed to its *modus operandi* in its unionism approach. Arguing that SADTU reflects a culture of industrial action and engagement in means-to-end actions, such as protest through song and dance called ‘toyi-toyi’ (Mafisa, 2017). According to Heystek and Lethoko (2001, p. 225), SADTU has been “synonymous with teacher militancy”, which has “led to a negative attitude of the public towards unions in general.” In contrast, SADTU is mindful of the brand associated with its name and activities, but it identifies as ‘a union of professionals’, which is integral to teacher unions’ agenda (Kumalo & Skosana, 2014). SADTU’s stance reflects their history of struggles against apartheid, and this is seen through their position to advance ‘redress’ in the education system. Like the existence of most political parties, SADTU identifies as a sole teacher union that represents the interests of South African teachers as a whole.

ii. The National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA)

NAPTOSA was launched in 1991, in the same political context in which SADTU had defined its agenda and position against the ruling regime. NAPTOSA, provided a unionist home for principals who were seen as collaborators with the apartheid regime, [and other] disgruntled SADTU members” (Mafisa, 2017, p. 10555). Similar to SADTU, NAPTOSA presently reflects the position it took at its inception which is expressed in its slogan “teach with dignity”. NAPTOSA (2001, Section 1) aims to have:

A non-discriminatory system of education; an equitable system of education; effective compulsory education; professional responsibility of educators; gender parity and elimination of backlogs; serving the interests of a child; and the promotion of co-operation with parents and community as well as the professional development of teachers.

While NAPTOSA has historically distanced itself from political issues, and its aims arguably reflect a social, political, and educational agenda, NAPTOSA outrightly reflects a professional agenda. The inclusion of the idea of professionalism in NAPTOSA’s stance is not just semantics. Hindle (1991, p. 73) argues that their emphasis on professionalism “is interpreted to mean a refusal to engage in industrial (mass) action, backed by the somewhat empty rhetoric that their ‘concern is for the child’”. However, NAPTOSA’s sense of professionalisation is conceptualised as an anti-industrial action stance (Hindle, 1991).

Hindle (1991, p. 73) also highlights that NAPTOSA

Attempted to force a contradiction and to capture the ‘professional’ element of teaching. [that] they [had] distanced themselves from SADTU by including the term ‘professional’ in their name, and by their early press statements which showed antagonism to political issues and unionist practices.

It is recorded that while South Africa’s President at the time, F.W. de Klerk, “met with representatives of NAPTOSA before it was even launched, and praised its intended formation, he [had] not yet granted SADTU an interview despite numerous requests.” (Hindle, 1991, p. 73). It is therefore quite evident that NAPTOSA’s formation was not met with hostility, unlike its counterunion, SADTU.

iii. The South African Teachers' Union (SATU):

SATU's (2000, Section 1) aims are to:

Empower educators with regard to professional responsibilities; assist educators in the process of guiding their pupils to their maximum potential as responsible citizens of a democratic state; further the use of the mother tongue (Afrikaans in this case) as the medium of instructions whether in single, double, or parallel medium schools; establish a service whereby member's interests and rights are improved and protected; note the educational needs of pupils and strive for the improvement of these; ensure that the interests of learners are not adversely affected by the actions of workers, and perform any function which the Constitution requires.

SATU sees teachers' qualifications of their members as a determining factor that they are professionals. SATU is the third-largest union in South Africa and, unlike SADTU and NAPTOSA, which boast significant Black membership, SATU has a predominantly White Afrikaner conservative membership. One of the underlying motivations of the establishment of SATU was its aim to preserve the Afrikaans language and heritage in the education sector. Similar to NAPTOSA, SATU claims that their "main concern is the professional element of teaching as a career" (Mafisa, 2017, p. 10555). SATU's stance implies that, just like NAPTOSA, they prefer negotiation and mediation as a means to settle disputes (Mafisa, 2017).

2.4.2 Teachers unions: summary of ideological orientations and priorities

So far, this review has shown how the historical legacy has shaped teacher unions' structure, purpose and modus operandi, but how they now hold different political and educational priorities. The question arises whether their historical legacies find traction with young teachers who are entering the professional space nearly three decades into democracy. The cultures of some teacher unions today still reflect the legacy of the struggle for justice that led to their formation. For instance, SATU and NAPTOSA foreground the professional aspect of teaching as the most important element of their unionism and downplay industrial action for negotiations as a means to settle disputes (Mafisa, 2017). While the dynamics of teacher unions have changed over the years, the teacher unions have remained important and influential role players in education affairs in South Africa. This might be attributed to teacher unions' identity in which they are viewed as channels through which teachers can exercise their agency or activism and where the leaders of the unions can advocate for teachers' interests (Mokgalane

et al., 1997). Table 2.2 below provides a summary of the ideological orientations and priorities of the three unions.

Table 2.2 SADTU, NAPTOSA, and NATU Ideological Orientations and Priorities Summary

Union	SADTU	NAPTOSA	SATU
Membership Size (Dec 2023)	275 979	44 603	29 639
Ideological Leanings	Social Movement Unionism:Politically aligned with the ANC/COSATU Tripartite Alliance. Often criticized for prioritizing unionism over professionalism.	Professional Unionism:Politically independent. Focuses on quality education, professionalism, and demographic diversity.	Independent Advocate:Politically independent, affiliated with FEDUSA. Champions mother-tongue education and community rights.
Primary Priorities	Labor Rights & Welfare:Securing higher salaries, protecting jobs, and improving conditions of service.	Quality Education & Professional Development:Providing member-centric services, professional support, and ensuring quality education for all learners.	Community & Language Rights: Protection of school governance, language of instruction, and opposition to over-centralized policy.
Approach to Industrial Action	Frequent and sometimes militant use of strikes and industrial action.	Focuses on negotiation and professional engagement through formal bargaining councils.	Employs peaceful protest and legal/legislative engagement as primary tools.
Influence & Reputation	Seen as a powerful, politically influential force with a firm grip on policy.	Positioned as a professional, responsible voice. Gaining influence through policy engagement.	An influential, rights-based advocate for specific community interests and governance.

2.5 Chapter Summary: Literature Gap

Although prevalent debates position teachers as subjects that lack autonomy, the unionised spaces offer teachers a platform to act as a collective, with legal protection and independence from their status as government employees, which grants them a degree of autonomy. Given the different education, activism, and university experiences newly qualified teachers have, there is potentially a new kind of professionalism that seeks to resist marginalising practices, and bring a different set of ethical, knowledge tools to the field. It would be naive to think that

the current generation of ECTs responds to dilemmas and demands of the teaching practice the same way as the reviewed research. There is a strong element of historical activism for the ECTs, and it is critical to assume that this history has shaped their identity. The identity new teachers assume can be reflected in the way in which they interact with the teaching contexts. The current literature fails to acknowledge the multifaceted identities new teachers may be carrying. There are fundamentally three potential identities that ECTs may be assuming. Firstly, they may identify as workers who adhere to the strict demands of the job and act within those confines. Secondly, new teachers may identify as professionals who adhere to the specific expectations of the professional council in fulfilling both ethical and educational expectations. Thirdly, new teachers may identify with a social activist identity, which may be guided by a need to fulfil an agenda on equity and justice in education. Thus, my study was designed to fill these gaps by understanding how ECTs envisage a transformed education system and how they position themselves in relation to that. The study addressed these gaps by establishing how ECTs enact their sense of agency through different sites in the education system and schooling environment.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

The literature review (Chapter 2) revealed that studies frequently portray early career teachers as passive, ignorant, and needing to adopt prevailing teaching practices. This chapter aims to build a conceptual and analytic framework that enables me to analyse how ECTs enact their agency as they enter a field of practice after qualifying. In this section, I draw on Bourdieu's field theory to conceptualise ECTs as social actors with a set of dispositions and histories that shape their interactions within a field. Bourdieu's theory provides the macro-sociological context, framing the teaching profession as a dynamic field wherein ECTs, possessing a unique habitus and various forms of capital, interact with established norms and power structures. Within this context, professional agency is positioned as the central phenomenon of study, representing the specific actions and capabilities of ECTs as they respond to and potentially transform their environment. To move beyond a descriptive account, the framework turns to LCT, which serves as a powerful analytical tool. LCT operationalises the abstract concepts from Bourdieu's theory by providing a precise means to analyse the principles of legitimation underpinning practices. Specifically, the Specialisation dimension of LCT enables the empirical investigation of how ECTs' actions are shaped by the interplay of epistemic relations (what knowledge is valued) and social relations (whose attributes are valued), thereby revealing the 'rules' of the game that govern their agency and potential for transformation within the field.

3.1 Struggles and dilemmas in a field of practice

This subsection positions the professional field that ECTs enter as a dilemmatic space where struggles emerge. These conflicts are explored by borrowing concepts from Bourdieu's theoretical framework (despite his work not focusing on the teaching profession). The analysis demonstrates how these struggles are rooted in individuals' varied dispositions, experiences, and histories, and are further exacerbated by the hierarchies present in professional practices and the unequal occupation of spaces within the field.

3.1.1 Field

Bourdieu (1993, p. 72) conceptualises fields as a social space in which interactions, transactions, and events occur. In this thesis, I argue that these fields are inherently dilemmatic

spaces. The custodian of the idea of ‘dilemmatic spaces’, Honig (1994), described dilemmas as “situations in which two values, obligations, or commitments conflict and there is no right thing to do” and he further argued that as a result, this poses “the question of difference and the ineradicability of conflict in a specific and ordinarily familiar setting.” (Honig, 1994, p.568). As depicted in Figure 3.1, there are two main fields relevant in this study, namely higher institutions (universities) and the basic education system (schools). Each field has logics of practice, where social actors occupy different positions, based on the experiences they bring from their histories, priorities, hopes, and professional preparation. In higher education institutions, actors include students, lecturers, and university management. In the basic education system (schools), actors include teachers, teacher unions and school management. Groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions in this space. In this study, I use the concept of field to understand social interactions that happen in the practice—within classroom spaces, within school communities, and in union activities. ECTs, with their own educational backgrounds, experiences, and teacher education, are social actors. They enter established fields where more experienced teachers’ social priorities and education histories have evolved in context over time. And so, these two groups of social actors’ attributes contribute to the makeup of the schools as institutions, which are guided by different factors such as power and status, which give rise to dilemmas. These dilemmatic spaces result from established teachers’ ways of enacting teaching mismatch with the preferred practices of ECTs.

A notable difference between a traditional view of dilemma and dilemmatic spaces as proposed by Honig (1994) is that a traditional view maintains that dilemmas are “related to specific situations in which people react to conflicting values, obligations or commitments and where there is often no right way to act” (Honig, 1994, p.4) and so far, arguments from various literature are consistent in this view. A traditional take on the concept of dilemma is that dilemmas are event-based. On the contrary, the concept of dilemmatic spaces emphasises the idea that dilemmas are not specific events “but things that are ever-present in people’s living spaces” (Fransson & Grannas, 2013, p.7). According to Fransson and Grannas (2013), dilemmatic spaces are “social constructions resulting from structural conditions and relational aspects in everyday practices” (p.7). Schools and professional communities are social spaces, and members that come into these spaces are bound to create meaning of their immediate reality through interactions, and these interactions can be characterised by consensus, disagreements or mutual-neutral breaks. The authors contrasts traditional views of dilemmas, events that demand immediate decisions amidst conflicting values, with the more expansive concept of

dilemmatic spaces. While traditional dilemmas might be seen as isolated incidents, dilemmatic spaces recognise that these conflicts are evergreen and embedded within the fabric of daily professional life. The teaching professional practice is neither distinct nor immune to conflicts, and the question always remains ‘What is the right to do?’ in particular dilemma terrains. This perspective is critical in understanding the intrinsic conflicts inherent within teaching practices and school contexts, which are characterised by a continuum of tensions ranging from interpersonal conflicts among colleagues to intrapersonal conflicts related to pedagogical strategies and classroom management. This understanding emphasises that the disputes faced by teachers do not reside solely within isolated incidents but instead reflect broader systemic issues within educational settings that influence how ECTs navigate their roles.

Dilemmatic spaces “vary in intensity and gravity, but none is untouched by conflict and incommensurability.” (Honig, 1994, p. 569). As such, there may be differences in how new teachers experience dilemmas in professional practice, conflicts, and the uniqueness of situations characterise every dilemmatic space. The evolution of the teachers’ work practice through policies poses difficulties in dilemmatic spaces. In terms of policy change in the regulation of teachers’ work, Fransson and Grannas (2013) argue that “the changeable culture of accountability not only construes (personal) dilemmas, but also new ways of conceptualising and negotiating the dilemmas and positions of teachers and stakeholders.” Studies conducted on policy change in educational contexts reveal that in South Africa, the teaching fraternity has a hostile relation to policy development and enactment that is aimed at the regulation of teachers’ work (Jansen, 2004).

The discussion on why ECTs often find themselves at odds with existing educational paradigms highlights the dual pressures they experience: assimilating into a potentially outdated system while simultaneously being envisioned as agents of change through policy frameworks like MRTEQ (2015). The interpretive question arises: Are these new educators truly prepared for the realities of their workplaces, or are they being nurtured to challenge and transform those very environments? The literature suggests that while policies push for transformation, the schooling system itself may resist such changes. The text underlines that the educational landscape in South Africa may present barriers that limit ECTs’ capacity to effect positive change, positioning their professional journeys as navigational struggles between innovation and entrenched practices.

In the critical discussion about dilemma and dilemmatic spaces, Roblin and Margalef (2013) propose that dilemmas can be viewed as interpersonal dilemmas, which refers to “tensions resulting from collaboration and interactions with other members from the community” and intrapersonal as relating to tensions that revolve around “curriculum, teaching strategies, student learning, classroom management, and teacher-student interactions” (Enyedy, Goldberg, & Welsh, 2006, p. 91). While dilemmas exist in professional spaces, there is always an attempt to resolve them. Still, the question is: how do we reconcile ECTs and established teachers’ ideas and prepositions that are in conflict? Fransson and Grannas (2013), building on the ideas of Honig (1994), pose critical questions regarding solving dilemmas. They ask, “What is ‘the right thing’ when several options are available but only one can be chosen? What is regarded as ‘the right thing’ when the number of options from which to choose depends on the perspective or position from which something is examined?” (p. 7).

Wiredu’s (1996) concept of ‘will to consensus’ grapples with the questions posed by Honig. The fundamental reason for Wiredu’s proposition is based on the power-sharing between the minority and majority in the society and how this influences how people come to resolutions under the majoritarianism democratic system (Matolino, 2016). The fundamental characteristic of Wiredu’s will to consensus is its ability to help individuals reach agreement on what is to be done “without forsaking their opinions about what is true or false.” (p.343). Through Wiredu’s will to consensus members “can one ‘act’ in solidarity with the community toward alleviating suffering, or, better still, act toward empowering those who suffer to alleviate their own suffering.” (Sands, 2018, p. 4). However, as these new teachers enter a system still grappling with exclusionary practices, the question arises: are they prepared to effect change, or will they be complicit in existing norms? Wiredu’s consensus framework provides one possible answer. By emphasising collaborative engagement, ECTs can leverage their roles as agents of change while accommodating their environments’ complexities. Their ability to create dialogue and seek consensus may empower them to challenge outdated standards and advocate for inclusive best practices in their classrooms. A vital component of this discussion involves understanding how ECTs navigate their agency within these dilemmatic spaces. As they transition from activist students to professional educators, they must balance their desire to enact change against the realities of established norms and expectations within their schools. The choice of whether to join a teacher union can further embody their commitment to this struggle, framing their professional identities within larger collective movements for educational reform.

Unions serve as platforms for organising collective voices, enabling ECTs to assert their rights and push for transformative practices that align with both their educational ideals and the needs of their students. As they form these alliances, they embody Wiredu's will to consensus, utilising solidarity to confront systemic barriers and advocating for equitable opportunities within the education sector. As such, Wiredu's 'will to consensus' challenges traditional notions of governance and presents a viable pathway for ECTs to navigate their professional landscapes. However, the most crucial aspect of the will to consensus is that dialogue "can function to produce compromises by means of smoothing edges, leading to a willing suspension of disagreement, making possible agreed actions without necessarily agreed notions" (Ifeanyi Ani, 2014, p. 343).

3.2.1 Habitus

Habitus denotes the "embodiment of social structures and history in individuals—it is a set of dispositions, internal to the individual, that both reflects external social structures and shapes how the individual perceives the world and acts in it" (Power, 1999, p. 48). In this study, habitus entails new teachers' experiences as shaped by their own dispositions, social backgrounds and educational histories at school and during their professional preparation programmes. The habitus is ever evolving in the shift of fields or contexts, which shapes actors' identities and what they perceive to be legitimate. As shown in Figure 3.1, the identity of the actors in the field acts on the field as much as the field acts on their identity. These may potentially be tools by which they determine how to act once they enter the teaching contexts. MacKay (2019) argues that the identity of early career teachers is fluid and nonlinear in its development. As such, ECTs are perceived as developing practitioners who possess a body of specialised knowledge and are developing ways of perceiving, thinking, and being as professional practitioners. According to Swatz (1997, pp. 141–142), the combination of the three central aspects of the field theory brings about a 'model of practice', which

Conceptualises action as the outcome of a relationship between habitus, capital and field, [where it is argued that] practices are not to be reduced to either habitus or field but grow out of the "interrelationship" established at each point in time by the sets of relations represented by both.

3.2.3 Capital

Capital refers to resources available in a field, which actors can accrue, transfer and exploit (Bourdieu, 2018). In this study, capital could be the knowledge of ECTs against the knowledge and experience of established teachers. ECTs' capital in their previous field of practice (the university) is denoted by marks, certification, and credibility through political activism, and coming into the profession means that they have to develop a new capital. Capital can also denote the different power relations, where acceptance and recognition from established teachers in their schools are a form of social capital. The struggles of social actors differ per field, and in this study, I drew on struggles that may reveal the dispositions, beliefs and knowledge base that guide engagement in a field. Therefore, obtaining such social capital may be through aligning with a particular union.

3.2 Teachers' Agency and Resilience

The complex landscape of education spaces highlights the growing recognition that teaching is a highly demanding profession. Teachers are often confronted with various dilemmas that can lead to burnout and attrition, particularly for early career teachers who may lack the experience required to navigate these pressures effectively. It is an undeniable truth that teaching is a demanding profession and resilience has been amongst others a concept of interest “to argue that schools and particularly school leadership can create an environment where it is nurtured and teachers are able to interact in responsive ways with students without feeling vulnerable to the demands of the work” (Day, *et al.*, 2011, p. 1). Day *et al.* (2011) suggest that the cultivation of resilience in teachers is dependent on the conditions created by the school leadership, which can either harness or lessen the trait in teachers. Interrogating the concept of resilience helps explore and understand how early career teachers can deal with the dynamics of their work, which involves interactions and relationships. In this section, I position resilience as dependent on ECTs' ability to exercise agency.

Resilience theory classified resilient individuals as those who displayed “good developmental outcomes despite high-risk status, sustained competence under stress, and recovery from trauma” (Werner, 1995, p. 81). In the context of teaching, teacher resilience refers to the ability and capacity of teachers to have positive adaptation as well as ongoing professional commitment and development in the presence of challenging conditions. According to Benjamin and Black (2012), learning institutions such as schools “need to provide the

protective factors necessary for teachers, especially novice teachers, to develop the capacity to successfully deal with stress, adversity, workload, and relationships that are part of the everyday experience of teachers” (p.6). In this way, early career teachers will be able to elicit resilience in their professional work as they interact with challenging conditions in their community of practice. The cultivation of resilience is both a necessity and a possibility for early career teachers navigating and enacting their agency in a demanding educational landscape.

In a failing education system like South Africa, the professional mandate might very well be to confront and dismantle exclusionary and marginalising structures and practices. This is envisioned by (SACE Professional Teaching Standard 3, which states “teachers support social justice and the redress of inequalities within their educational institutions and society more broadly” (SACE, 2018, p. 9). One such approach to fulfilling this mandate is teachers’ exercising of agency. Teacher agency refers to teachers’ ability “to act in new and creative ways” in confronting norms and regulatory forces that may conflict with their professional mandates (Toom *et al.*, 2015, p. 615). With the number of aspects listed as being acted upon due to teacher agency and the implications they have in the improvement of the working relationships between teachers and the practice, what then could teachers’ professional agency entail?

According to Toom *et al.* (2015), the general empirical studies on teacher agency “offer valuable viewpoints of teacher agency by breaking up the complexity of teachers’ professional agency, for example, in multiple innovation contexts and when facing changes or challenges in their work” (p. 615). Teacher agency is an encompassing idea of their deliberate, active role in taking control and informing their work in the field of practice. On this premise, teacher agency is motivated by a wide range of factors and missions. My research sought to establish the extent to which their agency is driven by what they professionally stand for or their notions of professionalism. It also looked at how their sense of belonging, such as union participation, or their obligations to the state as an employer, shapes their agency. The extent to which progressive teachers’ mission, as discussed in Chapter 2, is motivated by the social transformation of institutional culture and all its different aspects was also investigated.

Teachers’ agency involves various aspects that must be interrogated to determine if teachers possess agency or not. The theorisation of the concept of agency has been a challenge in the literature, with questions emerging (Biesta *et al.*, 2015): firstly, what is meant by agency in

relation to teaching? This question is important since it defines what counts as enacted professional agency in the manner in which ECTs position themselves in school communities. Secondly, what it means for teachers to be active agents in their work. This study would constitute what channels ECTs utilise to enact their agency. In the broader teacher communities, this could be represented by participation in teacher unions. Thirdly, what promotes or hinders teachers' agency? In this study, this could entail the dilemmas and constraints ECTs face when trying to enact their professional agency.

According to Biesta and Tedder (2006), an ecological perspective on agency emphasizes how individuals actively shape their responses to challenging situations. Agency is not theorised as a quality that individuals have but “as an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction” (Biesta *et al.*, 2015, p. 626). As such, Biesta and Tedder (2006, p. 137) stress that:

[The] concept of agency highlights that actors always act by *means* of their environment rather than simply *in* their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations.

The implication of Biesta and Tedder's (2006) assertion is that the idea of agency has to do with the action of individuals in specific situations rather than the possession of agency as an inert or latent quality. However, in practice, agency involves patterns of activity that transcend the individual. An essential highlight of what differentiates agency from mere action is that people who exercise agency are often deliberate about responding to a particular situation. There is often a goal attached to the action. Building on a pragmatist philosophy of the idea of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) proposed a conceptualisation of agency as three-dimensional (the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative dimension). Consequently, agency should be understood “as a configuration of influences from the *past*, orientations towards the *future* and engagement with the *present*.” (Biesta *et al.*, 2015, p. 626). Through their conceptualisation of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 970) ultimately defined agency as:

... the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those

structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.

In the exploration of the three dimensions of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 971) described the *iterational* dimension (the past) as having to do with “the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.” As in the case of habitus in field theory, this would be in the form of ECTs’ past agentic pursuits, which determine their current identities and inform their interactions in the field of practice. However, this argument neglects an integral form of capital that ECTs have—that of different forms of knowledge that could be recruited in their agency on their present experiences. While the focus is on the identity of ECTs, the arguments miss the point of the power of knowledge insights they bring into school contexts. The *projective* dimension (the future) spoke to “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (p. 971). In my study, the future speaks to the kind of field that the ECTs envisage by contesting the present. ECTs would grapple with exercising agency with a view to the future consequences, whether positive or negative. The practical-evaluative dimension (the present) is “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.” (p. 971). In this dimension, ECTs would rely on well-calculated judgements and other possible actions to address emerging issues.

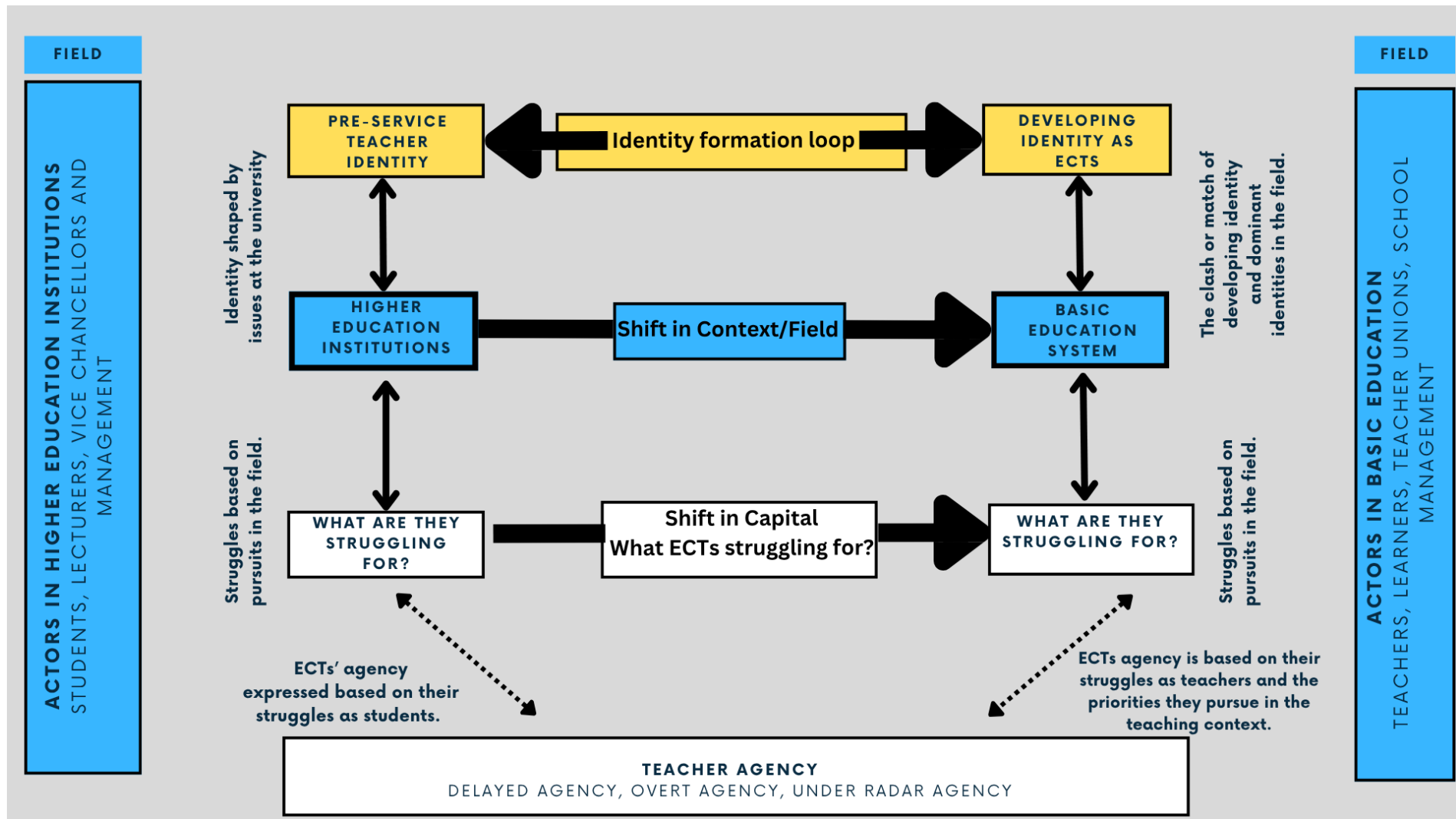
A critical area of the three-dimensional framework seems to be located in the iterational dimension, where there is an emerging conversation about the factors that inform agency before we can even discuss the next stages. Some of the cited factors in the achievement of agency are the role of values and beliefs, and the role of relationships in contexts. The underlying ‘voices’ that inform how teachers exercise agency are necessary for discussing the role values and beliefs play in achieving agency. Priestley *et al.* (2013, p. 3) argue that agency “will be enriched if people have a broad repertoire of responses from which they may draw.” The model of agency highlights identity as an integral entity.

Bourdieu’s field theory forms the basis of the agency model in that there is a habitus, which is formed by actors’ past experiences, and the practice is formed by an interaction of various

aspects of actors and the available capital in the field. The use of Bourdieu's Field Theory and the three-dimensional framework of agency can help understand how ECTs enact their agency in their own classroom spaces within the school structures and their choice of teacher unions. How new teachers act in practice may be informed by their past university experiences, and this could be their experiences as student activists and any other experience that falls outside the scope of formal knowledge settings, such as their orientation towards social justice. Like Bourdieu's field theory, specifically the habitus aspect, the model of agency highlights that their past experiences may be connected to life histories (beliefs, relationships, personal experiences) or professional histories (pre-service training, work-experience) that are "oriented towards the future, both concerning more short-term and more long-term perspectives; and that it is enacted in the here-and-now, where such enactment is influenced by what we refer to as cultural, material and structural resources." (Biesta *et al.*, 2015, p. 627).

With these concepts in place, I can now develop connections and synergistic relationships among these three constructs, which are visually summarised in Figure 3.1:

Figure 3.1 Thinking framework to look at the relations between ideas I introduce in the conceptual framework



3.3 Legitimation Code Theory (LCT)

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) offers a multi-dimensional approach that analyses what is valued for participation and success in fields of practice (Maton, 2014). LCT builds on the work of Bourdieu and others by providing a detailed analytical framework to operationalise the central concepts of this study. Maton (2017, p. 249-250) argues that “while Bourdieu powerfully argues for this transformation, field theory does not itself fully embody [the] relational thinking [that LCT offers]. The conceptual framework represents an unfinished “mental revolution” that needs augmenting to achieve Bourdieu’s aims”. Maton (2014, p. 3) argues that LCT’s social transformation potential lies in “being used not only to interpret the world in various ways but also to change it.” By “making such organising principles visible, LCT enables these bases of achievement to become accessible to more actors, promoting social justice” (Maton, 2014, p. 3). According to Barrett (2024, p. 83), Maton’s LCT is significant because, like Bernstein’s work, it provides a means of analysis. By “means for understanding the organising principles of educational and other social practices valued and rewarded in different settings.” (*ibid.*, p. 83). LCT offers an analytic framework that focuses on the principles that underpin social practices (Maton, 2014). In LCT, all practices are understood to be enacted by social actors in ways that are meaningful to them. Consequently, their thinking and actions convey what they deem essential for participation and achievement within their contexts. The adoption of LCT reveals the organising principles of practices, and so avoids producing a descriptive study that does not add value to the transformation of the teaching contexts.

In this study, LCT offered a framework to investigate how ECTs legitimise both their classroom practices and their choices of teacher unions. Specifically, it explores the extent to which their practices align with or contradict the expectations of their experienced colleagues within the school context. By revealing the ‘rules of the game’, the study could help schools better approach the transitioning of new teachers into teaching contexts by understanding the ‘focus’ and ‘basis’ of the agency. The ‘focus’ in LCT refers to what counts as legitimate content of concerns, ideas and practices within a particular context (Maton, 2014). This study explores the content of these concerns, ideas, and practices through constellation analysis. This study considers how ECTs legitimise how they position themselves in relation to the existing practices at their schools, and the ‘basis’ on which ECTs legitimate their stances is analysed through Specialisation, one of the dimensions of LCT. To investigate the focus and

basis of the professional agency of ECTs in the study, I drew on the analytic tools, constellation analysis and the Specialisation dimension of the LCT.

3.3.1 Constellations

My study focuses on understanding the concerns, beliefs, and struggles ECTs face as social actors entering their schooling contexts, a dilemmatic space. For this, LCT provides a useful tool of constellation mapping. This is useful for my study because it provides a structured, theoretical framework to visualise and analyse the complex, often contradictory, environment that your ECTs occupy. Maton *et al.* (2016, p. 310) conceptualise constellations as

Groupings (of any socio-cultural practice) that appear to have coherence from a particular point in space and time to actors adopting a particular cosmology or worldview. [These] may take any form, though binary constellations (oppositional and mutually-exclusive) are common. [They] may comprise clusters of smaller groupings.

In Maton and Doran's (2021) work on science lessons constellation analysis, they argue that these clusters are not mere random collections; rather, they are organised in ways that reflect the explanatory logic characteristic of how a group of social actors in a field legitimate their practices. Other studies have use constellation analysis to investigate values underpinning the constitution of Chile (Quitpatay, 2022); to investigate an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course for international students in Canada (Matin & Walsh-Marr, 2024); to investigate how students critique the representation of enslavement in Harry Potter (Jackson, 2021); to investigate privileged meanings and values in disciplinary fields of social work and nursing (Tilakaratna & Szenes, 2020). Constellation analysis was also used to examine the positioning of Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom in the language of new articles about diplomatic relations between the two countries (Mvundura, 2023), amongst other LCT studies in various disciplines.

In this context, the study focused on constellations of concerns, beliefs and priorities of ECTs within the school environment. Furthermore, charging involves imbuing these ideas with cultural, educational, or social significance. As Maton and Doran (2021) explain, such ideas may be charged differently depending on context, highlighting an essential aspect of constellation analysis: understanding how concepts intersect within a specific field. Some attributes may be valued (so positively charged) or vilified (so negatively charged), while others might remain neutral or uncharged.

By examining how clusters, condensations, and charges come together, we can map a coherent system of understanding. The organisation of constellations, what objects, ideas, beliefs etc. are included or excluded, is governed by legitimisation codes generated by different dimensions of LCT (Maton, 2014). Maton argues that constellations manifest uniquely across different contexts and fields, influenced by the actors involved and the underlying cosmologies that shape their dispositions (Maton, 2014). For instance, various teacher unions may maintain distinct constellations regarding how they perceive teachers as professionals. In the same breath, the characteristics of constellations in a field suggest that certain ideas, dispositions, and beliefs are prioritised over others. This means the inclusion and exclusion of various stances can “vary according to different actors, [and] change over time” (Maton, 2014, p. 152). As such, positioning these ideas, dispositions, and beliefs in various contexts could give rise to dilemmas.

3.3.2 Specialisation dimension

The arrangement of constellations is underpinned by organising principles that reveal the basis on which they are legitimised. One set of tools for analysing the basis of legitimisation is provided through the Specialisation dimension. Specialisation refers to the organising principles that govern whether practices are legitimated by the mastery of knowledge and/or the dispositions of knowers. It aligns with the notion that different communities have distinct epistemic practices that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge (Maton, 2014). Specialisations offers a set of conceptual tools that can be used to reveal what is valued as legitimate and valid in particular contexts, from the viewpoint of groups of social actors.

Maton and Chen (2020) posit that “in each social field, actors cooperate and struggle, both for more of what is viewed as signs of success and over what defines success”. Specialisation offers a framework to investigate and reveal these struggles. The first principle, *epistemic relations (ER)*, speaks to “legitimate objects of study and principles for generating knowledge” (Maton, 2016, p. 118). It highlights what can be legitimately described as knowledge within a given field. They define the nature of the content and the principles used to validate it (Maton, 2014). In essence, epistemic relations focus on who knows what, how knowledge is produced, and the legitimacy of various forms of understanding. Stronger epistemic relations (ER+) signify a high level of dependence on specialised knowledge and expertise, which often leads to rigorous criteria for determining what constitutes valid knowledge. In this study, stronger epistemic relations (ER+) are marked by knowledge and principles used to justify the actions

of ECTs in relation to adopting or resisting prevalent practices. On the other hand, weaker epistemic relations (ER-) may permit broader interpretations of knowledge, allowing for more subjective or context-dependent understandings (Maton & Doran, 2017). In this study, I was interested in the factors that influence ECTs' selection of a teacher union. I also wanted to understand whether ECTs resist, challenge, or subvert prevailing practices and on what grounds they do so. As such, weaker epistemic relations (ER-) entail contested knowledge and principles that may not be foregrounded in the justification of ECTs' adoption or resistance actions.

The second organising principle from the Specialisation dimension of LCT that underpins practices is social relations. This principle concerns the question "on what basis do I claim to be a..." social actor (Maton, 2007, p. 87). The second is social relations (SR), which denote relations to the *subject* of that knowledge, the person or people who are the knowers (Maton, 2014). In contrast to epistemic relations, social relations address the contextual and relational dynamics that influence knowledge practices. Social relations consider who participates in knowledge production, the power dynamics among individuals and groups, and how these relationships shape the transmission and legitimation of knowledge (Maton, 2014). This dimension emphasises that knowledge is never produced in a vacuum. Rather, it is embedded within social contexts that determine its relevance and acceptability. Stronger social relations (SR+) imply a significant degree of hierarchy and exclusivity, wherein special dispositions, experiences are important in determining who is a legitimate knower, and who is not. This can lead to the marginalisation of voices and perspectives that do not conform to established norms. Conversely, weaker social relations (SR-) under-emphasise the individual positioning and relations within a group in determining what counts in practice (Maton, 2014; Maton & Doran, 2017). For this study, the former entailed what 'knowledge' principles new teachers rely on for their teacher union choices, and the latter, what basis informed the identity they assume in the pursuit of enacting their professional agency.

In comparison, stronger social relations (SR+) are marked by an emphasis on the beliefs and dispositions in ECTs' resistance or adoption of prevalent practices. Weaker social relations (SR-) entail little reliance or reflection of personal beliefs and dispositions in ECTs' adoption or resistance to prevalent practices. These relations are of interest in this study because the principles that shape how ECTs exercise their agency in school contexts and join teacher unions reflect what they value, and how they position themselves as knowers in the field of practice.

The variance of how strong these are will differ from one practice to another, and their interaction with one another provides a window into the basis of legitimation in those social settings (Maton, 2014).

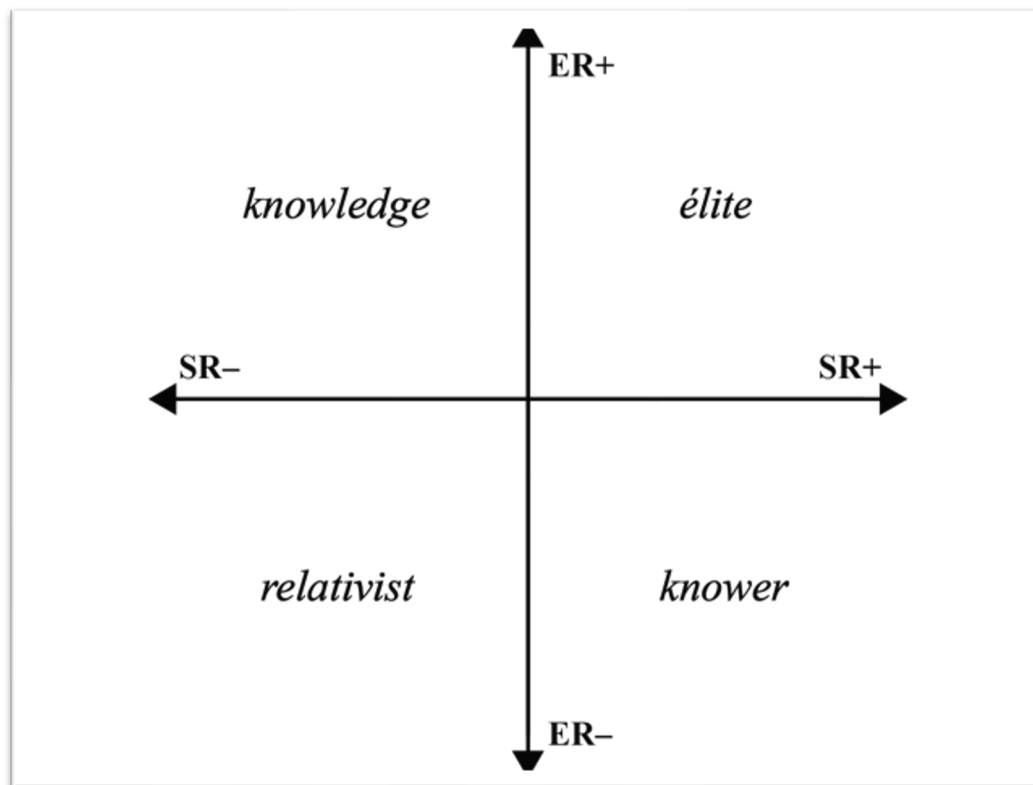
Organising principles are varied, Maton and Chen (2020, p.37) argue that “any set of practices has a diverse range of characteristics, such as their complexity, their context-dependence, their emphasis on specialised knowledge or personal experience, how strongly distinct they are from other practices, whether they point backwards or forward in time.” LCT conceptualises these varied forms of attributes as “different species of legitimation codes” (p.37).

3.3.3 Specialisation Codes

Differing strengths of social relations and epistemic relations can be plotted on a Specialisation plane (Figure 3.2) to show their relation to what is legitimate in the work of social actors. This sets up four analytically distinct Specialisation codes that reveal the basis of legitimacy in the practices of different groups of actors. Firstly, the knowledge codes describe stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and weaker social relations (SR-), where specialised knowledge in the field is emphasised as a basis for legitimacy and the attributes of the actors in that field are not emphasised (Maton, 2016). Specialisation has been used to analyse the code clashes that occur when Chinese students study courses at Australian universities (Chen, 2010); the codes in the assessment of student teachers doing their teaching practicals (Rusznyak & Osterling, 2024), and the knowledge underpinning the teaching and learning of jazz (Richardson, 2019). Secondly, knower codes (with ER-, SR+) where attributes of the actors are emphasised as a basis for legitimacy but specialised forms of knowledge are not. In elite code (ER+, SR+), both specialised knowledge and attributes of actors form the basis of legitimacy. And lastly, in the relativist code (ER-, SR-), the legitimacy in the field is neither marked by specialised knowledge nor attributes of the actors (Maton, 2016). These relations are summarised in Figure 3.2 (Maton, 2014, p. 30):

Figure 3.2 Legitimation Code Theory Specialisation Plane

The Specialisation Plane



Enacting LCT in this study conceptualises ECTs as social actors whose concerns, choices and priorities are informed by some strengths of epistemic relations and social relations. They enter into a field of practice that values some strengths of epistemic relations and social relations. The underpinnings of their assimilation or resistance can be reflected in the strengths of epistemic relations and social relations. In this study, outcomes of their assimilation or resistance to prevalent practices could be in pursuit of additional capital or in attempts to transform the field. The interplay of their concerns and valorised practices in school contexts could lead to either code matches or clashes with the prevalent practices of established teachers. For instance, a code match would be a case where there is little or no conflict between what they bring with them and the practices in the field. Their dominant codes match those expected of other actors in the field. A code clash would be denoted by indifferences in what ECTs bring and the prevalent practices. This may lead to resistance or a will to consensus, where ECTs resist or silently subvert prevalent practices—a mismatch between their gaze and that expected in the field.

Collectively, these concepts allow constellation analysis to delve deeper than mere scientific facts, providing insights into how knowledge is constructed and legitimised in educational settings. By investigating how ideas are clustered, condensed, charged, and situated within the broader cosmology of teaching practices, we gain a clearer understanding of the foundational principles that inform the experiences of early career teachers (Maton & Doran, 2021). By making these ‘rules of the game’ visible, constellation analysis provides a deeper understanding of how knowledge and practices are legitimised within a specific social context, and how these systems can enable or constrain certain outcomes (Maton, 2014; Clarence, 2016). The choices made by teachers regarding their unions are reflected in these constellations, where differing stances are supported by various legitimisation codes. Such differences in the constellations held by actors within the field can lead to either clashes or matches among perspectives.

3.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter established the conceptual and analytic framework necessary for investigating how ECTs enact their agency in the teaching profession. The framework primarily synthesises two major sociological theories: Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). Through Bourdieu's concepts, which provide the macro-sociological context, I position the teaching profession as a dynamic, dilemmatic field defined by struggles between established practices and incoming dispositions. Within this field, ECTs are conceptualised as social actors possessing a unique *habitus* (embodied history and dispositions) and various forms of *capital* (accumulated resources), which shape their perceptions and interactions. The analysis specifically focuses on the dynamic interaction between the university (higher education) field and the school (basic education) field, emphasising the fluid and evolving nature of the ECTs' *habitus* as they navigate these distinct spaces.

Central to the study is the concept of professional agency, defined as the specific actions and capabilities of ECTs to act in new and creative ways to confront or transform norms. Agency is understood through an ecological perspective as an emergent phenomenon arising from the actor-situation transaction. To capture its complexity, agency is conceptualised across three temporal dimensions: the iterational (selective reactivation of past patterns), the projective (imaginative generation of future trajectories), and the practical-evaluative (capacity to make immediate judgments among alternatives). This investigation further connects agency to resilience, arguing that an ECT's ability to thrive in a demanding educational landscape depends on their capacity to successfully exercise this professional

agency, potentially utilising strategies such as Wiredu's 'will to consensus' to collaboratively navigate professional conflicts.

To operationalise these abstract concepts, the framework incorporates Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), which serves as the precise analytic tool for examining the principles of legitimation underpinning practices. Specifically, LCT's Specialisation dimension allows for the empirical investigation of the 'rules of the game' by analysing the interplay between epistemic relations—what knowledge is valued—and social relations—whose attributes are valued. The resulting four Specialisation codes (knowledge, knower, elite, and relativist) are utilised to identify and visualise the ECTs' beliefs and struggles through constellation mapping. This LCT mapping enables the framework to analyse instances of code match, where the ECTs' dispositions align with field expectations, and code clash, where mismatches lead to resistance, silent subversion, or the need for a collaborative resolution. By making the deep-seated 'rules' of the school field visible, LCT provides a robust method for understanding how knowledge and practices are legitimised and how these systems either enable or constrain the professional agency of ECTs.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

This study investigated the ways they envisage and enact their professional agency in schools and how this plays out in their choice of teacher unions. The main ideas of research design are “the strategy, the conceptual framework, the question of who or what is to be studied, and the tools to be used for collecting and analyzing data” (Pugach, 2005, p. 550). This chapter sets out and justifies the research design.

4.1 Research Paradigm

This research study looked at the basis upon which ECTs, as social actors, and their alignment with unions legitimate their own practices within teaching contexts. This was a shift from descriptive work that only offered superficial explanations of the phenomena. The study is situated within a realist framework by adopting LCT, which Maton describes as offering a relational and depth realist perspective built on the foundations of critical realism (Maton, 2014). This framing is essential for moving beyond surface descriptions and exploring the underlying mechanisms that shape ECTs’ experiences. It recognises that teaching takes place in social spaces with particular social practices that are enacted by actors. Critical realism, as a philosophical approach, distinguishes between three key components of reality: the empirical, actual, and real. Understanding these components is essential for analysing social phenomena comprehensively. Firstly, the empirical relates to what can be observed and experienced (Bhaskar, 1978). It comprises all the data gathered through direct perception or empirical research methods, such as surveys or interviews. In the context of early career teachers’ professional agency, this could involve observing their behaviours, interactions, and reported experiences within school environments and unions. The actual includes all events that occur, regardless of whether they are observed or not. This includes phenomena that may exist and produce effects without being directly perceived (Archer, 1995). The real consists of the underlying structures, mechanisms, and causal powers that give rise to both the empirical and actual levels. These include social structures, power dynamics, historical contexts, and other deeper factors that shape perceptions and events (Bhaskar, 1978). In this case, the societal norms around teaching, union strength, and educational policies represent the real dimensions that facilitate or constrain teachers’ agency. For this study, the collected data on ECTs provided an empirical view of reality, while constellations revealed the actual, and the use of LCT codes revealed the generative mechanism of the real.

This approach allowed me to move beyond mere surface-level observations and delve into the deeper ontological structures that shape our understanding of reality. By scrutinising not just the surface observations but also the underlying organising principles and structures that give rise to social phenomena, critical realism enabled me to offer richer and more comprehensive explanations of the research problem (Archer, 1995).

Bhaskar (1978) describes five attributes of a study using a critical realism framework (Scott & Morrison, 2006). Firstly, that our experience of the material and the discursive phenomenon has a real existence. Secondly, we cannot rely on our observation of the phenomenon, we should be guided by theory, although not predetermined by it. Thirdly, that descriptive tools, such as discourse, do not just describe an independent reality. Fourthly, that empirical observation data is not sufficient and therefore, the researcher has to intervene to better understand the phenomena. The ECTs' experience of existing teaching practices is tangible, yet simply describing these experiences only reveals the surface aspects of reality and provides insufficient empirical data to fully understand the underlying problem. While the ECTs' experiences can be explained by theory, they are not determined by it, highlighting that reality is ultimately guided by existing and evolving ways of making sense of the world.

LCT within the realist framework unpacks how organising principles work together in iterative ways to reveal the grounds of legitimacy. The finding that reality is guided by existing and evolving ways of making sense of the world directly aligns with this principle. These "ways of making sense" are the dynamic, relational mechanisms (the organising principles/codes) that structure and are structured by the teaching context.

4.2 Research Approach

The study used a mixed-methods research approach. Mixed methods research has both a qualitative and quantitative dimension. The mixed-methods approach offers an opportunity to gather comprehensive data and investigate complex research questions (McMillan, 2012). Quantitative research entails studying a phenomenon "objectively with the goal of obtaining a single true reality, or at least reality within known probabilities, with an emphasis on measurement, numeral data, control, and objectivity" (McMillan, 2012, p. 11). In this study, the gathering of data through surveys (quantitative method) provided generalised patterns over many participants. The survey established ECTs' thinking about issues in teaching contexts. The qualitative part of mixed methods is described as "an unfolding model that occurs in a

natural setting that enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experience” (Williams, 2007, p. 67). According to McEvoy and Richards (2006), the critical significance of qualitative methods, from a critical realist perspective, “is that they are open-ended. This may allow themes to emerge during the course of an inquiry that could not have been anticipated in advance.” (p. 71). In this study, qualitative methods were used as a way of probing deeper into the patterns emerging from the qualitative data. The main objective was to gather a detailed account of the variety of issues and to understand these findings to transform the social setting.

A mixed methods research approach was the most suitable for this study on how ECTs' alignment with teacher unions and their professional agency impact their teaching careers. By combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques, the research was able to obtain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing new teachers' behaviours and decisions. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods allowed the study to capture not only the numerical patterns and trends related to ECTs' union affiliations but also the underlying motivations, beliefs, and experiences shaping their choices. The quantitative component involved the use of surveys to identify patterns in union membership among ECTs, while the qualitative aspect, such as the individual interviews, provided rich insights into the reasons behind these patterns and the ways in which ECTs perceive and exercise their professional agency.

As Creswell and Plano Clark (2023) highlight, using a mixed methods approach can help researchers triangulate findings from different sources, enhancing the validity and reliability of the study. By integrating diverse data sources, the study was able to corroborate and complement its findings, leading to a more robust and nuanced interpretation. The use of mixed methods offered a more holistic perspective on the research questions, allowing the study to capture both the breadth and depth of ECTs' experiences, attitudes, and behaviours regarding union alignment and professional agency.

4.3 Case Study

This study adopted a case study inquiry approach to explore the transition of new teachers and how they enact their professional agency in school contexts. A case study is defined as “an intensive study about a person, a group of people, or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units” (Heale & Twycross, 2018, p. 7). The approach was crucial because it enabled

me to examine the context and processes that shed light on the factors that shape teaching contexts and ECTs' transition into them. Through the instrumental case study approach, this study aimed to uncover the various factors that influence new teachers' decisions regarding teacher unions, including perceptions of job security, professional development opportunities, advocacy for educational policies, and communal support networks. By contextualising these motivations within individual cases, researchers can paint a comprehensive picture of the complex considerations that shape new teachers' attitudes towards union membership (Stake, 2005). Understanding how different contextual factors interact to influence new teachers' decisions regarding union participation can provide valuable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and teacher union representatives seeking to better support and engage with new educators (Yin, 2014). Through a nuanced exploration of these interconnected themes, researchers can contribute valuable knowledge to the field of teacher education and policy that informs efforts to promote teacher well-being, professional growth, and collective empowerment in schools.

In conclusion, the instrumental case study approach offers a valuable approach for investigating the complexities surrounding new teachers' transition and professional agency enactment. By providing a contextualised and detailed analysis of individual cases, this study can generate rich insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of how new teachers navigate their roles and responsibilities in diverse educational settings.

4.4 Selection of Participants

The study employed purposeful sampling for ECTs' random sampling of the survey and interview participants, as well as the selection of teacher unions of focus. Purposeful sampling is utilized to identify and choose cases that provide valuable information, ensuring that limited resources are used most effectively (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is thoughtful, and participants are selected with the end goal in mind. The approach enables the research to identify and select individuals or groups that have significant knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). In the case of this study, the participants were ECTs who have been teaching for 5 to 7 years and were enrolled at university during and post the #mustfall movements. Since the study used mixed methods, the sampling was divided for data collection purposes.

The survey was created using google forms and validated prior to being disseminated. A call was made on social media inviting participants who met the criteria to respond to the survey. The surveys were distributed online via Facebook, university channels, and through WhatsApp contact sharing, which meant the participants could randomly complete them. The objective was to recruit 100 participants via a survey, from which a purposeful sample of 10 was selected for individual interviews. The interview cohort was structured to include an equal number of former student activists and non-activist participants. Although the survey drew a national response, the individual interviews were geographically restricted to participants based in Gauteng. This decision was made to enhance logistical coordination and to enable face-to-face interviews, which were particularly challenging to secure due to COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, individuals who volunteered for interviews but resided in other provinces were not eligible for selection. The sole selection criterion for participants was that they must have qualified as Early Career Teachers (ECTs) in or after 2015. This specific year was chosen as it coincided with the inception of the Fees Must Fall movement, representing a significant period in South African student activism.

Table 4.1 Participants Selection Criteria

Data Collection Instrument	No of ECTs	Selection Criteria	Work Location	Union Membership	Activism Status
Survey Participants	101	ECTs who qualified from 2015 and have been employed for a maximum of seven years.	National	Some were members of the main five (SADTU, NAPTOSA, SATU, PEU, & NATU), while others were not.	Not part of the selection process. Survey was open to all ECTs.
Individual Interviewees	10	Selected from the 101 survey respondents.	Gauteng	Members of main five (SADTU, NAPTOSA, SATU, PEU, & NATU) unions	• 5 former/current activists involved in university governance through student organisations. • 5 non-activist ECTs.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected in three ways: document analysis of various teacher unions' founding documents, manifestos, and constitutions, ECTs' survey, and ECTs' individual interviews

4.5.1 Document analysis

Document analysis combines the elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Through content analysis, I organised information from the teacher unions' documents into categories and identified pertinent information (Bowen, 2009). For this research study, documents (founding documents, manifestos, constitutions, and annual reports) from participating teacher unions were obtained for content analysis. I employed thematic analysis to establish patterns and emerging themes across all the documents from different teacher unions.

Document analysis is a systematic method of evaluating documents—these can be printed or electronic documents (Bowen, 2009). Documents embody the values and goals that the teacher trade unions convey to the public. These documents include statements of purpose and vision. They are artefacts that convey the mission statement, even the *raison d'être* for the union. They form official documentation that can be analysed, not merely the personal perspectives of individuals, like the interviews would generate. In that way, they provided a means of triangulating data looking for consistencies, shifts, and formal structure of positions held by unions. The analysis established the unions' position on professionalism activism and how they position themselves in relation to the state (as an employer).

4.5.2 Surveys

The survey method is adopted as means to “address a wide range of problems or questions” (McMillan, 2012, p. 196). In this study, the surveys provided a large-scale view of the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of the ECTs in relation to the teaching practices in their school context. McMillan (2012) notes that an important value of surveys is that “sampling from a population can be used to result in fairly accurate generalizable conclusions about larger population” (p. 197). This study used survey results to gain a broader overview from a larger pool of participants, followed by a more in-depth interview with a sample. In my study, the analysis of surveys established patterns among participants about their school context, their choice of teacher union, and what participants think about prevalent practices in teaching. The

responses from the surveys were used to further probe the position of ECTs and how they confronted the prevalent practices in school environments.

The survey (see appendix A) was structured into five sections to systematically collect data. Section one secured participant consent. Section two collected essential background information, such as the ECT's qualification year, school location, and any history with student leadership. It also included questions about their school environment and union affiliation, with disclosure being optional. Section three used a Likert scale format to assess participants' perceptions of common school practices and their observations of union activities. Section four was designed to delve into participants' reflections on how they align their personal practices with prevailing practices and their perspectives on the value of unions. The fifth and final section of the survey served as a logistical inquiry to gauge participants' interest and availability for follow-up, face-to-face interviews.

4.5.3 Interviews

Research interviews are “a form of data collection in which questions are asked orally and subjects' responses are recorded, either verbatim or summarized.” (McMillan, 2012, p.167). Research interviews allow for a deeper understanding of the issues being investigated, according to McMillan (2012). The interview questions (see appendix B) sought to probe the way that ECTs' practices align or misalign with the prevalent practices in the school.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the study strived for face-to-face interviews in order to try and “reduce the number of ‘no answers’ or neutral responses, and the interviewer could press for more complete answers when necessary.” (McMillan, 2012, p. 167). Research methodologies distinguish between three types of interview questions: structured (mostly applied in quantitative studies), semi-structured (applied in quantitative and qualitative research), and unstructured (mostly applied in qualitative research approaches) (McMillan, 2012). To allow a natural flow of the conversation between the researcher and participants, this study used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of essential questions that outline the topics to be investigated, while also providing flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewee to explore ideas or responses in greater depth (Stewart & Chadwick, 2008). Semi-structured methods provided an opportunity to gain insights into the experiences of early career teachers with prevalent teaching practices and their interactions

with teacher unions. The semi-structured interviews provided an environment without restrictions, where participants could express their ideas and justify their assertions.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis allows the researcher to “discover patterns, ideas, explanations, and ‘understanding.’ Specific data elements have to be organized and then synthesized to derive the patterns and ideas that will form the basis of the conclusions” (McMillan, 2012, p. 297). Data analysis requires a move between theory and data. There are three fundamental aspects in the process, that is, metatheory, explanatory framework (like LCT), and empirical data (Maton, 2016). However, before these can be used, empirical data is treated as an information-rich entity, which requires a researcher to engage without being limited by theory. Theory guides the researcher on what is relevant in understanding empirical data and is used to reveal new insights and connections contained in empirical data patterns (Maton, 2016). According to McMillan (2012), data analysis is “done during the data collection as well as after all data have gathered.” (p. 295). In this study, the surveys formed part of the primary collection of data, which then informed the subsequent interviews. During this primary data collection, the purpose was to establish the general views of what ECTs think about teacher unions and what they think about prevalent practices in schooling contexts. The secondary data collection (interviews) further probed how general patterns play out in the choices and actions of a sample of participants. For the data analysis, three stages were adopted to ensure a thorough process of analysis, that is, empirical thematic analysis, analytic coding, and organisational coding.

4.6.1 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis allows for the empirical data to be coded into broad categories to establish the major themes coming out of the data. The thematic analysis focuses on explicit themes and patterns that are inferred from the data and can be guided by the philosophical assumptions guiding the study. It is argued that:

Thematic moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas. [Categories] developed for ideas or themes are then applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis, which may include comparing the relative frequencies of themes or topics within a data set, looking for [category] cooccurrence, or graphically displaying [category] relationships. (Namey et al., 2008, p. 138)

The thematic analysis uses the following six phases: Familiarising yourself with the data; Generating initial categories; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; and Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the case of this study, I first looked at those aspects of prevalent practices that the ECTs find difficult to assimilate into the prevalent ways of working in their school contexts. These were supermacro issues (policy and regulation), macro (school leadership and management, infrastructure, and resources, and), meso (pedagogic and assessment classroom practices, interactions with learners), and micro (ethical orientation, teacher professional conduct) (Bertram, 2023).

This study uses constellation analysis, as outlined in Chapter 3, as a key tool. This method helps to visually map the relationships between ideas and issues within my research. The process of constellation analysis involves several interconnected steps, each of which uses specific LCT concepts to move from empirical data to a deeper understanding of the ECTs stances in relation to prevalent practices in their schools. The first step is to define the scope of the study and identify the individual components, or nodes, that make up the constellation. Nodes are the fundamental components that a particular worldview takes on an issue (Maton, 2014). Researchers systematically identify these nodes from their data, which could be anything from concerns about curriculum to classroom practices, which contribute to the setup of dilemmatic spaces. Once the nodes are identified, the next step is to map the relationships between them. This is where the concept of clusters becomes important. Clusters are subgroups of nodes that are more closely related to each other than to other nodes in the constellation (Maton & Doran, 2021). The manner in which nodes and clusters are related is condensed with meanings (Maton, 2014). We can identify the charging (positive, negative, or neutral) that can be assigned to different parts of the constellation.

I represent the resultant constellations in diagrams, as developed by Lambrinos (2019). The diagrams themselves are composed of several key elements, as demonstrated in table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2 Constellation Analysis Diagrams Interpretation

Element	Visual Representation	Definition/Significance
Node	Circle	Represents a specific idea, issue, or concept within the data.
Weighted Node	Larger circle with a bolder outline	A node that contains multiple, interconnected issues, indicating its greater weight or significance.
Line	Connecting line between circles	Signifies the relationship or interconnection between two nodes or clusters presented by a participant.
Cluster	Larger circle enclosing a group of nodes	Represents a distinct set of closely related, interconnected issues that form a cluster. Clusters may be independent or share underlying connections with a node or another cluster.
Greyed-out Cluster (in analysis of each constellation)	Cluster greyed-out	Cluster/s that has been visually de-emphasized to maintain focus on the current discussion.

4.6.2 Organisational Coding

The subsequent stage entailed organising the data into major categories that incorporated similar ideas. After organising the data into major ideas and the categories under them, the next stage involved using the LCT concepts to create a translation device that would help explore the organising principles. The specialisation dimension in LCT was used to create a translation device through which I explored the social relations that take place in teaching contexts, where new teachers are concerned.

4.6.3 Finding the basis of legitimation with LCT

In analytical coding, the first step was to consider ECTs' expressed stances from the descriptive data. Secondly, it was necessary to understand the strength variance of the social and epistemic relations in their stances. Consequently, the relations revealed the specialisation code to establish the organising principles and basis of legitimation in the field of practice. To study these relations, LCT offers a framework through which one can develop a translation device.

Translation Device

A translation device is a tool that “constructs what is to count as an empirical referent, how such referents relate to each other to produce a specific text and translates these referential relations into theoretical objects or potential theoretical objects” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 133). The substantive theories together with the concepts in my conceptual framework were used to

describe the data, LCT, through two translation devices, and were used to analyse the data in order to understand the relations within the teaching contexts fields and teacher unions. The translation device offers a key or decoder of the data and takes huge amounts of data and summarises the data according to what matters. The translation device, combined with the powerful concepts of LCT, helped the study to “establish the organising principles underlying ideas, the practices and contexts, gives the study relevance beyond the specific topic” (Maton & Chen, 2019, p. 46).

Figure 4.1 Translation Device: Epistemic Relations

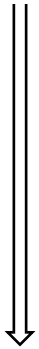
Concept	Category	Indicator	Examples
stronger epistemic relations  weaker epistemic relations	ER+	Emphasises specific concepts or procedures as a basis for making a decision or taking a stance.	- “school adjusts marks so that learners pass” - “The annual teaching plan is structured in a way that for example, term two extends until June, while learners will get their timetable and start writing in May.” - “[unions are] well oriented with labour relation policies and acts”
	ER-	Downplays specific concepts or procedures as a basis for making a decision or taking a stance	- “a lack of support from the management” - “Every institution needs to have structure and that structure needs to be known by educators and learners.” - “[unions] do Help when [you] encounter labour issues in the school”

Figure 4.2 Translation Device: Social Relations

Concept	Category	Indicator	Examples
stronger social relations  weaker social relations	SR+	Emphasises individual and/or collective dispositions, priorities or experience as a basis for making a decision or taking a stance.	- "The curriculum does not allow [me] to teach effectively" - "I have a problem with the discipline procedures" - "I am able to voice out against injustices and empower my learners"
	SR-	Downplays individuals and/or collective identities, priorities or experience as a basis for making a decision or taking a stance.	- "If you go and check the [ATP] against the lesson plans, it is something else" - "Learners who are not behaving, learners who are not cooperating, we take these to the school governing body for a disciplinary hearing. [But] I have no control" - "[I joined a union because] someone suggested it to me"

This study analyzes the combination between strengths of epistemic relations and social relations that generate specialisation codes (see Figure 3.2). Their combined strengths generate specialisation codes that determine how ECTs position themselves relative to prevailing school practices and inform their choice of teacher union.

4.7 Reliability and Validity

This section critically discusses the strategies employed to establish the reliability and validity of the study's findings, aligning the qualitative research process with standards of rigor. The concepts relevant to this study include credibility (internal validity), transferability (generalizability), and dependability (reliability).

4.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions of a study are accurate and trustworthy (McMillan, 2012, p. 302). It is essential to ensure the reliability and validity of research findings. Credibility is closely tied to internal validity, which involves ruling out contradictory hypotheses and treating constructs as real and reliable (Sikolia *et al.*, 2013, p. 2). Maintaining credibility in research is crucial for upholding the integrity of the study and ensuring that the results can be trusted by stakeholders. In this study, the use of triangulation was employed to enhance credibility and ensure consistency between different sources of data. Specifically, triangulation was used to compare the results of surveys with follow-up interviews to validate the findings. Additionally, when gathering information from teacher union presentations, triangulation involved comparing the union presentations with document analysis. By utilising multiple data collection methods, the study strengthened the credibility of the results by cross-verifying information from various sources.

A 'researcher reflection' was conducted to examine and acknowledge any potential biases that may have arisen due to my positionality. By critically reflecting on personal perspectives, assumptions, and experiences that could influence the research process or interpretation of results, efforts were made to mitigate bias and enhance the credibility of the study. As a researcher with a history of activism and a passion for supporting teacher agency, I recognize the potential for my personal experiences and affiliations, particularly with the SADTU, to introduce bias into this study. My deep-seated belief in the importance of professional agency and my commitment to empowering new teachers shape my perspective and could have influenced how I interpreted the findings. Therefore, I have made a concerted effort to maintain a critical and objective lens, actively seeking out and considering alternative viewpoints and data to ensure my research is as balanced and impartial as possible. This reflexivity is crucial

to producing a study that is both rigorous and trustworthy, despite my close personal connection to the subject matter.

This reflective practice allowed for transparency in acknowledging my potential impact on the research outcomes and provided insights into how subjectivity may have influenced decision-making throughout the study. By prioritising credibility through the use of triangulation, comparison of data sources, and researcher reflection, this study aimed to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of its findings. By aligning with established principles of internal validity and reliability, the research endeavoured to produce robust and dependable results that contribute meaningfully to the field of educational research on ECTs' integration in South Africa.

4.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the appropriateness of applying the results to other contexts and settings (McMillan, 2012). It involves the assessment of whether findings from a particular study can be relevant and meaningful when applied to different situations or populations. In the context of this study on ECTs' integration in South Africa, transferability played a crucial role in understanding how the results might be applicable beyond the specific research setting. Considering the extent to which local studies on ECTs' integration in South Africa have a consistent understanding of factors, there was a high possibility that the results of my study may reflect the reality of different settings. By identifying commonalities and patterns in the data that align with existing literature and observations in similar contexts, the potential for generalisability of the findings increases.

Transferability was applied to enable me to make some generalisations in specific warranted cases. Through a thorough analysis of the data, contextual factors, and the alignment of results with established theories or frameworks, I assessed the relevance and applicability of the findings in diverse educational settings. By considering the nuances and variations in different contexts while recognising the underlying principles that drive certain outcomes, I determined where the results could be transferred and applied effectively.

4.7.3 Dependability

Dependability entails the consistency of research findings in a hypothetical similar study. It is a concept closely related to reliability (Morrow, 2005) as it focuses on the stability and

predictability of research outcomes across different scenarios. Dependability appreciates the condition that collected data shows the fluidity of the issue/s being researched (Sikolia *et al.*, 2013), acknowledging the dynamic nature of the phenomena under investigation.

In this case, I relied on the guidance of my supervisor to ensure that the presentation of the research findings did not compromise dependability. By seeking input and advice from an experienced academic mentor, I aimed to enhance the trustworthiness and robustness of the study's outcomes. Additionally, it was my responsibility as a researcher to apply due diligence in the collection, interpretation, and analysis of the data in this research study. By upholding meticulous attention to detail throughout the research process, maintaining transparency in methods and procedures, and engaging in rigorous analytical practices, I strived to uphold the dependability of the study findings. Through methodological triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing, I aimed to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the research outcomes, ensuring that the data collected accurately reflected the complexities and nuances of the phenomena under study. Ultimately, by integrating both external guidance and personal commitment to methodological rigour and ethical practice, I sought to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field while upholding the principles of dependability and integrity in research.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The ethical aspects of the study acknowledge that “gathering data from subjects or using data in which subjects are identified, ethics are concerned with what is right or wrong, good or bad, or proper or improper.” (McMillan, 2012 p. 17). This section considers the ethical aspects of this study and how I sought to attain the justifiable levels of ethical research in this study.

Ethics concerns, such as anonymity, confidentiality, consent, and the impact of the research on participants were addressed in several ways. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) based at the University of the Witwatersrand (Protocol Number: H22/02/10). I obtained permission from the Gauteng Department of Education before the collection of the data. Information sheets and consent forms were given to each of the participants before the interview. The information sheet explained the objectives and procedures of the study, as well as the participant's right to participate voluntarily and to withdraw at any time. This was followed by the signing of consent forms based on the information. Participants' involvement in this research was entirely

voluntary; therefore, no form of coercion was used to force them to take part without their full consent. Participants received no direct benefits from the research, but it was clearly explained in the information sheet that research findings would be used to inform and contribute to the ongoing research on ECTs' professional practice and their successful induction into South African schools and communities of practice.

The participants' confidentiality and anonymity are integral in ethics consideration, and to ensure that there were absolutely no negative consequences to them or the school for taking part in the research study, pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants and the school. All information and data collected about participants have been kept confidential. Research data collected during the research (electronic and material) have been safely kept and locked in an office based at Wits University. There was no discussions about participants in the research with any other participant or person outside the scope of this research. The researcher is bound by and adheres to the ethical boundaries that were given by the Wits University Ethics Committee and the researcher has an obligation and responsibility to uphold these and adherence to these is a priority.

England (1994) argues that research represents a shared space, which is acted on by both the researcher and the participants. As a result, the positions and identities of both actors can influence the research process (Bourke, 2014). The researcher's positionality is therefore integral in carrying out research and it is important to view this as an ethical aspect that necessitates continuous reflection during the research process (Bourke, 2014). To address my positionality as a researcher, firstly, I recognized both the similarities and differences between myself and the research participants (Hopkins, 2007). Secondly, I provided a clear explanation of the motivations for collecting the data. Thirdly, I addressed my positionality with the participants in my study and, lastly, I clearly addressed any concerns participants may have had to ensure openness between myself and the participants.

4.8 Limitations of the Study

In any research endeavour, it is critical to acknowledge and reflect on the limitations that impacted the data collection. This section outlines the constraints associated with my data collection methods, particularly within the context of a PhD study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Securing face-to-face interviews was challenging.. Various challenges emerged that constrained data collection processes, influenced the interpretation of results, and

ultimately shaped the findings presented in this thesis. The most significant limitation faced during this study was the overarching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic necessitated widespread lockdowns and social distancing measures, which fundamentally altered traditional methods of data collection. Due to health concerns and restrictions imposed by the government, face-to-face interviews were severely limited. This restriction impacted my ability to conduct comprehensive qualitative interviews with teachers who sometimes felt uncomfortable speaking face-to-face.

The nature of a PhD programme also imposed time constraints on the research. The project required completion within a predefined period, limiting the scope for longitudinal analysis. Consequently, it was not feasible to extensively follow early career teachers over time to assess the long-term impacts of unions or support structures, thereby restricting the depth of inquiry into an area that may yield valuable insights regarding their transitional experiences.

The choice of using a case study method presented its own set of limitations. While it allowed for an in-depth examination of specific contexts, it inherently limited generalisability. My research focused on a select number of early career teachers and teacher unions, which may not represent the broader landscape of teaching contexts. This limitation raises questions regarding the applicability of findings to different geographical areas, types of unions, or teaching contexts.

Attempts to analyse union documents provided insights; however, the absence of direct input from union representatives weakened contextual understanding. The lack of interviews with union leaders or members who could provide anecdotal evidence further restricted my understanding of internal dynamics. It is essential to consider these constraints when assessing the findings, acknowledging that the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and methodological choices inevitably shaped and sometimes limited the breadth of this study. Future research addressing these gaps may offer a more nuanced understanding

Chapter 5: Factors that enable or restrict early career teachers from enacting their ideal practices

This chapter presents an analysis of ECTs' perceptions regarding the factors that enable or restrict them from enacting their ideal teaching practices within their school contexts. In Chapter 2, I identified three potential professional identities that ECTs may occupy. Firstly, they may identify as workers, primarily focused on adhering to the strict demands and confines of their job. Secondly, they may see themselves as professionals, guided by the specific ethical and educational expectations set by the professional council. Finally, ECTs may adopt a social activist identity, driven by a commitment to fulfilling an agenda of equity and justice in education. In this chapter, I explore the ideals ECTs hold about themselves as teachers. I then examine the extent to which ECTs report on their ability to implement their envisioned ideals within their work context and their perception of how easily they assimilate into prevalent school practices. Where not, I identify teaching practices that ECTs resist, either openly or covertly. The data was sourced from a survey completed by 101 ECTs along with in-depth follow-up interviews of ten of them (five activists and five non-activists). The self-identified activist ECTs had the pseudonyms Erna, Alex, Fatima, David, and Irvine; and the non-activists were named Bongani, Hlobisile, Gugu, Clive, and Sbu. The data included ECTs' comments on various aspects of teaching practices and their perceptions of their practices in relation to prevalent practices. This chapter will help me answer the first two of my sub-research questions, namely, How do ECTs envisage a transformed education system? and to what extent do ECTs regard themselves as agents of transformation. The chapter will unpack the focus of legitimation and then reveal the basis of legitimation in order to understand the underpinning organising principles in ECTs' perceptions.

5.1 ECTs' Aspirations and Ideals

ECTs enter the teaching profession with some vision of the ideal teacher they aspire to become. The formation of this teacher image is influenced by factors which drive ECTs to pursue different aspirations in their teaching career. This section explores the overarching priorities that ECTs emphasise when discussing the kind of teacher they hope to become. Analysing these priorities reveals what ECTs strive for at this point in their career. Two dominant agendas emerged from the dataset, namely, a *social agenda* (which manifests in the various roles that teachers play as community builders in their classroom,

schools and societies) and a *professional agenda* (which manifests most strongly in being a subject specialist and mediating its knowledge). The two dominant agendas are neither comprehensive nor mutually exclusive but have been emphasised to different extents by participants in this study. I will argue that these agendas play a crucial role in determining the career goals that ECTs champion in their teaching journey.

5.1.1 Social Agenda: Being a Community Builder

In this section, I examine the ways ECTs focus on using their role to address social issues, advocate for transformative change, and enhance the well-being of individuals in their communities. Eight out of ten participants interviewed conveyed their strong commitment to furthering social transformation through their teaching careers. There are six key ECTs in this section who self-identified as activists (Erna, David, and Alex) and non-activists (Gugu, Bongani, and Clive). Gugu, Bongani, and Alex have explicitly dedicated themselves to the development of their community. They perceive their role in providing basic education as a pivotal element in shaping learners' lives and preparing them for the realities beyond school. Bongani emphasised this point by stating that he joined the teaching profession "to ensure that he can produce young people who are educated and can compete in the economy of South Africa." His ambition extends beyond ensuring learners pass their present grade level; he wishes to develop students who can "qualify at universities and compete everywhere they go." This perspective illustrates a broader understanding among ECTs that education must serve as a pathway leading to higher academic achievement, thereby highlighting basic education as a stepping stone to alleviating poverty. Similarly, Alex articulated his desire to "bring change to society," which positions his goals within a larger context that transcends classroom instruction. Gugu chose teaching because she "wanted change" and recognised her "closest space or institution for [her] to change [the] world was through education." Echoing the sentiments of the renowned anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela, she stated boldly, "I am a firm believer in education because it is the only tool or the only weapon we have that can change our society." Likewise, David conceptualises schools as "one of the biggest institutions that we have in society that can change or gear the society to a different direction." His vision mirrors Mandela's assertion that quality education is vital for societal improvement. As Mandela articulated,

“South Africa inherited a highly dysfunctional educational system from the apartheid era. It is one of our major tasks of reconstruction to build an educational system that provides quality opportunities for all our people. ... Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world” (Mandela 2003).

These ECTs embody Mandela’s legacy through their dedication to transforming educational contexts for the betterment of society.

Other ECTs, like Erna and David, reflected on the environments from which they come, demonstrating a deep commitment to their communities and the influential figures who shaped their journeys. Erna shared, “I am from a very humble background. Even the society I come from is a hopeless society, [and] everything there was [in] IsiZulu.”. Here she emphasises social relations (SR+) Her personal history motivated her decision to pursue teaching so she can “go back and change the situation at home.” Evidently, many ECTs recognise how learners’ backgrounds can influence their classroom behaviour and engagement. Clive reflected on the impact of running support programmes aiming to “decrease the number of young people who are doing drugs and alcohol.” In a similar vein, Irvine noted specific challenges faced by students from local hostels, remarking, “Most of the learners we [accept into the school] are from hostels. Our school is next to a hostel. So the social ills are a lot and these social ills are seen in the classroom.” This acknowledgment speaks to a growing awareness of the interplay between societal issues and education. David reinforced this understanding, stating, “When you go into broken communities, more particularly Black communities, those learners do not only [come] as individuals who want to learn, they come in with a lot of baggage.” For these ECTs, the implications of education extend far beyond mere academic learning, encompassing character development and preparation for active citizenship.

Both Gugu and Alex strongly advocate for innovative teaching practices and a transformation-oriented approach. Gugu expressed her aspiration to be “a teacher who is an agent of change, a teacher who is inspirational to [her] learners.” Here she foregrounds her desired dispositions emphasising stronger social relations (SR+). She emphasised the importance of being “open-minded about issues” and effectively relating to her students. Her awareness that teaching transcends formal curricula was captured in her assertion: “Remember now, the teaching we do is beyond the curriculum teaching; we also teach the hidden curriculum, which is morals and values.” Gugu sees her classroom as a venue

where teachers witness the myriad challenges confronted by their students. Therefore, she believes fostering a detailed understanding of each learner's circumstances necessitates conducting a "situational analysis." Consistent with Gugu's perspective, Alex argued that it is crucial for teachers to "understand the learners and the environment."

For these ECTs, their aspirations to influence the lives of learners extend far beyond their obligations to support learning in the subjects they teach. ECTs' commitment reveals a profound sense of agency, framing teaching as not merely a job, but as a vital avenue for societal change—and that they seek to make an active contribution in reshaping the future of their students and communities.

5.1.2 Professional Agenda: Being a Knowledge Builder

Any act of teaching signifies that knowledge is being conveyed (Shulman, 1987). This fundamental idea shapes ECTs whose passion for their specialised subjects and phases dominate their teaching aspirations. Hlobisile, Fatima, and Bongani emphasised their commitment to their teaching subjects when reflecting on how they understand their roles as educators. Their focus on immediate joy and satisfaction in the classroom underscores a dominant aspect of their teaching motivations. For Hlobisile, a non-activist, the act of teaching is not merely about delivering information; it is about facilitating a transformative process for learners. She shared, "I enjoy teaching because you are moving someone from a point of being lost to a point of being enlightened." This statement reflects her recognition of her agency as a teacher—realising the impact she can have on students' understanding and self-awareness. The excitement of witnessing students grasp concepts supports her motivation, emphasising that teaching can provide immediate emotional rewards. Fatima, an activist, echoed this sentiment in her ambition to encourage critical thinking among her social science students. She asserted that she wants students to "think critically in social science," suggesting that her pedagogical approach goes beyond rote learning to foster analytical skills. The immediacy of these interactions brings her satisfaction, suggesting that she experiences fulfilment through the relationships and dialogues established within her classroom. In both cases, Hlobisile and Fatima's drive stems from the interactions they have with learners during the learning process. This feedback may become a catalyst for these ECTs, allowing them to view teaching as an impactful practice that yields immediate gratification. Their reflections highlight how

ECTs can derive a sense of agency from their direct encounters with learners, emphasising the rewarding nature of engaging in the educational process.

Bongani, a non-activist, presented a different yet complementary perspective, voicing a desire to deepen his expertise in his subject area. He articulated, “I want to be a specialist in the way that I am able to solve critical problems in Science.” Bongani emphasises both dispositions and mastery of knowledge (ER+, SR+). This aspiration indicates a commitment to ongoing professional development and mastery of content, emphasizing the teaching of the subject. Bongani emphasises epistemic relations and downplays social relations. Many ECTs, like Hlobisile and Bongani, draw inspiration from their own educational experiences, observing effective teaching practices that they aspire to emulate in their classrooms. Hlobisile recalled, “I had a teacher in Grade 8 who made teaching so easy as compared to other teachers.” Such memories demonstrate how formative experiences shape their current objectives and methodologies as educators. Hlobisile demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+), acknowledging the significance of mentorship—whether through formal or informal means—as instrumental in framing their understanding of effective teaching strategies. Similarly, Irvine referred to the impact of his teachers on his decision to teach:

“It came directly from the observation of my teachers. The way they used to teach you, their passion for the subject. I loved their method of teaching, and how they would engage us. It made me think, I can actually do this.”

His remark highlights a case where novice teachers learn by witnessing practices at play. This adoption of practices observed during their schooling not only validates their approach but also reinforces their sense of agency in crafting their teaching identities.

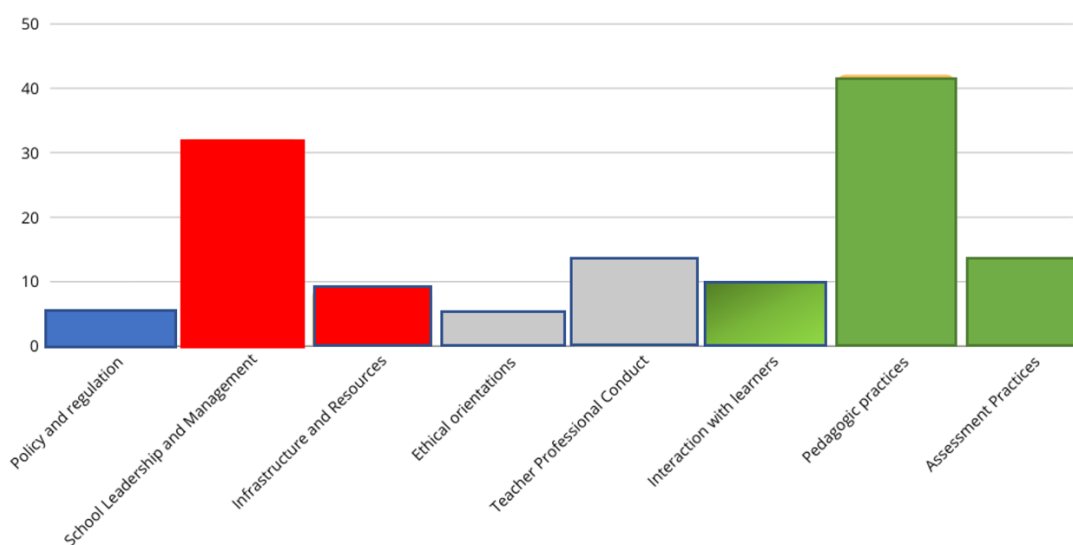
For these ECTs, the journey involves seeking immediate satisfaction in their teaching. The perceptions expressed by Hlobisile, Fatima, and Bongani reveal how agency manifests through the dual lenses of personal fulfilment and observational learning. Their aspirations represent not just individual desires to succeed in their careers but also a commitment to contribute positively to the academic and personal development of their learners. This interplay of motivations suggests that successful teaching cannot be confined to the delivery of knowledge; rather, it thrives when teachers recognise and harness the complexities of their roles within the educational landscape.

Social agenda is governed strongly by a knower code (SR+, ER-) where participants' desire to build community and contribute to educational rigour is often underpinned by a knower code, with them drawing on their own social histories and educational experiences. In contrast, those who are in the knowledge-building approach variously enact a knower code, drawing on the influence of previous teachers and mentors whose practice enticed them, or a knowledge code, where specific competencies in the subject field, and not personal experiences (SR-) have guided their approach to teaching. The analysis of the agendas demonstrates the contributions that ECTs seek to make through their teaching practices. ECT' issues that are significant to them could provide insights into the factors that might contribute to their selection of teacher unions.

5.2 ECTs' Perceptions of their Adjustment into their School Contexts

ECTs are expected to assimilate into existing schooling environments that have their own traditions, priorities, and ways of working. However, these are not always well aligned with the goals, developing practices, and beliefs of ECTs. In the survey and interview, participants were asked about their views and experiences on assimilating into the existing teaching practices in their school contexts. ECTs' priorities in the teaching context reveal issues that they may find clashing with their ideals. In this section, I examine the key issues that ECTs value, support, and critique in their teaching contexts. My analysis will show that ECTs variously assimilate, adjust to, or resist (overtly and covertly) the prevalent practices in teaching contexts. I have organised the discussion of the next section into four levels: supermacro (policy and regulation), macro (school leadership and management, infrastructure, and resources), meso (pedagogic and assessment classroom practices, interactions with learners), and micro (ethical orientation, teacher professional conduct) (Bertram, 2023). The analysis at these levels reveals context-based issues that reflect the perceptions of the ECTs in this study. Figure 5.1 shows the different issues raised by ECTs about adjusting to their school context. Exploring these issues is important in order to understand the obstacles that allow or prevent ECTs from enacting their practices. The concentration of issues in ECTs evidence relates to pedagogic practices and school leadership and management, as depicted in the bar graph in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Focus of the concerns expressed by ECTs about the schooling system.



Blue: supermacro; **Red:** macro; **Green:** meso; **Grey:** micro

In this section, I argue that the ECTs' perceptions about prevalent teaching practices reveal dilemmas they face regarding the functionality of schooling. These perceptions suggest that, in some instances, ECTs exhibit a sense of responsibility in addressing the issues, while in other cases, they attribute this responsibility to other stakeholders within their respective contexts.

5.2.1 Policies

Policy plays a crucial role in the South African education system, in shaping vision, goals, and practices. Policies from the Department of Basic Education operate at a super-macro level and regulate and control the operations of the education system and general school functioning. The regulation instruments of the teachers' work include, but are not limited to, the annual teaching plan policy, policies on assessment, and curriculum delivery. Eleven out of the 101 survey responses showed instances where ECTs feel that some policies conflict with their professional mandate of what it takes to be effective teachers. Two policies in particular were of concern to ECTs, one about progression policy and the second about annual teaching plans.

i) Learner progression: The national policy about the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R-12 (published as

Government Notices No. 1115 and 1116 in Government Gazette No. 36042 of 28 December 2012) was introduced by the Department of Education in 2013. There is a distinction stipulated in the progression policy between condoning, promotion, and progression. *Condonation* means the “relaxation of promotion requirements”, while *promotion* means the “movement of a learner from one grade to the next when that learner meets the minimum required level of achievement per subject in a particular grade” (RSA, 2013, pp. vii, xi). The policy defines progression as the “advancement of a learner from one grade to the next, excluding Grade R, in spite of the learner not having complied with all the promotion requirements” (RSA, 2013, pp. vii, xi). Progression can be used to prevent a learner from being retained in a phase for a period exceeding four years provided that the underperformance of the learner in the previous grade is addressed in the grade to which the learner has been promoted (as stipulated in the Admission policy for ordinary public schools as published as Government Notice 2432, Government Gazette, Vol. 400, No. 19377 of 19 October 1998). Despite their reservations, participants reluctantly comply with learners’ promotion decisions made irrespective of learners’ mastery of the content knowledge and skills expected. There is little or no room to negotiate such policy directives once issued.

Tied to the policy on promotional requirements is the adjustment of marks policy, a regulation issued as a gazette (ie. National Assessment Circular No. 3 of 2015) which directs the schools to adjust certain marks so that a number of learners can be condoned to the next grade. The National Assessment Circular No. 3 of 2015 (RSA, 2015, p. 2) reads:

The adjustment will be applied to learners who have obtained in a subject a mark which is within a 7% range of the pass requirement. Mark adjustments must be prioritized in the fundamental subjects of Home Language, First Additional Language, and Mathematics. Mark adjustment **must only** [emphasis in the original] be effected where it leads to a learner satisfying the overall promotion requirements as set out in CAPS.

In the case of the policy above, ECTs show a limited understanding of how certain departmental policies fit into the work that they do. In one example, the general adjustment of marks practice was labelled “pass one, pass all” by Tebello, resulting in the “adding [of] extra marks to tests and assignments in order to make the children pass.”

Similarly, Bulelani believes that learners should not be promoted if they have not met the stipulated requirements. Bulelani too pointed out the “adjusting of marks so [that] learners pass.”

Although policy directs teachers to condone learners who may not yet be ready for the next grade, Bulelani believes this happens at the school level and the schools need to stop the practice. As such, Bulelani deems this policy and how it is implemented as regressive in supporting learning. This example highlights the tension between advancing learners and ensuring they have adequately mastered the necessary content. While the intention behind the progression policy may be to provide flexibility and support to learners who could otherwise fall behind, it creates dilemmas for ECTs. While there is inference to the policy mentioned above, there seems to be some misinterpretation of the intentions and expectations of the policy directives. Thus, ECTs are caught in a struggle where they must navigate the implications of promoting learners without fully addressing their potential policy knowledge gaps. Their positions enact a stronger epistemic relation (ER+), and weaker social relation (SR-), highlighting a process that exists that is not subject to individual choice. Consequently, this can lead to feelings of frustration among teachers who are striving to uphold educational standards while adhering to potentially conflicting policies. As such, the interplay between these procedural guidelines and the realities of classroom teaching underscores the need for an approach that honours both academic achievement and social accountability within the educational system.

ii) The annual teaching plan is crucial in guiding teachers on sequencing and pacing content knowledge and there are directives from education departments to adhere to the stipulated timelines. The annual teaching plan provides specific guidelines on teaching various topics in all subjects, showing the extent of coverage, and informal and formal assessment points. The participants in this study held two distinct positions: one group supporting the adoption and compliance with the annual teaching plan, and the other believing the structure of the annual teaching plan is unrealistic and thus reluctantly complying. Three ECTs have observed a lack of absolute compliance with policy documents such as the annual teaching plan in their schooling context. For instance, Irvine acknowledges the importance of guiding documents and is concerned about how colleagues disregard them. Irvine reported that teachers he works with are not “following the rules to the letter.” For Irvine, teachers should follow the policy guiding principles as

he seeks to do and he expects others to do so too. Ashley regards the annual teaching plan as an integral document that guides her work. While this is the case, Ashley has observed teachers that do not “follow [the] ATP (annual teaching plan) at all,” which means they do not adhere to the sequencing and pacing required by the policy. She expressed a desire for order and accountability within the educational environment, implying a need for a shared commitment to agreed-upon standards. Ashley sees this shortcoming affecting the synergy in the work done by teachers. For these ECTs, ‘rules’ are communicated via policy documents and these ‘rules’ matter. In these cases, they enact a knowledge code (ER+, SR-) by working strictly to policy guidelines. It should be specifically noted that in the case of these ECTs, these ‘rules’ are not on matters of individual preference. Here the ECTs seek to be compliant with policy. There is a code clash where some are working strictly to prescribed guidelines (ER+, SR-) and others are arguing that the guidelines need to be interpreted in terms of the actual comprehension of learners (stronger social relations, where the teachers’ discretion and judgement matter). Alex, an activist, notably articulated his desire to be “involved” in the drafting process of the annual teaching plan, emphasising a need to highlight its unrealistic nature. He expressed a perception that those who developed the plan lacked the requisite understanding, leading to a framework imposed on teachers that does not reflect their lived experiences in the classroom. Through this assertion, Alex demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+) and weaker epistemic relations (ER-), positioning himself and fellow teachers as critical stakeholders whose insights are essential for informed educational planning and flexible implementation. Enacting a knower code, his call for involvement exemplifies a strong sense of agency, he perceives himself as an active participant in the education system rather than a passive recipient of top-down mandates.

Alex does not have a problem with the Department of Education directives but his issue is with the applicability of the policy directives in his context. As such, the struggle is at the local level. Erna shared a similar sentiment that shows that there is a gap between the requirements of a policy and the realities in the school context. Erna, an activist, said, “The curriculum does not allow [me to teach effectively]”, and she claimed, “If you go and check the annual teaching plan [against] the lesson plans, it is something different.” She emphasises stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and weaker social relations (SR-). Similarly, Freddy said, “The amount of written work that teachers are forced to do with the kids for the day is ridiculous.” Freddy concern emphasises weaker epistemic relations

(ER-), and weaker social relations (SR-). So, since they acknowledge that they have to adhere to the annual teaching plan, they also raise its misalignment with the realities of their school contexts. Consistent with Alex's, Freddy's, and Erna's critique, Bongani said, "The annual teaching plan is structured in a way that, for example, term two extends until June, while learners will get their timetable and start writing in May." Bongani's concern demonstrates stronger epistemic relation (ER+) and weaker social relations (SR-). Bongani reluctantly complies with the structuring of content coverage and the timing of the assessments, demonstrating stronger epistemic relations (ER+) but weaker social relations (SR-) as he perceives little scope for adapting the plan to the needs of his classes. The views expressed by Alex, Erna, Freddy, and Bongani reveal significant concerns regarding the misalignment between the articulated expectations of the annual teaching plan and the practical realities teachers face within their specific teaching contexts.

Curriculum and assessment developers often scope the assessment based on the content covered; as such, Bongani's critique might be linked to the flow of the school programme once examinations commence while teaching needs to take place. While it expresses a valid concern, it also reveals a potential limitation in Alex's perspective; namely, the reliance on personal anecdotes may undermine the acceptance of his claim. This reliance highlights that his knowledge is framed more around personal experience rather than being based on wider empirical evidence or collective insight.

Alex highlights an issue of the involvement of stakeholders to help inform what guides teachers' work, strengthening social relations. By seeking some flexibility in implementation, it reveals that ECTs feel their professional agency is restricted in the current policy environment. This highlights that in promoting an environment where compliance supersedes individual insight or pedagogical creativity, there is a risk of constraining professional agency, which is crucial for effectively addressing diverse classroom dynamics. Furthermore, professional agency typically encompasses the capacity of teachers to make informed decisions and advocate for their practices. Consequently, while adherence to policy provides a necessary framework, ECTs need to recognise the value of negotiating these policies and integrating their individual perspectives into their practice. There is a need for a critical reflection on how these rules can both guide and confine.

5.2.2 School Context and Resourcing

The state of the school infrastructure and lack of teaching and learning resources may hinder and restrict the effectiveness of ECTs as educators. ECTs attribute some of their challenges to deviations in the Department of Education's policies on the norms for teacher-learner ratio. For instance, Bheki noted that, "according to [the] policy, high schools should have 1:35 [teacher to learner ratio], yet [the ratio at his school is] currently 1:70." In Bheki's school context, the number of learners a single teacher is responsible for is double the number stipulated by policy. Although Bheki raises a contextual concern, the perception seems to overlook the contextual occurrences and constraints that may contribute to overcrowded classrooms. The contextual constraints are captured by Gugu who said, "We have got a large number of learners in Gauteng. Our learners come from different areas and some are foreign learners and they flood into Gauteng because it is an economic hub. As a result, we teach classes of 70 to 75 learners." Bheki, reluctantly complies with these class sizes although they are in breach of policy. Hlobisile, on the other hand, attributes overcrowding to an unethical practice at the administration level. Hlobisile's account shows passive resistance where she has not overtly addressed or challenged the practice. For example, Hlobisile said overcrowding in her school was a result of the "admin [admitting] many learners" to secure extra funding for the school. Hlobisile suggests that there is a deliberate act of over-enrolling learners in the school on the administration level. The issue at hand is that the current class sizes are inadequate for accommodating this large number of learners, which can pose various difficulties in the classroom teaching process. Despite the intolerable situation, the ECTs in this study have not challenged the enrolment practices, choosing to comply, with reluctance, to the classes they are allocated to teach, despite the policy breach. This is seen in Gugu's account where she said, "You cannot even move in the class, yet the same Department of Education has expectations of getting proper results from us." Erna on the other hand said, "In a 50-something learners class, when you are teaching, it is like you are preaching to a community. You cannot even walk around and check the work." As a way to mitigate Gugu and Erna's experiences, Brian stated that the overcrowding has led to a "temporary setup of mobile classrooms" at his school. The issue seems to be about accountability on the end of the Department of Education, which means that while Gugu and Erna may understand the constraints, they expect the department to consider them when teachers are

assessed. The accountability that Gugu and Erna seek is revealed in Brian's experience, wherein the department has put supporting measures in place.

While this is the case, the difficulties caused by overcrowding may include increased disciplinary problems, increased workload, and the inability to provide personalised teaching. As such, the ECTs' struggle between fulfilling the core responsibilities of teaching and environment constraints emerges for Dylan. Dylan stressed that in these overcrowded classrooms "inclusivity is uncatered for." For other ECTs such as Alex, the overcrowding affects resources. Alex shared that "teachers cannot make photocopies" since the school often runs out of "toner and paper," revealing the impact this has on the school's resources. These ECTs' experiences reveal that, although they are aware of the struggles, they reluctantly comply with the status quo without overtly confronting these dilemmas. The pressure to accommodate an enrolment of learners impacts the number of learners in a classroom and this has the potential to compromise the pedagogical and learning possibilities in the classroom.

5.3 School Management

ECTs in the study value the role that school management plays in their work. They view functional school management, at the macro level, as crucial for creating a stable working environment that supports classroom teaching, teacher management, and day-to-day operations. Without an effective school management system, ECTs are adamant that they cannot effectively carry out their work. As such, ECTs hold varying, although consistent, positions on what should be in place regarding school management. The findings show that 39 out of the 101 (37%) respondents' responses in both the surveys and interviews focus on the aspects that relate to the management of the school. This section delves into the ECTs' struggles at a macro level, relating to the school context and institution where they are employed. The struggles raised by ECTs revolve around decision-making by the school management that potentially constrains and/or enable their effectiveness on the job. Specifically, they highlight struggles revolving around school management team (SMT) support, school operations, opportunities within the school, treatment of teachers by the SMT, and the SMT's response to teachers' grievances. The school management is expected to fulfil various roles, one of which includes the development and support of its staff. These factors form part of their primary focus in the day-to-day functioning of the school. Regarding support, the survey findings revealed two distinct instances where

ECTs expressed perceptions of mentorship for ECTs, that is, the lack of support and/or the superficial mentorship offered by the school. An analysis of such is important since the guidance and mentorship provided during the initial stages of a teacher's career are crucial.

5.3.1 Planning

ECTs rely on appropriate planning to structure their work in school contexts. The influence of the members of the SMT is significant; their decisions impact not only organisational processes but also student learning outcomes. For instance, Clive acknowledged that “the school management team is important in making sure that things run accordingly in the school.” Clive’s view demonstrates weaker epistemic relations (ER-), and weaker social relations (SR-). Similarly, Sbu believes that stability in the school hinges on the effectiveness of the planning. For instance, Sbu noted that it is the “leadership in my school, [that can] cause instability in the school, [that] the competence of the SMT [can] drive division, and that affects the quality of teaching and learning in my school.” While Clive and Sbu acknowledge the role and importance of school management, the struggle emerges in complying with the management directives, regardless of the misalignment between prevalent practices and their beliefs. Two ECTs, Thabiso and Dave, reported that their school functionality is compromised because of the “lack of planning” and so “there is time [mis-] management.”

The ECTs’ struggles to adapt to school practices sometimes emerge from the lack of clear guidelines in the form of structure, for which they hold the school management responsible. As such, ECTs can only comply or reluctantly comply because they have to follow the directives of the management. For instance, David sees planning and time management as crucial in teachers’ work. He said, “Every institution needs to have structure and that structure needs to be known by educators and learners.” However, he observed that “there is no structure” in his school context and often he “does not know what is going on.” An example of this is that at times he does not “know when is assembly.” The lack of proper communication around scheduling and time management can prevent ECTs from effectively fulfilling their duties. Happy too claims that the SMT fails to properly manage time-tabling, resulting in “class periods [that] are extremely short.” Alex also pointed to this aspect, highlighting that in his school, there was a “fight about the fact that the maths teachers want to teach the kids all the time” and as such there

was neglect for the adequate timetabling of other subjects. The proper planning of school rosters emphasises the central importance placed on teaching and learning time. The findings show that there is little consideration for the various subject requirements in terms of time, and for Happy, this results in “a lot of difficulties for the practical subjects” such as “physical science and creative arts.” The issue raised in this instance is the prioritisation of particular subjects within the school programme.

For ECTs, the ramifications of disorganised leadership resonate deeply. Their responses to the prevailing conditions reveal an acute awareness of their professional agency. While their frustrations express stronger social relations (SR+), these relations are underpinned by a rationale that emphasises stronger epistemic relations (ER+). Armed with fresh pedagogical training and an eagerness to implement new practices, the ECTs in this study have found themselves navigating a landscape marked by instability and unpredictability. In such scenarios, ECTs may feel compelled to assert their agency.

5.3.2 School Culture of Teaching and Learning

Classroom discipline management represents a formidable dilemma for ECTs as they strive to balance establishing authority while simultaneously promoting a supportive learning atmosphere. Many ECTs expressed feeling inadequately equipped to handle disruptive behaviours, often citing a lack of institutional support from school management, which exacerbates their struggles in the classroom. This struggle is compounded by the varying relationships they navigate while encompassing the intricate power dynamics between learners, colleagues, and the broader community. Community contexts have impacts that permeate the educational landscape, albeit framing perception predominantly around the assumed socio-economic status of the learners. Irvine leans on an analysis of the social dynamics present in the community surrounding the school, articulating that “most of the learners we [accept into the school] are from hostels,” a revelation that underscores the complexity of student backgrounds and the connected social challenges that influence classroom behaviour.

David’s observations resonate with Irvine’s. “When you go into broken communities, more particularly Black communities, those learners do not only [come] as individuals who want to learn; they come in with a lot of baggage.” David recognises the weight of learners’ personal histories and challenges and how these can impact learners’ individual agency and capacity for change. The experiences of ECTs such as Menzi, Thomas, and

Clive exhibit varying degrees of professional agency, defined as their capacity to act independently and make choices, each facing distinct dilemmas that impact their efficacy and sense of control in teaching. Menzi articulated his struggle with the SMT's apparent disregard for teachers when dealing with disciplinary issues among learners. He stated, "The school management team does not care about teachers at all when it comes to disciplining and reprimanding the learners. The school management only cares about the learners' safety." This statement shows that Menzi feels isolated and unsupported and that there is a lack of consideration for teachers' safety. His emphasis on social accountability suggests that Menzi believes the school's policies do not prioritise teacher well-being or provide necessary resources for classroom management.

Thomas' concern, "I have a problem with the discipline procedures," demonstrates both stronger social relations (SR+) and weaker epistemic relations (ER-). Clive observed that

"There are learners who are not behaving, learners who are not cooperating, we take these to the school governing body for a disciplinary hearing. [But] I have no control; with all evidence that you can submit, once it gets there, if ever, these learners returned to class, I have no choice but to work with them."

His insights reveal stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and stronger social relations (SR+); he is aware of effective disciplinary practices but also feels frustrated by limitations on the implementation. The expectation from this ECT is for the disruptive learners to be removed, which is in contradiction to the Constitution. The tension between presenting evidence and lacking results underscores a disempowering situation that undermines his role and efficacy as a teacher.

Menzi, Thomas, and Clive exemplify degrees of professional agency in their interactions: Menzi is concerned about the lack of teacher support from management. His focus shows how external social structures limit his ability to assert his pedagogical knowledge effectively, leading to feelings of alienation. Thomas and Clive both leverage their understanding of disciplinary processes and maintain solid connections with social networks within the school. Their critical awareness allows them to navigate institutional dilemmas more proficiently.

5.3.3 School Management Team Expectations

The findings highlight the significant influence that school management has on the professional experiences and agency of ECTs. Through their interactions with the management team, ECTs express experiences regarding the dynamics of power, communication, and professionalism within the school environment. Initially, some ECTs, like Bongani, presented a positive view of the school management's role, stating, "the management is in charge of the institution," and they "ensure that [teachers] deliver what is expected." This reflects a clear acknowledgment of the hierarchy and perceived responsibility of the management team. Bongani's acceptance of this structure illustrates an understanding of his position as part of a broader organisation aimed at achieving educational goals. His assertion suggests that effective school leadership enhances his professional agency by providing direction and clarity in expectations.

However, underlying this positive perception are tensions concerning the conduct of school management in interactions. ECTs articulate an expectation for professional communication from school management, indicative of their desire for respectful and collegial engagement. The narrative around unprofessional encounters demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+), illustrating a disconnect between ECTs' expectations of professional conduct and the reality they often face. Zanele's observation that "leaders of the school [shout] at teachers in front of the learners" highlights an overstepping of professional boundaries, revealing a space of hostility that undermines teacher dignity. Eugene further elucidated this sentiment, expressing that he "hates" the prevalent method of addressing discontent through shouting, labelling it as "popular." Here, Eugene's emotional reaction indicates not only a rejection of such practices but also a longing for different communicative strategies.

In both cases, the ECTs show signs of passive resistance toward these unprofessional behaviours, recognising that some methods of communication are unacceptable. Their strong stance exemplifies stronger social relations (SR+) in that they foreground their personal dissatisfaction approaches to engagement, and seek alternative approaches (ER-). By enacting a knower code, the ECTs respond through passive resistance, indicating that while ECTs are aware of appropriate ways of professional communication, their inability to enact change is diminished in their current contexts. The reference to a need for better communication points towards a collective expectation among ECTs that

promotes professionalism in their interactions with school management. Overall, the nuances captured in these encounters highlight the fluid balance of professional agency for ECTs. While they possess aspirations for a supportive work environment, the present reality characterised by unprofessional communication undermines their confidence to engage fully as ECTs. The struggles outlined in the experiences of Bongani, Zanele, and Eugene reveal a community of ECTs striving for higher standards of interaction and mutual respect but facing barriers that constrain their potential. In light of these findings, there is a call for more constructive forms of engagement that will empower ECTs to assert their professional identities confidently and contribute meaningfully to their teaching contexts.

5.4 Pedagogic Practices

At the core of the meso level of schooling activities is the essential aim of fostering good teaching that promotes learner achievement. This section focuses on the struggles ECTs encounter with pedagogical and assessment practices. The perceptions of the ECTs who participated in this study indicate that quality teaching and learning is a primary priority for ECTs. When asked about prevalent practices they accept or resist, 42 out of 101 of the ECTs' responses highlighted factors related to pedagogical practices within their respective contexts. ECTs struggle to reconcile some prevalent pedagogical practices in their schools and the pedagogical knowledge that they possess. Under the umbrella of pedagogical practices, two areas of struggle emerged: 1) knowledge engagement in teaching contexts and 2) integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in teaching methods to support learning processes.

5.4.1 Mediation of Content Knowledge

ECTs revealed their perceptions about the quality of knowledge mediation in their school contexts. Some ECTs expressed concern with mediating knowledge effectively. When faced with a misalignment between their conceptions of effective teaching and prevalent practices in the school context, ECTs overtly resist the prevalent practices. For instance, there is a struggle regarding the epistemological value in the teaching strategies used by senior teachers. The evidence reveals that ECTs resist these practices in their own classrooms.

Participants in this study openly resist some traditional teaching strategies, especially those they consider to be passive teaching methods. Kelvin said some teachers were “teaching while sitting behind a desk and reading from the textbook” and another ECT, Andile, said there were instances where teachers would give learners “notes without explaining them.” Consistent with Kevin’s experience, Bongani shared that “teachers mainly use textbooks as resources and are reluctant to engage in practical tasks.” For Kelvin and Bongani, simply “reading from the textbook” without unpacking or elaborating on the concepts signals inadequate efforts in teaching and they believe that teachers can explore other ways to teach learners. Natasha added that, “Senior teachers still lack the capacity to engage meaningfully with learners to enhance the learning and experience of [the] subject.” The frustration with senior colleagues underscores an awareness among ECTs that meaningful engagement goes beyond merely conveying information, it necessitates deep learning and critical thinking. One of the reasons attributed to the lack of meaningful engagement was shared by Mzwakhe and Ben who said, “Teachers [teaching] topics that they are not good at” and “topics covered are never covered in depth [because teachers] do not address all sub-concepts under a particular topic.” As such, ECTs such as Bruno proposed that there should be “group teaching, where teachers focus on their stronger aspects of the subject to enhance the teaching of different topics.” In this case, there is overt resistance of the prevalent practice and a call for collective responsibility, wherein teachers can learn from each other, demonstrating a knower code (SR+, ER-).

ECTs experience a struggle between teaching methods that are deemed ‘traditional’ and what they regard as more progressive teaching approaches in their school contexts. Some participants in this study believe there are teaching approaches that do not add teaching and learning value to the classroom. There is passive resistance wherein ECTs highlight the struggles but have not raised these issues with their colleagues. For instance, Wandile said, “I think subject-specific methods must be used. The methods must include learner-centred, currently most of it is teacher-centred. They encourage surface learning as opposed to conceptual development.” Consistently, Andani said, “teacher-centred approach is still dominant” and “teacher-centred approach is ineffective”, respectively. Another ECT, Sibho described how the teachers employed teaching methods that do not “encourage critical thinking.” These ECTs’ views suggest that ‘teacher-centred’ approaches are seen as problematic. For these ECTs, there are conceptions of what

constitutes good teaching and, as such, a deviation from these ideals marks a dilemma. Although these ECTs offer perspectives on what constitutes ‘meaningful engagement,’ it is evident that their conceptions of established practices, some of which they believe have become obsolete, are limited.

The accounts demonstrate stronger epistemic relations (ER+), specifically revealing the teaching practices in question. Similar to Bongani and Kelvin, David said:

The idea that history is taught by taking a textbook and reading from it and then learners make their own notes is not working. There are teachers that teach like that every single day and that person leaves the classroom and says I have taught.

These experiences offer a glimpse into the struggles between existing teaching practices in context and ECTs’ championed teaching practices. While ECTs reveal these struggles, there are cases wherein they constellate everything old as bad and ineffective and everything new as great, regardless of its educational underpinnings and value. As such, ECTs use this perception as a lens to judge the prevalent teaching practices in their teaching contexts.

Some ECTs point to their colleagues’ methods of mediating knowledge, ways they believe to be ineffective. Gerald, for example, expressed how they are forced to comply with the prevalent teaching practices, stating that “most learners at [the] school are spoon-fed” because teachers are instructed to “pass the learners.” In another comment, Raymond highlighted that learners are “not given individual attention in class”, while Alex said there is “unsupported learning and you are expected as a teacher to comply.” These experiences call into question an aspect of inclusivity and ensuring that every learner in the classroom gets the value of the education offered. ECTs such as Nkosinathi highlighted that there are instances wherein the “delivery of the content to the learners [is done without considering] learning barriers.” In other cases, such as Lisa’s experience, teachers teach “unaware of learners with learning disabilities” in their classrooms. Consequently, these ECTs argue that failing to address the critical issues highlighted in their teaching experiences leads to minimal teaching and learning levels. This constrains them in ensuring an integral priority, that is, that no learner falls behind. Although the evidence shows that some ECTs passively resist these practices, it also shows others reluctantly bowing to the pressure. Overall, the perceptions presented through these findings reveal a

pervasive struggle faced by ECTs as they negotiate their roles within school systems that often valorise what they deem as conventional methods over progressive teaching methods. ECTs' perceptions are that although they seek to use progressive pedagogies, the limitations imposed by their work environments stifle their ability to effect change. While the ECTs in this study demonstrate resilience and commitment to fostering meaningful engagement in classrooms, the structural barriers dictated by existing practices and power dynamics largely inhibit their potential.

5.4.2 The Integration of Digital Technologies into Subject Teaching

A significant struggle exists between the pedagogical ideals they bring from their training in 21st-century teaching methods and the traditional practices prevalent in their school contexts. Understanding these dimensions sheds light on how ECTs navigate their professional agency in a landscape dominated by unpreferred teaching approaches. ECTs claim to be equipped with training emphasising modern instructional techniques, specifically the integration of digital technologies in their classroom practices. For example, Kelvin's assertion about the predominance of "chalkboards and traditional methods" emphasises stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and weaker social relations (SR-), where he highlights a conventional reliance on outdated tools that he believes can stifle educational progress. Similarly, Zethu said that senior teachers rely on "primitive teaching aids" (stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and weaker social relations (SR-)). According to Faith's perspective, she would, "like more teachers to make use of technology in the classroom," further demonstrating stronger social relations (SR+), foregrounding her preference for particular teaching approaches. By advocating for the recognition of learners as "multimodal," Faith articulates a progressive view that values innovative teaching practices capable of engaging modern learners effectively. Such beliefs cultivate an active resistance against entrenched methodologies that fail to recognise the evolving educational environment necessitated by digital proficiency. Despite their strong convictions that promote technology, ECTs often express their frustrations passively rather than confronting them directly. For instance, Bheki emphasised that teachers "must use technological devices," yet stopped short of challenging colleagues on their adherence to traditional methods. Similarly, Ntombi suggested that resources beyond "traditional methods" should be utilised, but there was no evidence of pushing for immediate action or engagement in discourse with her peers.

This passive resistance recognises the need for change, yet their hesitation to address these issues may reflect a delicate interplay between their professional identity and the powerful influences of senior colleagues on what is regarded as legitimate pedagogies in their school contexts. While there is an acknowledgment and regard for outdated practices, the absence of dialogue about their ineffectiveness plays into a limited capacity for professional agency. Consequently, ECTs may be unable to assert their voices in a context that seems resistant to novel pedagogical advancements. In this instance, ECTs enact a knower code. The emphasis on incorporating digital technologies to enhance learning signals that ECTs aspire to redefine their roles within these prevalent teaching practices. Gert noted that, “maybe we can use digital devices to teach learners [so that they] do not lose concentration easily,” (stronger social relations (SR+)). This highlights the belief among ECTs that these methods not only benefit teaching but also foster better learner engagement, an essential aspect of effective pedagogy.

Participants like Teddy and Erna demonstrated overt resistance by vocally critiquing their colleagues’ reluctance to adopt digital tools in their teaching practices. Teddy observed that “teachers fear using [digital technologies]” and indicated a profound disappointment with peers who resist what he deems as evolving methodologies. Erna echoed this sentiment, imploring her colleagues to “move with time” in response to educational reforms calling for digital integration. These comments reveal that some ECTs challenge the status quo by advocating for pedagogical shifts reflective of recent educational goals.

5.5 Assessment Practices

There are struggles between what ECTs regard as fair and valuable assessment approaches and the prevalent assessment practices in their school context. Based on the collected data, 14 out of 101 responses suggest a tension between the ideals and practices of assessment as experienced by ECTs. Their struggles reveal resistance to what they perceive to be unethical and unfair assessment practices entrenched in their school contexts. Their responses raise four concerns:

- i) the emphasis on test scores rather than understanding,
- ii) assessing work not covered adequately in class,
- iii) providing learners with model answers before a test, and
- iv) setting questions that are far too easy.

These ideas will be discussed in turn and are deduced from the experiences they shared about some practices that are not aligned with their conceptions of what, how, and why assessments are in place.

i) Emphasis on test scores rather than learner understanding

Among the aspects raised by these ECTs were issues related to teaching for exams, providing assessment feedback, and engaging in what constitutes unethical or unfair assessment practices. There is a notion of teaching to the assessment that seems to dominate their experiences. The analysis shows that ECTs such as Fatima and Loyiso reluctantly assimilate into the practices that exist in their schools. For instance, Fatima, one of the ECTs, said learners are “conditioned and used to being taught strictly what they will be assessed. For example, they are taught to [the] question paper a day before they can write the same paper.” Loyiso reported that, “Learners are taught for the sole purpose of performing better in an exam with no emphasis on mastering subject matter.” Fatima and Loyiso believe there is a compromise in the quality of teaching when teachers teach to the test. While they express these evaluations, the ECTs passively resist these practices, demonstrating stronger epistemic relations (ER+).

ii) Assessing work not adequately covered:

For some ECTs, it is important to evaluate learners on what was covered in the classroom. However, the experience of these ECTs shows that the struggle exists in contexts where learners are evaluated without being provided with the necessary content required to complete the assessment. For instance, David said that in some cases learners are assessed on “work that was never taught.” Although this account pertains to the ECT, it is conceivable that the assertion is solely based on the perspectives shared by learners.

iii) Providing learners with model answers

Dube described how some teachers “taught [the same] question paper” (ER+) that would be used as an assessment. Another ECT, Phumzile, revealed that some teachers compromised the integrity of the assessments by writing “formal assessment memos for upcoming [assessment] on the board” (ER+). The struggle in this evidence is between

ECTs' developing conceptions of assessment integrity and unethical assessment practices. Both the accounts by Dube and Phumzile show that in some instances teachers in their school contexts may be compensating for the learners' lack of content. These also reveal instances of unethical and unfair assessment practices being employed by some teachers, which compromise the very purpose of schooling—to enhance learners' understanding of various subjects.

iv) Setting questions that are far too easy

The ECTs in this study regard the quality of assessments as important in promoting learning. As such, some observations suggest that a compromise in assessment quality affects learning and reluctant compliance with prevalent practices. For instance, Tshidi expressed concern about the pressure in their school to “constantly need to dumb down work in order for the weak learners to pass.” There may be little understanding of the support programmes and efforts enacted in the schools for academically struggling students. As such, support for academically struggling learners (“weak learners”) could be deemed as counter-quality. Nevertheless, these accounts describe some of the prevalent assessment practices that are unethical and unfair, and that compromise the standards and quality of assessments altogether.

ECTs' awareness of the necessity for ethical and valid assessment practices reveal strong knowledge convictions entwined with their educative aspirations. Yet, systemic pressures exert a profound influence over their decision-making processes, leading to reluctant compliance with unsatisfactory practices. These dynamics reinforce the significance of context in shaping educational experiences for ECTs. Despite possessing new pedagogical ideals formed during their teacher education journey, the contrasting practices observed in schools compel them to navigate intricate power imbalances that often constrain their agency. In essence, they are caught in a dichotomy of aspiring to implement quality assessments while feeling constrained by existing norms that do not align with their values. ECTs' empowerment would be in realising their potential, which is essential for educational institutions. The priorities of ECTs are concentrated in pedagogic and assessment practices; this evidence could reveal what informs and drives their own practices.

5.6 Ethical and Professional Conduct Dispositions in Teaching Contexts

In this section, the discussion highlights the ECTs' ethical and professional conduct dispositions in their teaching contexts. The findings show that 15 out of 101 ECT responses and 10 individual interview participants' responses show that the ECTs are critical of some of the ethical conduct of educators they work with. The analysis discussion advances the following arguments: i) ECTs subscribe to explicit and implicit professional and accountability standards; ii) For ECTs, 'rules' matter and iii) teaching and learning are the core of ECTs' mandates.

The participants' findings in the survey and interviews demonstrate an awareness of how their communities of practice are formed. The data indicate that ECTs possess a certain level of understanding regarding what behaviour is deemed acceptable and what should be discouraged in the teaching profession. As such, there are evident struggles between ECTs' held ideals about professionalism and the prevalent professionalism practices in contexts. The aspects raised by ECTs encompassed a range of issues, including conduct within the classroom, conduct within the school community, and overall professional behaviour. The school setting plays a crucial role in shaping the work of teachers and has the potential to influence a teacher's identity.

The findings from this study reveal a significant disconnect between the professional ideals held by ECTs and the practices they observe in their school contexts. This disparity does not merely show the struggles of ECTs regarding classroom management, like absenteeism and late arrival; instead, it reflects a deeper engagement with the concept of professional and ethical conduct, which shapes their developing identities as teachers. The data indicate that ECTs often grapple with covert resistance to observed behaviours among their peers. Despite expressing concerns about issues such as "teachers not attending classes" or neglecting "contact time," they frequently internalise their frustrations rather than confronting these dilemmas directly. David's observation regarding teachers who "neglect contact time" in favour of "other activities" illustrates a fundamental clash between the values ECTs associate with teaching and the actions they witness. This situation demonstrates an understanding of a view of professionalism that is not always mirrored in their lived experiences at school.

The reluctance to challenge these norms suggests a weakened social power of ECTs. They feel compelled to align with the prevailing practices rather than advocating for adherence

to what they believe constitutes appropriate professional behaviour. For instance, Musa's reflection that "learners that come from other teachers' classes lack knowledge because some teacher does not attend his periods" highlights his awareness of accountability but simultaneously reveals a reluctance to address absenteeism overtly. The conflicting observations about the casual disregard for professional obligations, such as "teachers returning to class late," signal a significant concern regarding the integrity of professional identity within schools. Khulekani's observation points to a normalisation of such behaviours, which he views as detrimental to the profession. This struggle reflects a commonly shared desire for higher standards of professionalism paired with systemic barriers that discourage pedagogical responsibilities. As reflected in the accounts of several ECTs, there exists a belief that the actions of all staff members critically influence educational outcomes. Bongani's assertion that "if [educators] were to fix the conduct of educators, [he] believes that [they] can be able to get the results that [they] want" underscores their recognition of collective responsibility within the teaching context. Gugu's reference to the "lack on issues of conduct," including the unprofessional demeanour displayed by some teachers, reinforces this sentiment. These assertions demonstrate a stronger social relation (SR+) and weaker epistemic relation (ER-), where the ECT posits his belief in adhering to professional conduct and ethical standards among all teachers as paramount for achieving desired learning outcomes. However, the struggle remains, as ECTs' notions of accountability are still largely based on external observations rather than a collaborative response urging change. While some ECTs display awareness of expected standards, their struggle against prevalent practices poses risks to their agency and effectiveness.

5.7 Professional Learning

In nine out of the 101 responses, ECTs highlight struggles they have regarding their own professional development in their schools. The first part of the discussion will focus on the mentorship of ECTs and the second part will look into the professional development opportunities in their school environment.

5.7.1 Mentorship of Early career teachers

While some ECTs express a strong desire for a supportive professional environment characterised by communal practice, their experiences indicate varying degrees of

fulfilment regarding mentorship and guidance. Initially, it is crucial to recognise that ECTs like Fatima and Irvine actively seek out collaborative environments. Fatima's recounted a compliment, "We like this quality [trait] in this young woman, so let us work with it, let us see where we can go." Irvine further emphasised the importance of collaboration when he stated, "There is a culture of working together and exchanging ideas." His experience signifies a situation that is shaped by the collective knowledge-sharing among peers, which facilitates his ability to approach fellow teachers for support and insights. Thus, both Fatima's and Irvine's accounts suggest enabling environments that seek to increase their professional agency through an institutional community of practice.

In contrast, other ECTs are confronted by a contextual reality marked by insufficient mentorship and guidance. Gugu articulated the frustrations felt by many others when she observed, "There is so much lack in terms of teacher induction." Zakes' high expectations are similarly unmet as he noted a deficiency in senior staff support, stating, "There is not enough support from senior staff in [helping me] adjust in the school as a new teacher." Patrick's comment about "a lack of support from the management" underscores a potential gap in leadership and systemic responsibility, which impairs the overall development trajectory of ECTs. Bongani's recommendation that schools must set goals and provide adequate support reinforces the understanding that effective management plays a pivotal role in fostering professional growth for ECTs. This sentiment reflects weaker epistemic relations (ER-) wherein a specific disconnect exists between the expectations of comprehensive induction and the actual support offered in their contexts. However, the absence of structured induction processes for new teachers suggests systemic failures, leaving some ECTs unclear about their roles and expectations, enacting a relativist code (ER-, SR-). And where interactions with knowledgeable peers could significantly enhance ECTs' professional learning, the evidence demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+). When this support is lacking, it leads to feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and diminished agency as ECTs struggle to establish their professional identities amidst overwhelming dilemmas. Further examination suggests that the role of school management is critical in shaping ECTs' experiences.

The overarching theme is one of agency creation versus limitation. For the ECTs in this study, the quality of support systems directly influences their capacity to enact best

practices and engage fully in their roles. Kabelo's insights highlight another dimension, that is, that mentorship should be meaningful rather than superficial. Her assertion that "a mentor must be a person who is inspired to do what [they] are expected to do" points to the necessity for thoughtful, intentional mentorship programmes over mere procedural compliance. This indicates a complex interplay between stronger social relations (SR+) and weaker epistemic relations (ER-) in that there is a personal view of ineffective mentorship, which compromises mentorship. The struggles detailed by these ECTs collectively emphasise perceived fundamental gaps in support systems for their professional development. An effective mentorship programme, grounded in genuine relationships and well-defined expectations, can catalyse ECTs' growth. However, the current experiences of these ECTs appear insufficient, leading to underdeveloped understandings of pedagogical expectations in specific contexts. The implications of these perceptions extend beyond individual teachers, calling into question the integrity of school frameworks designed to nurture new teachers. When adequately supported, these ECTs can harness their aspirations and talents to contribute meaningfully to the teaching contexts. Conversely, when support is absent, their professional agency becomes constrained, forcing them to operate within restrictive confines that hinder their progress and impact.

5.7.2 Development Opportunities for ECTs

The findings indicate a significant divergence between the aspirations of ECTs and the realities they face in their schools, particularly concerning professional development opportunities. Some ECTs expressed a strong desire both to receive guidance and to contribute to professional development opportunities. However, this enthusiasm is met with notable barriers, primarily exclusionary practices. Themba's remark, "Young teachers are not given opportunities in leadership, the management or teaching certain grades," encapsulates the substantial frustration felt by many, but not all, ECTs. This account demonstrates a situation wherein institutional structures limit access to leadership roles, thus sidelining younger teachers from participating more fully in their professional environments. The perception suggests a power differential within the school that results in an inequitable distribution of responsibility and opportunity based on seniority rather than merit, desire or capability. Glen echoed this sentiment, pointing out that "most of grade 12 classes are given to senior experienced teachers." Here, we witness a reported

practice that ECTs perceive as marginalising and illustrative of the hierarchical nature of roles within teaching contexts. This indicates a case wherein knowledge and experience become conflated with access to higher-grade classes, thereby stifling opportunities for ECTs to develop their pedagogical skills and grow within their careers. Preference given to established teachers, as noted by two other ECTs, deepens the sense of exclusion, individually and collectively undermining the professional identities of young teachers.

Despite these obstacles, some ECTs display an eagerness to take on greater responsibilities and demonstrate their capabilities within the school community. Yet this ambition often meets reluctance from established colleagues and administrative staff, which leads to a paradox where some ECTs feel competent but concurrently lack recognition. Themba's statement about young teachers being "stuck in PL1 positions" poignantly captured this dilemma, suggesting that systemic constraints prevent ECTs from progressing in their career trajectories. Their professional agency is further complicated by a recognition that, although they may perceive themselves as capable peers of experienced teachers, there exists a norm that prioritises established teachers over novice teachers in leadership contexts. This dual narrative showcases the discord between self-perception and institutional legitimisation, where some ECTs must navigate a complex web of expectations versus practical realities. The desire for active involvement extends beyond personal advancement, which means that some ECTs also seek to influence their educational environments positively. Glen's belief that "novice teachers can also be given a chance" reflects an underlying assertion of professional agency, yearning for autonomy, and engagement in decision-making processes. He argues for sharing ideas during meetings, which reveals covert resistance against marginalisation. Unfortunately, despite this willingness, participation remains unjustifiably restricted, leading to frustration among these teachers.

There is a code clash, where ECTs seek to enact knower codes, but the institution does not permit it. This dynamic is mirrored in Hlobisile's expression of suppressed voice. She stated, "We have a lot of things to say, we have a lot of things to say about our own leader and colleagues, but as a new teacher I am not free to talk about." Here we observe stronger social relations (SR+) characterised by an individual lack of trust and communication between this ECT and the prevailing leadership, which is an atmosphere that stifles open discourse; here feeling unheard and disempowered. Cebo's reference to "not having a

voice” illustrates a profound disconnect between the aspirations of some ECTs and the collegial engagement expected within professional learning communities. These ECTs want to contribute meaningfully to the evolution of educational practices; however, the barriers they face show profound deficiencies in how schools nurture and harness the potential of all teachers. The existence of exclusionary practices compromises both individual growth and communal knowledge-building, ultimately impacting the quality of teaching and learning outcomes.

ECTs Interaction with Prevalent Teaching Practices: Basis of Legitimation

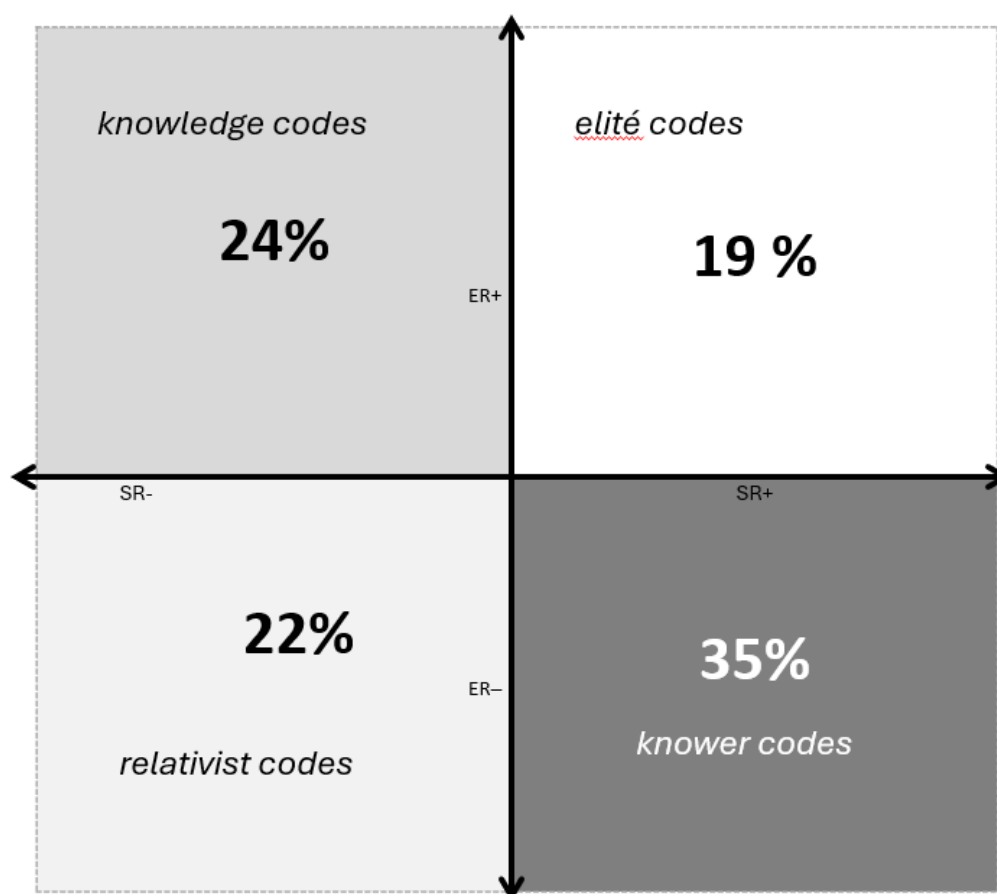
One of the key insights that emerged in this analysis is the foregrounded social relations (SR) and epistemic relations (ER) around the struggles ECTs have between their own priorities and prevalent practices. In the issues raised by ECTs, I established the kind of priorities that take precedence in ECTs’ journeys. These underpinning codes of ECTs’ issues of priority are summarized in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1 Specialisation codes governing the ways ECTs position themselves in relation to prevalent schooling and classroom practices.

Epistemic Relations (ER)	Social Relations (SR)	Code	Prevalence
weaker (ER-)	stronger (SR+)	knower codes	35%
weaker (SR-)	stronger (ER+)	knowledge codes	24%
stronger (ER+)	stronger (SR+)	elite codes	19%
weaker (ER-)	weaker (SR-)	relativist codes	22%

The majority of the ECTs in the study base their teaching practices and decisions on dispositions, emphasising stronger social relations (SR+) and weaker epistemic relations (ER-) as demonstrated in Figure 5.2. This indicates that a significant number of ECTs entered teaching with a strong desire to address social issues and transform their communities, drawing on their personal histories and experiences to shape their approach.

Figure 5.2 Specialisation Plane for Prevalent Practices in Teaching Contexts: Legimation Codes



ECTs' development as excellent knowledge practitioners is critical to initiating change and epitomises the dual agendas they embody—professional and social. The aspirations and ideals foregrounded by ECTs are predominately enacting a knower code where there are weaker epistemic relations and stronger social relations and (ER-, SR+). The aspirations of ECTs are interwoven with two dominant agendas: a *social agenda*, which manifests in the various roles that teachers play as community builders in their classroom, schools and societies, and a *professional agenda*, which manifests most strongly in being a subject specialist and mediating its knowledge. Where both agendas coexist, the evidence suggests the struggles experienced by ECTs with professional practices often reflect a concern with the long-term empowerment of learners through education. ECTs arrive with a vision of the ideal educator they aspire to be, shaped by personal and contextual influences. Many ECTs share a profound commitment to effecting societal change through their roles in the classroom and beyond. The evidence foregrounds weaker epistemic relations and stronger social relations (ER-, SR+), enacting a knower code.

The motivations of many ECTs are deeply rooted in their backgrounds and lived experiences. ECTs in this study foreground their humble beginnings and are driven to create better opportunities for others from similar circumstances, emphasising social relations (SR+). They deem the school as a vital institution with the potential to reshape society positively. For these educators, being a teacher transcends the act of instruction; they see themselves as active agents capable of influencing their learners' life trajectories and preparing them for future challenges. In the narratives of these ECTs, a recurring theme emerges: their resolve for transformative action in an educationally-just schooling system. Classrooms are envisioned not solely as places for academic learning but as nurturing environments for personal growth and emotional support. This understanding highlights the importance of the hidden curriculum, which instils values and morals while helping students build resilience against socio-economic challenges.

Simultaneously, the emphasis on the professional agenda shapes ECTs as knowledgeable subject specialists. Their dedication to enlightening students fulfils a personal sense of purpose, as illustrated by participant Hlobisile, who finds joy in guiding her students towards understanding. The ECTs' evidence foregrounds stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and stronger social relations (SR+), in which the outcome they seek becomes the basis of the aspiration. Such connectivity fosters passionate and informed educators who strive to elevate the quality of learning experiences. However, many ECTs express frustration with traditional teaching methodologies that dominate their current environments. They often feel disconnected from their formative educational experiences that shaped their expectations of engagement. This is exemplified by their call for innovative teaching strategies and to embrace best practices rather than conforming to prescriptive guidelines. This situation highlights the need to mediate knowledge effectively while prioritising approaches that emphasise understanding, engagement, and enthusiasm over rote memorisation.

ECTs in this study are caught in a complex web of expectations and dilemmas as they strive to integrate into established educational systems. Central to their experiences are the policies that shape operational frameworks within schools. However, findings revealed that many ECTs find themselves at odds with these prescribed directives, particularly regarding learner progression policies and annual teaching plans. An ongoing concern among ECTs is the pressure to promote students regardless of their mastery. The

evidence indicates stronger social relations (SR+) and stronger epistemic relations (ER+), enacting a knowledge code. ECTs in this study highlight a conflict, where there is an emphasis on the need to maintain academic integrity amidst administrative expectations that can compromise foundational knowledge. Similarly, Tebello voiced his critique of policies designed to “pass one, pass all,” arguing such emphasises a relativist code (ER-, SR-).

The pressures of compliance create a paradox for ECTs in this study; on one hand, some resort to passive resistance towards stringent regulations, while on the other, they hold a steadfast commitment to academic rigour. This dynamic indicates a desire for dialogue that honours flexibility and emphasises the relevance of policies in real-world contexts. Furthermore, concerns about certificate validity and departmental accountability expose systemic issues that underscore the tensions between policy and classroom realities. In addition to policy enforcement, ECTs face quality-of-life challenges impacting their teaching experiences. These range from inadequate infrastructure to insufficient resources, leading to substantial obstacles in executing effective instruction. The lack of implementation of optimal teacher-learner ratios exacerbates feelings of forced compliance, as many educators struggle against the overwhelming challenge of overcrowded classrooms. These ECTs note how these inadequacies deeply affect instructional quality, leaving ECTs feeling disappointed by structural limitations beyond their control.

The culmination of these pressures often hinders inclusivity, provoking introspective conversations regarding adequate support mechanisms. ECTs report several shortcomings, including ineffective time management and a lack of structure that disrupts daily teaching flows. Specific incidents reveal procedural breakdowns that contribute to institutional instability, further alienating staff whose pedagogical philosophies diverge from administrative practices. The onboarding processes, ideally intended to cultivate an understanding of holistic objectives, frequently fall short, limiting opportunities for establishing professional accountability. Compounding these frustrations, many ECTs navigate discipline management within challenging environments, where authority dynamics complicate learner support needs. Deficiencies in institutional backing make it difficult to establish consistent classroom norms, exposing contradictions in power relations between learners and educators. This balancing act requires sensitivity to

community influences while addressing unique disciplinary methodologies, an effort made more challenging by external societal factors. ECTs express a readiness to govern through enforcement models, yet they acknowledge the space for empathy necessary to address complex circumstances. The burdens they perceive often distort their confidence, fostering division within their teaching environments. Ultimately, collective efforts toward solidarity among colleagues can create conducive learning structures, enhancing mutual participation amidst adversity.

As ECTs grapple with the realities of established educational practices, they often find themselves resistant to traditional lesson frameworks that fail to adequately respond to the nuanced learning needs of their students. Many participants foreground stronger social relations (SR+) as they share frustrations regarding reliance on textbook pedagogies that do not elevate classroom discourse or engagement. This stagnation proliferates due to superficial understandings that neglect deeper explorations of content. The conflicts inherent within current assessment methodologies further complicate ECTs' efforts to enact meaningful progress. ECTs in this study articulated grievances surrounding ethics in collaborative standards, pointing to practices that merely serve external interests at the expense of genuine learning outcomes. Critics argue that these assessments reinforce negligence toward measuring student capacity, misleadingly legitimising performances against outdated metrics and hindering progressive educational frameworks. Emerging themes highlight an urgent call for stakeholders to seek harmonisation within assessments that prioritise fairness and reflect broader educational ambitions. ECTs aspire to create inclusive, expansive futures for their learners—one where diverse skills and innovative initiatives cultivate an environment of non-exclusionary pathways. Ultimately, the narratives of ECTs demonstrate the intricate interplay between their aspirations and the external structures influencing their pedagogical practices. Their perceptions show the necessity for ongoing evaluations focused on granting learners access to richer learning experiences that transcend mere knowledge transmission. By bridging identified gaps through community-of-practice-oriented innovations, ECTs strive for sustainable reforms that resonate beyond their immediate constraints.

In sum, this analysis has clarified the enabling and restricting factors faced by ECTs in actualising their pedagogical ambitions. The aspirations of ECTs in this study are characterised by the interplay between community-building and knowledge-mediated

agendas. Achieving transformational success requires these new educators to integrate social consciousness with disciplinary expertise. Recognising these intertwined motivations becomes crucial to understanding the obstacles ECTs face amid entrenched educational practices. As they navigate this landscape, their efforts represent a promising avenue for fostering impactful change within the South African education system.

Chapter Summary: The interplay between ECTs' perceptions, and teaching practice priorities

Chapter 5 delved into the perceptions of ECTs regarding factors enabling or constraining their capacity to implement their ideal teaching practices within their school contexts. The data were based on a survey conducted with 101 ECTs, supplemented by in-depth interviews with ten individuals. The summary of the main findings is outline in the table 5.2 below.

Table 5.2 Summary of Main Findings: Enabling and Restricting Factors in Practice

Level	ECT Aspiration/Ideal Practice	Key Challenge/Restricting Factor	Mechanism of Resistance/Coping
Personal	Ideal Self: Viewing teaching as an avenue for societal change, focusing on morals and social ills, and being an excellent subject specialist.	The overwhelming social baggage of learners and communities restricts focus to basic academic demands.	Internal Conflicts and/or Passive Resistance: The disconnect between high ethical expectations and the unprofessional behaviours observed among peers leads to internal conflicts, often resolved by opting for passive resistance rather than confrontation.
Micro/Meso (Practices)	Ideal Pedagogy: Advocating for learner-centred and progressive methods, and utilizing technology (ICTs) for enhanced engagement.	Resistance to Change: Colleagues' reluctance to adopt new methods, dependence on traditional tools, and the perpetuation of outdated instructional modes.	Frustrated Agency: ECTs feel their professional agency is constrained by prevalent practices, despite exhibiting signs of resistance. Their ideal pedagogy frequently clashes with ineffective practices.
Meso (Assessment)	Ideal Assessment: Commitment to fair, ethical, and valid evaluations that truly reflect comprehensive student understanding.	Compromised Integrity: Practices that prioritize passing rates over genuine learning, such as "teaching to the test," assessing content never covered, or "dumbing down" work.	Voicing Concerns: ECTs express frustration and advocate for evaluation methods that maintain academic standards and reflect actual student capabilities.
School Support	Ideal Support: The need for effective mentorship, formal induction, and opportunities to contribute to professional learning (PL).	Inadequate Support Structures: A disparity between ECTs' ambitions and the support provided, often manifesting as a lack of formal mentorship or superficial, exclusionary support practices.	Seeking External Capital: The desire to improve confidence and communal practice is often hindered by the unmet need for effective mentor relationships.

The chapter's exploration revealed the aspirations of ECTs as they navigate their initial experiences in the teaching profession. ECTs enter the profession with a vision to become effective educators and agents of social change. Many express a commitment to using education as a means for community development, influenced by their personal backgrounds and societal challenges. They articulate a desire to expand students' prospects beyond academics, emphasising the importance of moral instruction and

character development. Examples from participants highlight this dedication to transformative education, echoing sentiments from leaders like Nelson Mandela. In addition to social ambitions, ECTs are focused on their roles as subject specialists. They find fulfilment in facilitating learning and stimulating critical thinking among students. Their reflections reveal a balance between seeking immediate satisfaction through student interaction and long-term growth in their subject expertise. Influences from past educational experiences often shape their teaching philosophies and methodologies. ECTs reported varying responses towards prevalent practices in their school environments, ranging from adaptation to outright resistance. The analysis categorised issues into different levels, addressing macro (school leadership), meso (classroom practices), and micro (teacher conduct) influences on ECTs' ability to realise their teaching ideals. Key concerns included policy compliance, classroom management, and resource availability.

The enforcement of policies such as learner progression can conflict with ECTs' ideological commitments, creating tensions between professional standards and administrative directives. Observations revealed reluctance amongst ECTs to confront these policies directly, affecting their teaching effectiveness. Challenges related to inadequate resources and overcrowded classrooms strain ECTs' capacities to engage effectively with students. Despite recognising systemic issues contributing to these conditions, ECTs often feel compelled to comply with the status quo without actively challenging it. Effective governance emerged as a crucial factor impacting ECTs' experiences. Support from SMTs influence their job performance and sense of agency. Issues such as poor planning, lack of mentorship, and indirect communication hinder ECTs' motivation and effectiveness, emphasising a need for constructive engagement and collaboration. ECTs expressed significant concern over pedagogical approaches dominant within their schools, particularly traditional, teacher-centred methods that do not align with their ideals. While many seek to adopt modern teaching techniques, they often experience friction from long-standing practices entrenched within their institutional frameworks. Struggles exist as ECTs attempt to implement innovative strategies in environments resistant to change.

Though many ECTs desire to integrate digital methodologies, evidence suggests they still often comply with prevalent pedagogical norms, whether due to the unavailability of resources or institutional disinterest. For instance, some ECTs express frustration with

being constrained by their school environments, evidenced in their commentary on the insufficient integration of technology within existing practices. This complex intertwining of advocacy and compliance serves as an important point when examining their professional agency. While ECTs possess innovative ideas shaped by their educational experiences, external pressures, including the availability of resources and organisational expectations, significantly restrict their willingness and ability to implement these new methodologies consistently. The findings underscore a key struggle for ECTs as they attempt to fuse their teacher education capital with the realities of traditional classroom practices. Their struggles reveal an ongoing need to construct their identity; they are supposed to be advocates for change yet they are simultaneously compliant participants in established teaching contexts. In essence, their professional agency, despite exhibiting signs of resistance, often feels constrained by prevalent practices that perpetuate what they think are outdated modes of instruction.

Their aspirations for engaging pedagogy frequently clash with prevalent instructional methods viewed as ineffective. Despite being trained in integrating technology into teaching, ECTs face barriers due to colleagues' reluctance to adopt these methods. Many view this older generation's dependence on traditional tools as a limitation to enhancing engagement and meeting contemporary educational demands. ECTs voice concerns over assessment practices that prioritise test scores over comprehensive understanding. They express frustration with compromised integrity in assessments while advocating for fair evaluation methods that truly reflect student capabilities. There is a strong awareness of professional ethics that shape ECTs' reflections on teacher conduct. The disconnect between their ethical expectations and observed behaviours among peers leads to internal conflicts, with many opting for passive resistance rather than overt confrontation. ECTs report struggles related to mentorship and professional development opportunities, revealing a disparity between their ambitions and the support provided within their schools. Effective mentor relationships can positively impact their confidence and communal practice, but these relationships often fall short.

Chapter 6: ECTs' reasons for joining specific unions

Joining a teachers' union is a significant step for ECTs as they begin their professional careers. Unions claim to offer a range of benefits and support systems that can potentially help ECTs navigate the struggles they face as they transition into the teaching profession. However, the union choice requires consideration of options and a decision that might be based on very different grounds. The survey and interviews show that the union membership of the sampled ECTs who have joined a union is spread across South Africa's teacher unions, as illustrated in Appendix C. In this chapter, I begin by analysing the content and communication strategies utilised by SADTU and NAPTOSA, I aim to highlight the underlying principles that may generally guide ECTs in aligning themselves with one particular union rather than another.

I then analyse the survey and interview data on ECTs' reasons for selecting and joining specific teachers' unions. Of the 101 data points from the survey and 10 interviews, 87 relevant and reliable data points were analysed. I use constellation analysis from LCT to identify the nodes of relevant factors, the clusters of meaning, and the value they ascribe to various positions. This gives me a way to map out the various considerations that guide their choices, including the union's values, services, reputation, peer recommendations, and membership benefits. This chapter will address the question of how ECTs enact their sense of agency in their choice of union and their involvement in unionised activity. The data findings showed that ECTs position themselves differently in their view of unions, with some charging the unions positively (valued), negatively (vilified), and neutrally, which is neither regarded as positive nor negative. The first level of analysis reveals the focus of legitimation, that is, the distinct reasons ECTs provide for joining teacher unions. These can be clustered into four main constellations: *seeking protection*; *seeking alignment* with personal core values and priorities; *seeking strategic association* with a dominant union in their school context, and *seeking opportunities for professional learning*.

The constellations are made of nodes such as ideas, perceptions, and beliefs held by ECTs on various parts of the educational system and stakeholders that are pulled together (linked) to form clusters of meaning that in some way, influence ECTs' decision to join one union rather than another. It is important to note that ECTs' justifications for their decisions may have several reasons that are not equally important in priority. I show how

each cluster is developed and variably emphasised, showing the prevalence of common priorities amongst ECTs. By analysing the constellation of ideas and practices among ECTs, we can gain insights into the underlying motivations behind their choices of unions. The second level of analysis reveals the *basis of legitimation*. The chapter will show varying strengths of epistemic relations (ER) and social relations (SR) of the reasons ECTs provided for their decision to join specific unions and not others. The themes reflected in the data indicate that the predominant concerns of ECTs primarily pertain to values, beliefs, and ethics in their roles as teachers, followed closely by epistemological matters focused on knowledge and professional practice. The sections will demonstrate the specialisation codes that ECTs enact when choosing a teacher union.

6.1 SADTU and NAPTOSA Recruitment

In this section, I analyse the epistemic relations (ER) and social relations (SR) that manifest within the primary constellations, developed their manifesto, constitution and supporting documents, represented by South Africa's two major teacher unions: SADTU and NAPTOSA. By examining these strengths and how they intersect with one another, I aim to uncover the specialisation codes that are enacted through the content of union documents. Understanding these codes is crucial for interpreting the basis on which some union ideals and messages resonate with particular ECTs. The strategic vision and mission statements contained in SADTU's and NAPTOSA's documents serve as reflections of the broader aims and philosophies of each union but also as tools for attracting new members.

6.1.1 South African Democratic Union Recruitment

This interpretation analyses the specialisation codes that shape SADTU's significance for ECTs as they navigate their professional agency within this politically charged landscape.

a) Membership Identity

SADTU's recruitment strategy foregrounds its history which is inextricably linked to South Africa's socio-political evolution. In its documentation, SADTU emphasises both its historical roots and its present-day political affiliations to political organisations such as COSATU and the ANC. Emphasising SADTU's commitment to its foundational principles of transformation and equality in education, the union states that "SADTU is one of the affiliate unions of COSATU... in alliance with the ANC, SACP, and SANCO"

signifying a cooperative network aimed at wielding collective strength. This historic cornerstone is reinforced through the mention of the founding date, “6th of October in 1990,” (SADTU, 2001, Section 1), a momentous occasion that resonates with South Africans, which was the official start of the process of ending Apartheid with the unbanning of organisations such as the ANC and trade unions. Such references demonstrate an educational agenda informed by socio-political awareness and rooted in a legacy of resistance against apartheid education structures. By claiming legitimacy based on its struggle history and political affiliates, this part of the messages transmitted by SADTU to existing and new members enacts weaker epistemic relations (ER-) and stronger social relations (SR+), embodying a *knower code*.

By asserting its political stance, SADTU positions itself not just as a teacher’s union but as a pivotal actor in broader societal transformation. This complexity is particularly significant when considering how ECTs perceive their professional agency amidst such well-established political frameworks. The assertions made by COSATU President Sidumo Dlamini, stating, “It is you who have built SADTU into an organization which represents an intellectual reservoir where revolutionary ideas for the transformation of education are generated,” (SADTU, 2011, Extract from a speech) further solidify SADTU’s role as an incubator for progressive educational ideologies. This will resonate with ECTs who seek to break away from conservative teaching methods associated with past injustices.

SADTU’s commitment to eradicating discrimination and fostering democratic education is encapsulated in its mission statements and constitutional mandates. The emphasis on the principles involving “eradicat[ing] all forms of discrimination in the education environment... and launch[ing] a transformative programme of National Reconstruction and Development” (ER+) reiterates an extensive framework designed to achieve justice and equality. In quoting the SADTU constitution, it becomes apparent that the union expects conformity to established ideologies, stating, “All decisions taken by higher structures are binding,” highlighting the primacy of organisational unity. This has implications for ECTs, who must reconcile their individuality with collective expectations. Such directives can reinforce a sense of community among seasoned members while simultaneously hindering the integration of fresh perspectives brought by ECTs. The declaration that “No member with his or her own ideology, theory, and

discipline shall be permitted” (ER-, SR-) further establishes an atmosphere wherein diverse viewpoints may struggle for validation, igniting frustration among ECTs yearning for space to assert their ideas.

The ability of SADTU to mobilise its members around these political ideologies reflects a leadership dynamic rooted in collaborative vision-building. Importantly, ECTs become part of this collective identity, affirming their place within a broader narrative while grappling with the implications of established practices they may feel compelled to question or critique. The relationship between SADTU and the ANC, while often supportive, reveals critical tensions when Dlamini warns about not being silent: “We [are not] going to be silent when we can see that our movement is committing mistakes.” This articulation indicates stronger social relations (SR+) and weaker epistemic relations (ER-), enacting a knower code, one where dissent is possible and correction is valued. The code is characterised by a nuanced tension, whereby SADTU must balance loyalty with accountability, which is a delicate dance that directly impacts ECTs. For ECTs, navigating this duality can lead to confusion regarding their agency and voice. They desire to contribute to transformative educational practices yet might find themselves constrained by the union’s overarching allegiance to allied political entities who are essentially their employees. Consequently, the perceived duty to remain aligned with SADTU’s ethos may inhibit their ability to articulate their voice or propose innovative changes, anchoring them in a state of reluctant compliance. In addressing their grievances with the ANC, there remains an implicit expectation that ranks should tighten around party lines. This can alienate younger members eager to enact change, thereby complicating their agency within both the union and their schools.

SADTU understands its role as extending beyond the boundaries of traditional educational environments, demonstrated through campaigns like “I am a school fan,” (SR+) aimed at creating safe school communities. This reflects a conceptual framework where the campaign projects a desired identity, and this stance has stronger social relations (SR+), encouraging community solidarity. ECTs participating in such initiatives may recognise opportunities to assert their agency in advocating for safe and inclusive educational settings. Yet, their involvement might still feel limited due to overarching union narratives focusing more on systemic politics than individual teacher empowerment. As ECTs grapple with their professional identities within SADTU, their experiences can underscore

a complex interplay between organisational mandates and personal aspirations. The robust political orientation of SADTU provides a rich backdrop for teachers inclined towards social justice; however, it can also act as a constraint for those whose visions diverge from established norms.

To cultivate a genuinely participatory space, there is a need to navigate tensions inherent in SADTU's political alliances while also creating meaningful dialogue that invites ECTs into leadership roles. A re-engagement with the values underpinning its founding principles, coupled with recognition of the fresh perspectives ECTs bring, could enrich SADTU's mission and enhance the agency of newcomers into the profession. As the union evolves, prioritising the upliftment of the voices of all members, including ECTs, will be crucial for enabling sustainable transformation in the South African education system.

b) Protection

SADTU's stated commitment to "defend and represent their members" serves as a cornerstone of its identity, articulating not only a service philosophy but also framing its relational dynamics with members. The metaphor that SADTU "acts like a big brother in the education environment" demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+), positioning themselves in terms of a family relationship—a union that looks after its own, emphasising belonging to a group identity. Moreover, the use of phrases such as "jealously defends and represents" indicates a strong commitment to member advocacy that straddles both assertiveness and vigilance. This position is affirmed by the then Minister of Education's (Angie Motshekga, now former minister) description of SADTU as a "revolutionary union that prides itself on fighting for the underdogs" which further situates the union within a progressive socio-political context. It further elaborated by COSATU President Sidumo Dlamini's statement that "you have built this union into a colossal fortress to which teachers run when they are under attack." This reflects stronger social relations (SR+) in that they build a communal bond among members who rely on SADTU as a protective entity against "any form of discrimination and unfair labour practices." Such language creates a sense of solidarity amongst members who might feel threatened, thus positioning the union as not just a representative body but a refuge for workers' rights. The positive endorsements from prominent figures within South African governance signal SADTU's robust positioning within societal structures.

SADTU's proactive stance on disciplinary matters highlights a core aspect of its protective mandate. The reference to representing members "during internal or external disciplinary enquiries" (ER+, SR-) underscores a critical element of their work, addressing issues of justice therein. As articulated, Strategic Objective 4 includes plans "to develop a strategy to represent members in cases of disciplinary matters," which suggests that the protocols are yet to be developed to strengthen some of its epistemic relations over time. This objective reveals how SADTU leverages knowledge and expertise concerning labour laws, policies, and workplace rights, thereby empowering members to navigate complex education sector issues. The intention to conduct policy reviews and train full-time shop stewards illustrates a commitment to building a knowledgeable cadre capable of defending members effectively. In so doing, SADTU enhances its epistemic capital while simultaneously bolstering members' confidence in union support, creating an environment where ECTs can pursue their professional aspirations with the backing of informed advocates.

SADTU's acknowledgment of legal representation and concerns for "our member's legal [standing] and welfare" emphasises the union's intent to engage with the complexities of labour law actively. The assertion that SADTU "protects workers from unfair dismissals and unfair labour practices" indicates an understanding of the broader implications of employment rights within the education system, showcasing the union's commitment to safeguarding against systemic injustices inflicted by the Department of Education. This focus on legal competencies demonstrates stronger epistemic relations (ER+), indicating knowledge construction around employment standards and employee rights against mismanagement by authorities. This is crucial for ECTs, since being represented in these legal contexts is important as they often face vulnerabilities related to job security and employer expectations during their early years in the profession. SADTU's stance empowers ECTs, affording them a sense of agency shaped by the collective strength of union membership, enabling them to advocate for fair treatment and counteract potential threats to their emerging careers.

ECTs' engagement with SADTU's protective mandate must navigate various issues shaping their professional identities. The union's comprehensive approach to representing members creates an environment conducive to challenging oppressive practices; however, it also shapes ECTs' agency within strict organisational mandates. While the union's

protective image reassures ECTs, the underlying expectation to align with SADTU's established ideologies could create tension for those seeking to challenge some of these ideologies. Despite this, ECTs can leverage the union's strengths by engaging proactively in discussions surrounding their professional development and advocating for policies that favour a constructive change in education. By positioning themselves within this network of support, ECTs can find paths to influence educational practices while knowing there is a formidable ally in SADTU to back them up. The union effectively positions itself as a crucial player in promoting worker rights and achieving transformative educational outcomes. However, navigating the complexities of allegiance to the union and personal agency will require ongoing dialogue to ensure that ECTs feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to their profession while benefitting from the supportive frameworks SADTU provides.

6.1.2 National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa recruitment

The findings regarding NAPTOSA provide insightful perspectives on teacher union dynamics, with particular emphasis on professionalism and the vision to provide quality education. In this section, I explore how NAPTOSA portrays and seeks to fulfil its mandate. This interpretation analyses the social relations (SR) and epistemic relations (ER) that shape how NAPTOSA articulate their priorities.

i) Professionalism and Quality Education

NAPTOSA's constitution declares the union to be "independent, autonomous and party politically non-aligned," committed to professionalism and prioritizing quality education." NAPTOSA thus positions itself as a stakeholder solely focused on the quality of education rather than supporting particular political agendas. This declaration enacts weaker epistemic relations and stronger social relations (ER-, SR+), embodying a knower code. Such framing can directly appeal to teachers' identities, asserting that being part of NAPTOSA means belonging to an organisation that values high standards in schooling irrespective of political affiliation. For ECTs, this would provide not only legitimacy to their career choice but also a peer community that reinforces the importance of professionalism through collective norms and practices.

The phrase “myriad of professional development programmes that are conducted every term” illustrates the union’s proactive stance towards providing opportunities for teachers’ continuous professional development. Such initiatives could address the needs of ECTs and foster a sense of belonging within a supportive community focused on mutual growth. NAPTOSA’s commitment to principles articulated as “the inalienable right of every child and student to quality education,” aligns organisational aims with moral imperatives governing teachers’ actions. By embedding these principles into recruitment and training materials, NAPTOSA demonstrates stronger epistemic relations (ER+) where the emphasis is on the specific knowledge endeavour in relation to the child.

Clauses like “assert the professional responsibility of teachers to guide learners and students” showcase a dual focus on both academic instruction and character-building. This highlights their expectation that teachers both transmit knowledge and serve as mentors who influence the broader societal fabric. Consequently, ECTs are encouraged to conceptualise their roles beyond direct instructional responsibilities; they are seen as agents of change contributing to the civic education of their learners. Moreover, NAPTOSA’s Charter emphasises standards of conduct such as “When we exercise professional judgement both duty and compassion shall inform our decisions” and “the needs and welfare of the individual learner must be of central importance.” This statement demonstrates both stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and stronger social relations (SR+) by underscoring the requisite knowledge and ethical frameworks that govern teachers’ decision-making processes, enacting an elite code. It suggests an expectation that teachers should employ both their professional training and empathetic understanding in their interactions with learners, which enhances their professional agency. For ECTs, this fusion could empower them by reinforcing their agency not only through acquired pedagogical knowledge but also through a commitment to humanising teaching practices. Furthermore, the call for integrity, “in all our actions and words,” stresses the importance of modelling values that contribute to a respectful and diverse learning environment. When the union promotes accountability and role-modeling, it helps ECTs envision pathways to embody the very ideals they are expected to uphold while simultaneously reinforcing their social roles as social actors within the workplace. The insistence on refraining from “improper or inappropriate relations with learners” signifies a critical boundary within the professional realm. This is important for ECTs to establish healthy interaction norms that protect both their learners, the professional and their own

professional standing. Such expectations can strengthen their professional agency while serving as a guideline for ethical behaviour aligned with union values.

Finally, NAPTOSA's commitment to enhancing the teaching profession is clearly stated in declarations such as "We take responsibility for the renewal and protection of our profession" (demonstrating stronger social relations, SR+). This essence of accountability speaks volumes about nurturing a professional culture devoted to self-improvement, advocacy, and respect. ECTs can internalise such expectations, recognising their potential impact on their profession and community. For example, the mantra of working "always to enhance our profession" not only serves as a motivational guideline but encourages reflective practice essential for anyone beginning their teaching journey. The call for humility and awareness of "our own frailty" (stronger social relations, SR+) indicates that professional growth is not merely linear but is a journey filled with learning experiences, aligning well with the needs of ECTs striving to establish themselves within schooling communities. The structure provided by NAPTOSA encourages new teachers to not just adhere to standards but also to act as dynamic agents of change, thereby creating a critical consideration for individual learners paired with a robust system for personal and professional development. This can give ECTs a sense of purpose and empowerment as they embark on their teaching careers.

a) Protection

NAPTOSA's focus on defense and representation reveals a dual strategy aimed at safeguarding the interests of its members. The first level encompasses immediate and individualised support, such as grievance resolutions, disciplinary hearings, and personal advocacy, "the first point of call when [a member is] in trouble." This direct emphasis on availability shows stronger social relations (SR+), demonstrating a commitment to individual teacher needs through easily accessible support structures. For ECTs, who may encounter numerous dilemmas during their early career stages, this accessibility enhances their sense of security within the profession. Conversely, while there is a pronounced commitment to individual member support, it lacks a tailored approach specifically designed for ECTs. The uniformity of support provided raises questions about how effectively the union addresses the distinctive concerns unique to ECTs. The knowledge required to support the specific developmental trajectory of ECTs may not be fully integrated into union messaging or services.

In addition, the second level of NAPTOSA's representation agenda focuses on collective negotiations with employers regarding conditions of service, salary negotiations, and workload. Phrasing such as "NAPTOSA can assist you in various matters... resolve your grievances" (SR+) highlights a proactive stance on addressing apparent issues in instances where conflicts arise. However, this broad framing again suggests a generalised remedy rather than one tailored specifically to the unique struggles of new teachers, which may limit their engagement with union narratives. The constitutional objectives that profess NAPTOSA's mission to "promote, protect and maintain the rights, status, and interests of its members" are critical in establishing an organised framework for understanding members' collective interests. This objective demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+) by foregrounding teachers, creating a shared identity around professional values. However, while these provisions underscore rights protection, they remain somewhat vague, especially regarding how NAPTOSA interprets and serves the distinct responsibilities or interests of ECTs.

Furthermore, the question arises regarding collective interests critically evaluated through the lens of ECTs. Without structured mentorship programmes or proactive messaging that speaks directly to the needs of these new teachers, the value proposition offered by NAPTOSA may seem diluted. Thus, while the structure exists for support and advocacy, there appears to be an undercurrent of disconnection regarding how effectively NAPTOSA facilitates genuine inclusion of ECTs into its ongoing efforts. Ultimately, NAPTOSA's approach demonstrates a comprehensive awareness of the broader dilemmas facing teachers but simultaneously highlights gaps that could limit the professional agency of ECTs. By emphasising member representation while not distinguishing particular strategies for new teachers, NAPTOSA runs the risk of failing to integrate ECTs into its advocacy narrative fully. Navigating these complexities requires NAPTOSA to build structured support that resonates with the unique experiences of new teachers, which will contribute positively to their professional growth, identity formation, and ultimately enhance their agency within the teaching profession.

6.2 Seeking Protection

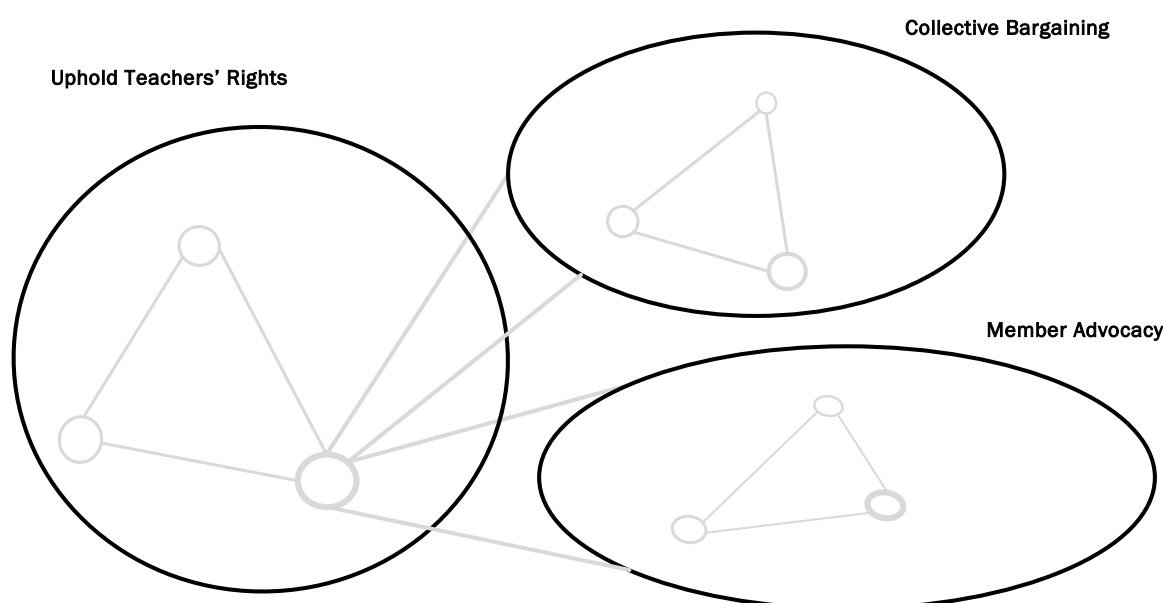
In this section, I will show how different nodes (ideas, beliefs, etc) that relate to seeking *protection* form clusters, and illustrate how these clusters contribute to an overall constellation of meaning that is influential in guiding the union choices of ECTs. Twenty-

one out of 86 reliable and relevant experiential data points (24%) highlight the significance of ECTs' perceptions regarding union protection when selecting a union to join.

The *seeking protection* constellation combines various elements that mostly relate to the teacher union's role in representing teacher members in labour-related matters and conflict issues. The general ideas and beliefs are that unions protect their members through their ability to 'assist with disputes', 'deter bad behaviour', 'provide security' and provide an environment where teachers are 'less likely to be bullied'. ECTs highlight that there are stakeholders in the education system from whom they may need protection. Consequently, ECTs believe that one way of getting that protection is through union membership. These ECTs view protection in different ways which results in different cluster of ideas under the same constellations. Three dominant clusters make up the protection constellation, that is, *collective bargaining*, *upholding teachers' rights*, and *member advocacy*. Under these clusters are the different orientations and reasons ECTs provide for joining particular unions.

Figure 6.1 below shows a general visual representation of the three clusters and illustrates the different key notions emphasised by ECTs regarding their perception of teacher unions as a means of seeking protection. These nodes under each cluster are visualised below to demonstrate the prevalence and frequency of the accounts. The prevalent links of ideas ECTs hold in this category are: unions advocating for the teaching profession, unions as allies in resisting exclusionary practices, and representation of teachers. In the next section, I will explore each group and show the connectedness of the ideas that form different clusters of meaning.

Figure 6.1 Constellation diagram showing nodes for clusters in the Seeking Protection Constellation



Under the group cluster, union for *collective bargaining*, the ECTs cited reasons relating to the unions' ability to use labour law understanding to hold employers accountable for employment contract terms and negotiate on behalf of its members. The second group cluster, unions as a *member advocacy*, focuses on the potential and actual conflict that arises within the school contexts. The key nodes in this cluster include the need to prevent marginalisation, victimisation, and protection from stakeholders that ECTs view as potentially a source of conflict. The third group cluster, unions as a means to *uphold teachers' rights*, is a cluster wherein ECTs seek the enforcement of conditions of service and ensuring fair processes and procedures regarding job interviews, and ensuring job security.

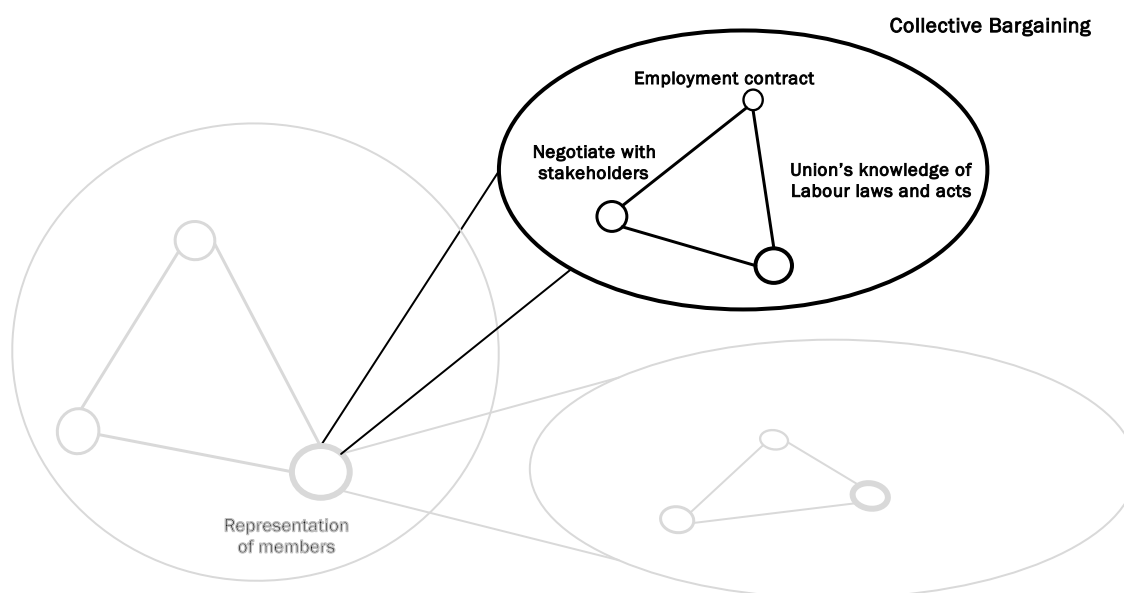
Eighteen out of 86 data points (21%) demonstrate that the focal point in ECTs union choices is on the union's knowledge of policies and labour laws, ability to negotiate with stakeholders, and assistance in protecting teachers' interests. The reasons ECTs give for protection are consistent, showing varying intensity of the same underlying issues. The findings show that the union's knowledge of policies and labour laws is important in dealing with labour issues, the protection of the rights of teachers, and the protection from unfair practices. Union expertise on labour laws serves as a basis for ECTs' unions choices

that seek the benefits of *collective bargaining, member advocacy, and upholding teachers' rights*.

6.2.1 Collective Bargaining

The justifications for ECTs' subscription to unions are related to the union's knowledge capital. In these pursuits, teacher unions are seen as entities capable of managing teachers' potential and addressing emerging dilemmas in key areas, such as labour-related issues, enforcing conditions of service, and labour negotiations. In the bargaining role of teacher unions, evidence indicates that ECTs acknowledge and appreciate the authority of teacher unions to engage in discussions with stakeholders in the education sector and to enforce conditions of service, as demonstrated by the nodes in Figure 6.2. ECTs consider this role of the unions crucial to secure their interest at the government level and improve their working conditions. The evidence on these key areas leads to a convergence of meanings, focusing on *unions for collective bargaining* as a key determinant for ECTs' union choices.

Figure 6.2 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Collective Bargaining*



The findings also revealed that some ECTs are motivated to join teacher unions primarily because they provide a platform for voicing concerns. This dynamic demonstrates collective interests converging around central labour issues. ECTs view teacher unions as

pivotal in managing their professional dilemmas and addressing labour-related issues and negotiations. The confidence placed in unions to engage with stakeholders stems from an appreciation for their expertise and their understanding of employment laws and regulations. This perception shows that ECTs feel a sense of support and solidarity derived from unified representation. As illustrated by Luke's statement, "Unions help when [you] encounter labour issues," there is an inclination towards a union that is capable of not only defending but also empowering individual teachers through education about their rights, indicative of stronger epistemic relations (ER+) and stronger social relations (SR+). Ben further articulated this sentiment by saying that he appreciates how the union "stands to educate me about my rights and fights for my rights" (SR+). Here, the transferability of the union's knowledge capital becomes important and Ben believes that the education he acquires through the union enhances his agency and comprehension of rights within the educational space. Such sentiments reflect not merely reliance but rather a consciousness among ECTs as they develop a nuanced understanding of labour conditions and advocacy options available to them.

Regarding ECTs' concerns about difficulties that come with the power privileges of opposition stakeholders, there is an understanding that the efforts of the union allow them to be better teachers. These ECTs seem to align their professional development with the broader implications of union activities, particularly in negotiating better working conditions. Mbali argued, "You teach better because you don't have to deal with negotiating with stakeholders," indicating a direct correlation between the union's role in negotiations and the improved focus on pedagogical responsibilities. In this case, stronger social relations (SR+) are demonstrated, where ECTs position their individual judgment of the union in enabling teachers to dedicate more time to teaching rather than navigating the complexities of labour relations. Furthermore, the perspective offered by Sfiso, "They help bargain for better conditions of service from government," aligns the union's endeavours with enhanced effectiveness in the classroom. By strategically leveraging collective expertise, unions empower ECTs to concentrate their efforts where it matters most. This positive feedback amplifies both the professional agency of ECTs and the effectiveness of unions as negotiators advocating for conditions conducive to high-quality education.

While most ECTs acknowledged that union membership can act as a safeguard against potential abuses of power, a few expressed their personal reservations about unions' reliability and trustworthiness. For instance, Mxolisi stated, "I've noticed that unions do not address educator's concerns as they should but they are more on [government] side instead of their [members]." Here, Mxolisi's perceptions reveal a perceived deviation from defending members' interests, where the union appears to align more closely with governmental agendas. This assertion indicates a perceived disconnect where union leadership is seen not as champions of teachers but as enablers of external authority. Complementing this sentiment, Clive further expressed concerns regarding union representation, saying that at his school, "we have union reps who are sitting and watching whilst there are employees who have concerns and that are dissatisfied. We have a [union] executive (site stewards) that can quietly watch the leader of the school ridicule members in front of other members and they keep quiet about it." Clive's observation underscores a specific procedural ground for disappointment; there is a clear expectation that union representatives should advocate for members but fail to fulfil this role. The perceived active choice to remain silent or inactive in the face of injustice points to a breakdown in the representative duty of these individuals. Moreover, Clive critiqued the bias of union representatives by noting,

"We have a leader that can come to a morning briefing, that short meeting, and speak as if she is talking to her kids or children. Union reps are quiet because they are supporting the one at the top because tomorrow she is going to help [them] get positions."

As Loyiso articulated, "The leaders [at the] top of the unions are captured by the state" and, echoing similar sentiments, Thapelo asserted that, "Unions don't stand for their people." Clive, Loyiso and Thapelo's observations imply that personal ambition and allegiance to authority may inhibit the representatives' ability to advocate effectively for their members.

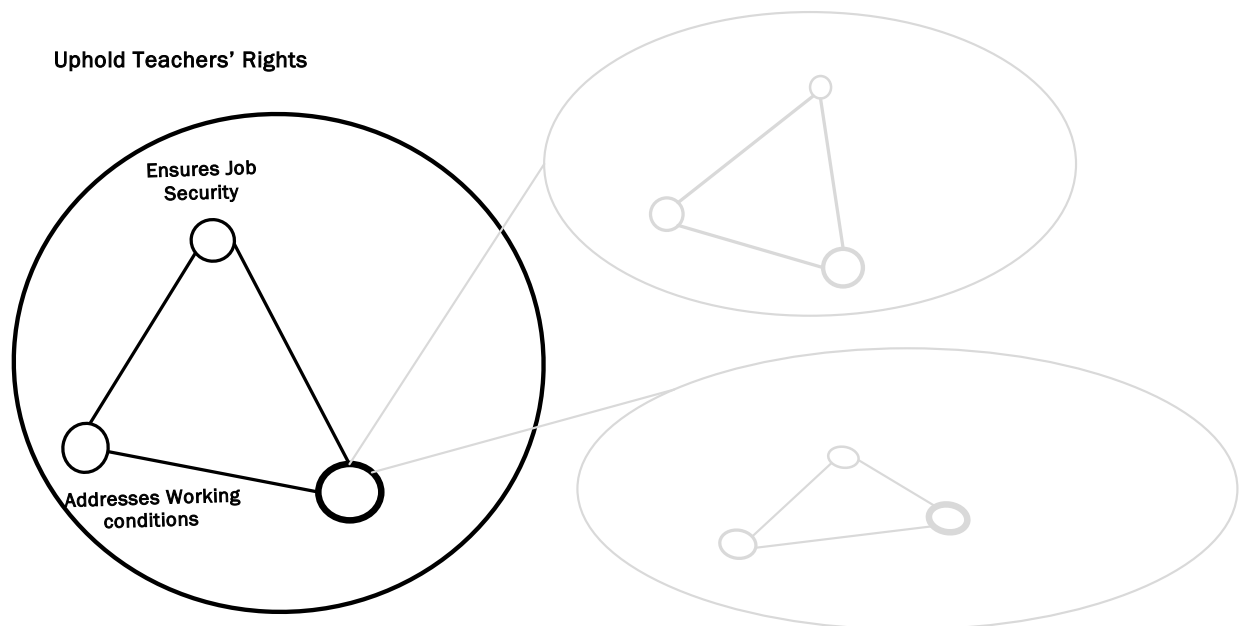
Consequently, these ECTs harbour serious doubts about the efficacy of their unions, which creates a negative perception that undermines their agency. Essentially there are two positions The implication here is that the very essence of what it means to be an ECT

is at odds with their environment when the organisations meant to support them are viewed as self-serving.

6.2.2 Upholding Teachers' Rights

There is an interlink of ideals that relate to the union's ability to represent teachers in issues pertaining to their rights and that unions provide a safe environment to raise the issues. In striving for job security, better working conditions, and gaining representation from unions, some ECTs actively raised issues about their conditions of service. Five out of 86 data points (6%) show that ECTs join teacher unions because they provide a platform for teachers to voice their concerns. This means that some ECTs can take an active role in the mandates that teacher unions choose to engage in and advance. The relationship of the groups is shown in Figure 6.3 below. The emerging cluster of meaning from the interaction of nodes is that ECTs join unions as a means of achieving a platform for personal representation.

Figure 6.3 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Upholding Teachers' Rights*



The acknowledgment of unions as custodians of teacher rights leads to a determining factor for union choice among ECTs. ECTs find comfort in being represented by

experienced unions, and this aligns with Sbu's observations, "for protection in terms of worker's rights, equality, and fairness," given the dominant contextual dilemmas in South African schools. This demonstrates weaker social relations (SR-) and stronger epistemic relation (ER-), showing the specific aspects for which unions offer protection.

The evidence reveals that ECTs have some knowledge of what constitutes teachers' rights, albeit not explicitly defined, but an implicit recognition of their significance in the mandates of teacher unions. ECTs see a correlation between the protection of these rights and their belief that teacher unions possess a deep understanding of the laws governing teachers' work. When mentioning rights, ECTs are referring to the terms outlined in different documents, like the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document, which lays out the expectations and responsibilities of each stakeholder within the educational setting. For instance, Bongiwe stated, "You receive support in terms of labour relations regarding your job description, expectations, and limits so that you know the law that governs you as a teacher." Erna expressed appreciation that the unions are "well-oriented with labour relations policies and acts." The ECT referred to her union's activities that provides clarity on legal roles and responsibilities, ultimately underpinning their professional practice. This underscores a belief that unions can guide them through regulatory space, defining their professional roles.

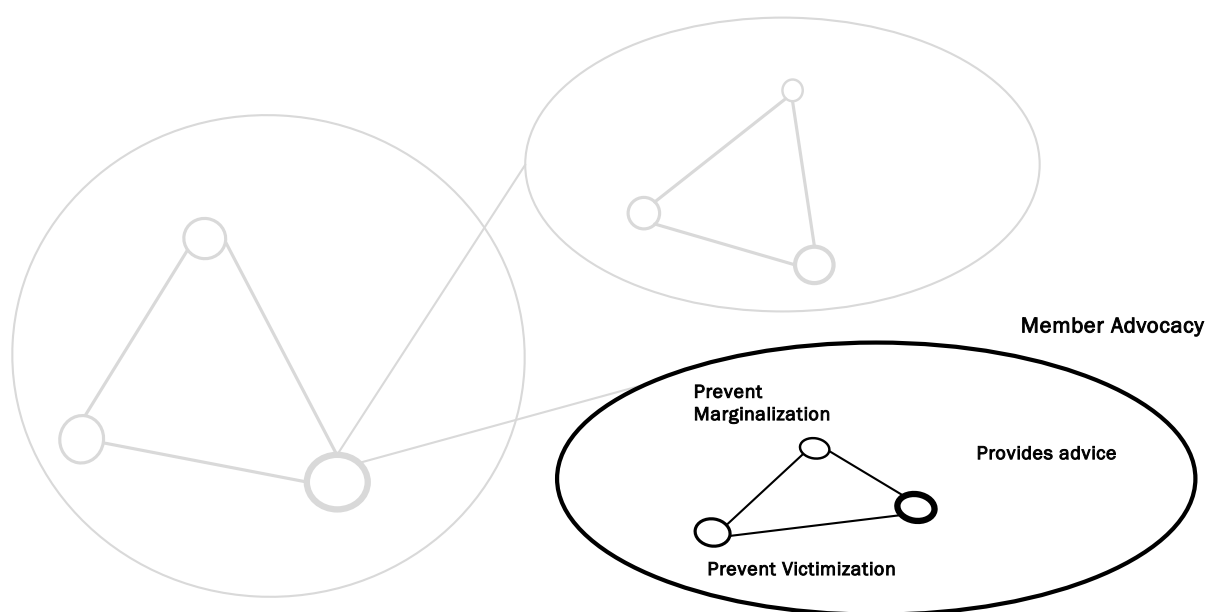
ECTs expressed a desire that unions should actively educate their members about their rights and implement preventative measures against detrimental practices in teaching environments. Irvine articulated this concern effectively when he stated, "When a new teacher comes into the profession, they don't know what their responsibilities are. They might be overworked, and if the [union] shop stewards that are placed at the workplace are not there...that's where you begin to see the vacuum." In this statement, Irvine recognises that effective union representation requires proactive engagement with new teachers. This involves not only informing them of their rights but also ensuring they are aware of their responsibilities, thus preventing possible exploitation or overwork—a critical component for creating a supportive professional environment. Moreover, Irvine asserted that unions must "up their pace to make sure that the new entrants are skilled in terms of what to do, that is in line with the acts that govern our employment and what not to do as well." Here, Irvine reveals a need for unions to adopt a more dynamic approach, equipping educators with comprehensive knowledge that can empower them in their roles.

Irvine's call for greater involvement of union representatives conveys a sense of urgency; he emphasises that if no one is there to guide or conscientise new teachers about their rights and institutionally defined roles, it results in a void that ECTs may struggle to fill independently. The implication here is profound—without adequate and timely intervention from unions, ECTs risk becoming isolated and vulnerable within their roles. For these ECTs, the call is clear—their agency depends not just on being represented but on being actively informed and empowered within their professional contexts.

6.2.3 Member Advocacy

Different individuals interact in teaching contexts through interactions characterised by powers and privileges. Twelve of 86 (14%) of the data points in the findings show that ECTs believe that other stakeholders in their teaching contexts interact with them based on unequal power relationships. There are three stakeholders that ECTs see as holding power in their teaching context: the Department of Education, school management, and senior members of staff. There is therefore the potential for marginalisation and victimization. Consequently, ECTs join teacher unions to gain an independent stakeholder that can represent them and match the power play. The highlighted cluster in Figure 6.4 shows the link between issues such as marginalisation and victimisation that may potentially be perpetuated by other stakeholders and, as such, ECTs appreciate the opportunity to seek guidance or representation from their chosen union.

Figure 6.4 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Member Advocacy*



Charnel’s comment about “far too much bullying from old teachers” highlights that an antagonistic environment can potentially undermine ECTs’ confidence and professional development. Xoli also said, “The old teachers can abuse their power in the school.” Xoli’s statement reinforces this notion, demonstrating how positions occupied by established teachers can perpetuate hostile environments for some ECTs. The role of these stakeholders is not merely functional; their actions create a discourse of power that limits new teachers’ capacity to define their professional identities positively.

In response to perceived or actual oppressive conditions, some ECTs often unionise to assert their agency amidst these power dynamics. Their decision to join teacher unions stems from a desire for representation and support, functioning as a counterbalance to the prevailing structures of power that they believe may marginalise them. Zanele’s assertion that she “needed support and protection” reflects an awareness of the systemic issues within teaching contexts that necessitate such moves toward solidarity. This is similar to Thabiso’s statement about the “security of knowing that I have someone who can negotiate and represent me,” which characterises his trust in the union’s capacity to safeguard his interests. Furthermore, Busi’s and Thulani’s comments highlight how union membership empowers ECTs against perceived threats from school management. The phrasing used by Thulani, “[the union] acts in my defense and protection,” signifies an

essential shift wherein ECTs gain access to resources and advocacy that enhance their role in professional spaces. This demonstrates stronger social relations (ER +) as he positions himself in engaging with knowledge systems that support his growth as a teacher and provide frameworks through which he can assert his rights. Importantly, the narratives shared by these ECTs indicate that joining a union is not merely a defensive strategy but also a proactive step toward reclaiming their professional agency. Tina's expression of feeling "protected" and "safe," followed by the implication of reaching her "full potential," signifies a transformative change in autonomy and identity as a teacher. Unions empower some ECTs to navigate their roles without the lingering fear of punishment that previously hindered their performance.

By actively participating in union mandates, some ECTs empower themselves to contribute to broader discussions impacting their careers and classrooms. The statement from Thabang, "I am able to voice out against injustices and empower my learners," illustrates how union membership enables ECTs not only to raise their voices but also to enact change that extends beyond their personal experiences towards the empowerment of their learners. The sense of empowerment is further echoed by Lucky's comment about having "a space to challenge a decision" that affects the effectiveness of his teaching. While he did not elaborate on specific details, the acknowledgment of alternative avenues for expression shows an awareness of limitations existing outside union structures. This reflects a context where individual voices may be stifled, underscoring the need for supportive bodies like unions that facilitate discourse and representation. As Bheki noted, "I can voice my concerns to a union rep if I feel unheard" and doing so helps him "receive proper guidance as to how to deal with [his] concerns professionally." This indicates that through structured advocacy, ECTs can engage more effectively than alone. The issue of fear associated with raising grievances is highlighted in Xoli's assertion, "[they are] able to express themselves without fear of being fired." This resonates with other ECTs like Joshua, who said, "[to be] able to express my frustration about lack of management in my school environment." David's emphasis on how joining a union "allows me to have a voice," signifies a newfound communal support system that fosters open dialogue. Conversely, the choice of words such as "allowed" hints at previously restricted contexts where he felt disadvantaged or silenced due to power dynamics, a reflection of a space that might hinder knowledge sharing and self-advocacy in traditional school dynamics.

For some ECTs, aligning with a union becomes a proactive measure to safeguard their rights amid potentially hostile interactions. Alex's reference to joining a union to mitigate "negative outcomes from interaction" with colleagues exemplifies an understanding of the precarious nature of workplace relationships. Similarly, Hlobisile said if "you offend a colleague and they take legal action against you," then the union can step in to assist. This perspective indicates a perceived hostile environment that may necessitate intervention strategies. However, the existence of such a support structure equips teachers with resources and guidance on navigating interpersonal dilemmas professionally in the event that such a situation arises.

Buhle noted that because of her union membership, her "school management cannot insult [her] competency." This suggests her acknowledgment of the protective barriers unions offer against potential systemic oppression. The findings suggest that teacher unions significantly enhance some ECT professional agency through the establishment of supportive spaces and protective mechanisms. Union membership empowers some ECTs to stand against perceived injustices, advocate for better conditions, and navigate the complex realities of their immediate working environments. By fostering an atmosphere of solidarity and empowerment, unions act not only as a refuge but also as a catalyst for positive change in educational practices. Ultimately, this highlights the essential role of collective organisation in shaping the experiences and futures of ECTs within the system. The findings on the intersectionality of power dynamics among established stakeholders and ECTs illuminate the pressing need for greater recognition of the unique dilemmas faced by some ECTs. This scenario depicts a complex space marked by both negative and positive relations that shape their interactions and professional responsibilities. Through unionisation, some ECTs are able to reclaim agency, effectively navigating the obstacles positioned by established teachers and school structures. As they advocate for themselves, they not only seek to mitigate experiences of marginalisation but also create conducive working contexts that facilitate growth and development in their teaching careers. This impetus for positive change underscores the critical role of teacher unions in empowering ECTs to thrive in their roles.

The perceptions of some ECTs regarding member advocacy reveal critical frustrations that challenge their sense of agency and representation within the educational landscape. Generally speaking, these perceptions are negatively charged, reflecting a trend of

discontent and disappointment with union activities and effectiveness. ECTs like David articulated a fundamental belief that unions have not only a reactive role but also a proactive responsibility in addressing issues within the teaching profession. This expectation implies that unions should actively anticipate dilemmas rather than merely respond to them after they arise. David stated,

“The union branch is supposed to ask themselves, ‘Guys our teachers are facing an issue, how can we solve the issue that the teachers are facing’ not wait for the annual general meeting, branch general meeting, or wage negotiations. No! You are a union of workers, so let us look at the interest of the workers.”

Here, David conveys a perception grounded in the understanding that proactive engagement is crucial. This perception emphasises the conceptual grounding that unions must prioritise workers’ interests by taking the initiative instead of being reactive or reactive after the fact. Furthermore, David emphasised the need for prevention over escalation when he insisted, “Let us not wait for a problem to arise to only start defending or looking out for our workers.” This idea encapsulates a desire among ECTs for unions to act as vigilant advocates who actively monitor the conditions of their members rather than responding to crises only when they escalate. By highlighting this preventative dimension, David reveals a fundamental aspect of ECTs’ agency; they want their voices heard and their concerns addressed proactively, enhancing their professional experiences and workplace culture.

Another key dimension of some ECTs’ dissatisfaction lies in their feeling of having no effective platform to voice their concerns. David observed that creating opportunities for open dialogue about teachers’ issues could lead to constructive outcomes. He remarked, “I think people lack the zeal to work because immediately you create a platform for me to bring all those issues I am facing as a teacher, your role as a leader would be then to solve those issues.” The notion that robust communication channels could foster accountability shows that some ECTs recognise that real change depends on leaders embracing their roles in facilitating dialogue and action. David’s perception reveals stronger social relations (SR+), positioning his own judgment of the perceived union shortcomings. David further elaborated on the shortcomings of approaches taken by SADTU, specifically highlighting the lack of genuine avenues for feedback, stating, “We are never given a platform where SADTU is going to say ‘Bi-monthly, we are going to have teachers

come together to give us all the problems we are facing.” Herein lies a strong sense of isolation felt by this ECT, which discourages engagement and participation. Such revelations indicate that, while some ECTs yearn for and expect supportive structures from their unions, they report on environments that stifle expression and obscure pathways for advocacy.

This disappointment with representation has led some ECTs, such as Fatima, to question the very necessity of unions. As an activism-oriented educator, Fatima boldly declared, “I don’t think it is what the teachers need right now. Teachers need a revolution of the mindset, not [a case] wherein teacher unions need to be thinking for us.” For her, the essence of empowerment revolves around reclaiming personal agency and resisting dependency on union structures to represent their voices. Her assertion indicates stronger social relation (SR+) tied to identity and beliefs regarding autonomy, that true empowerment comes from asserting individual agency through collective action rather than relying solely on institutional frameworks. Fatima further claimed, “We should put ourselves in a position where the power goes back to where it belongs,” indicating a call for transformation in how unions operate and engage with their members. She passionately advocates for a “teachers’ revolution,” expressing her view that existing unions not only fail to amplify teachers’ voices but actively diminish their power. “Stop everything, reclaim our voice,” she pressed, capturing a sentiment echoed by other ECTs who feel marginalised not just by their unions but by the education system.

ECTs in this study highlight the emotional safety that union membership offers, enhanced by camaraderie among peers and mutual support. Moreover, collective bargaining remains a crucial aspect of this constellation of protection. These ECTs explicitly highlight the effectiveness of unions in negotiating terms related to remuneration, class sizes, necessary resources, and job security. These negotiations reflect critical workplace considerations imposed by external authorities—be they school administrations or governmental bodies. Evidence shows that there is a foregrounding of stronger social relations (SR+), showing a sense of confidence in the union’s capacity to advocate effectively on behalf of its members, merging solidarity with a powerful sense of legitimacy and ethical grounding. Furthermore, ECTs under this constellation present unions as guardians of educational standards governed by legal frameworks. There is an understanding that collective bargaining shapes the profession’s landscape. Consequently, union affiliation serves as a

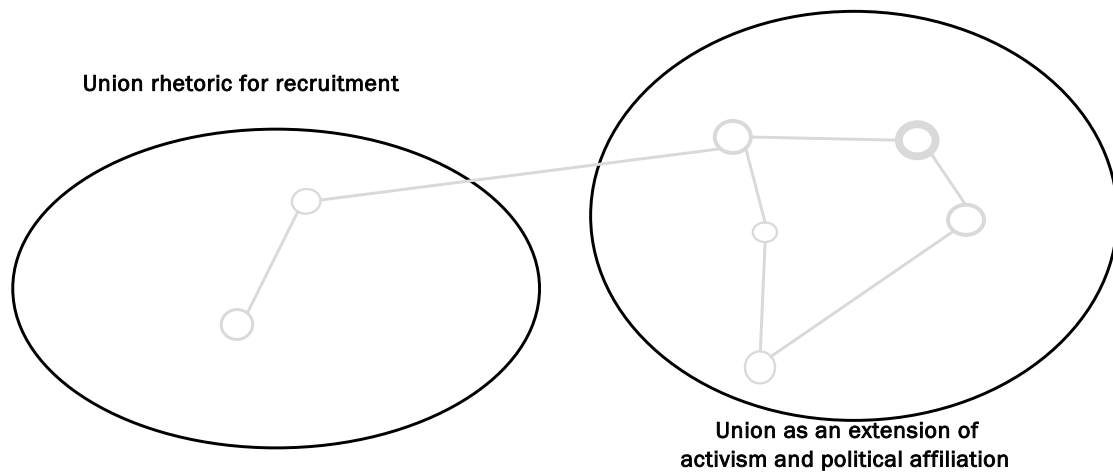
structural safety net that ensures adherence to quality assurance processes reflective of systemic governance expectations.

These views collectively illustrate a nuanced landscape of agency among ECTs. While some ECTs expressed hope for unions to effectively represent their interests and advocate for better working conditions, others called for a complete overhaul of the current structures. At the core of these views lies a profound desire for voice, representation, and empowerment within a system that is perceived as increasingly distant from their needs and realities.

6.3 Seeking Alignment

The group of ideas prevalent in this category includes the choice to join the union based on the union's vision and mission, priorities championed and upheld by unions, union history, and/or the ideology *alignment* with a political party. This is one constellation that fundamentally distinguishes the ECTs of this study into two groups, mainly because these are individual priorities, values, and aspirations of ECTs against what unions can offer. One group foregrounds the union messaging during recruitment which in some cases is aligned with their political preferences. The other group draws connections between union history, political affiliation, ways of functioning and sees this as an opportunity to extend their activism. Eight out of 86 data points (9%) show that ECTs' social and educational background and their political affiliation influenced their choice of union (indicating stronger social relations, SR+). There are two clusters (shown in Figure 6.6) explored in this subsection, *union rhetoric for recruitment* and *unions as an extension of activism and political affiliation*. Under the cluster '*union rhetoric for recruitment*', there are two main nodes, that is, the union mission and vision as expressed during a presentation made to them as fourth-year students. The union's mission and vision reveal the central aspects that the organisation is trying to achieve and include the strategies it would employ to get there. The mission and vision are linked to the union's priorities. The priorities of the union in the data presented here are linked to the union's alignment with a political party, which is linked to the union's history. The interconnectedness of the nodes is seen the Figure 6.5 below.

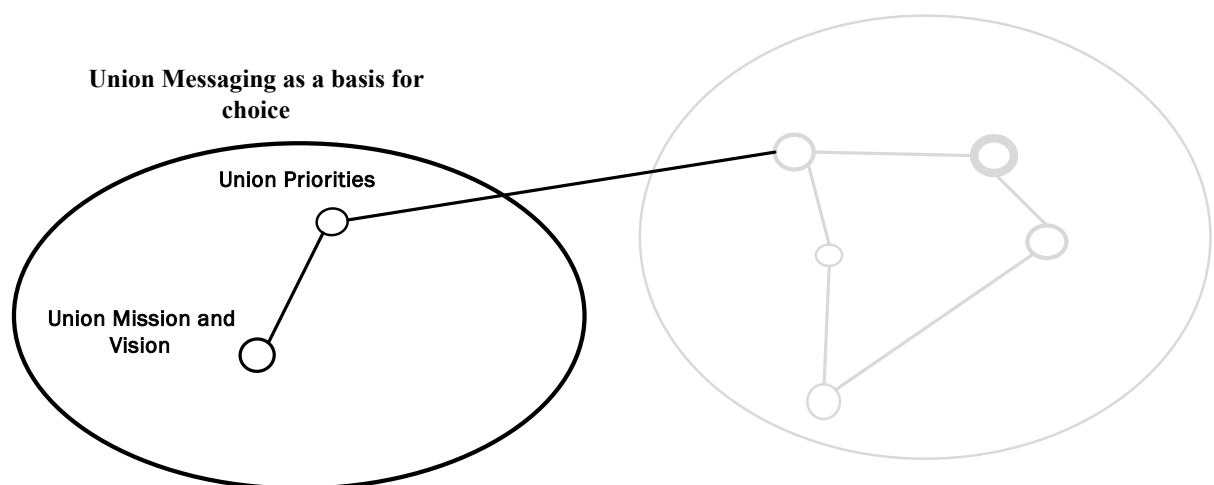
Figure 6.5 Constellation diagram showing nodes for clusters in the Seeking Alignment



6.3.1 Union Rhetoric for Recruitment

For some, the union reflects ECTs' priorities, interests, beliefs, and missions. Four out of the 86 data points (5%) show that campaigns wherein priorities, agendas, and manifestos are presented to potential members, influence ECTs' union choices. The cluster emphasised in Figure 6.6 below shows how some ECTs made their decision based on the mission and vision of the union and the priorities that were linked with these.

Figure 6.6 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Union Messaging as a basis for choice*



The data indicate that ECTs' decisions are influenced by union campaigns that articulate priorities, agendas, and manifestos tailored to appeal to potential members. This indicates the unions' ability to create opportunities for connection through outreach efforts on university campuses, demonstrating an understanding of new teachers' emerging contexts and potential dilemmas. For instance, Faith's testimony regarding one particular union that came to address final-year student teachers along with other unions. Their campaign messages "captured" her heart and exemplifies how unions can resonate with the aspirations and values of ECTs, creating a sense of belonging and alignment. This demonstrates weaker epistemic relations (ER-), and stronger epistemic relations (SR+). Such interactions build a personal relation around shared missions, thus enhancing the ECTs' acceptance of the union's objectives. Similarly Jane, a member of a different union "enjoyed their presentation and what they [the union] offered." Although Jane did not reveal what constituted the presentation and what the union promised to offer, she resonated with the union's values and strategic mission. The intersection of ECTs' personal, political and professional interests and union missions is critical. The emphasis on decisions made based on "the mission and vision of the union" (ER+) presents an important evaluation metric for ECTs assessing suitability. Thomas' reference to the "union's vision for the teaching profession" (ER+) and Nhlanhla's view that a union holds the "same mission and vision" (ER+) signifies a strong alignment between personal beliefs and organisational values. These statements demonstrate a bond formed when unions reflect the ideals and goals of their members, reaffirming the commitment ECTs feel toward the collective. This alignment underscores the notion that ECTs are not merely passive recipients of union offerings but active participants seeking organisations that resonate deeply with their own professional beliefs and future aspirations. This is further reinforced as unions provide clear and compelling messaging that enable ECTs to make informed choices.

For some ECTs, such as Alex, there is a dissatisfaction that illuminates the disjunction between the aspirational rhetoric used in recruitment slogans by unions and the reality on the ground—an inconsistency that deeply affects how ECTs perceive their own agency. Alex, who serves as a site secretary for his union, articulated his frustration with the disconnect he perceives during union meetings. He stated, "There is no single way that teacher unions are helping the education system." Alex's comment is negatively charged and emphasises weaker epistemic relations (ER-) and weaker social relations (SR-). This

assertion presents a stark critique of the effectiveness of unions in addressing real educational issues. The use of the term “single way” suggests that Alex is convinced that unions do not translate to meaningful support for educators, particularly in terms of relevant discourse addressing schools’ immediate needs. Delving deeper into his experience, Alex recounted attending a meeting where the year’s theme was “A year of decolonising education.” His enthusiasm for this agenda underscores a personal commitment to educational reform: “I am passionate about decolonising education.” (ER-, SR+). However, his subsequent disappointment became evident when he shared that, despite this significant focus, little was discussed on the topic during the meeting. Instead, he recalled a moment where he had to explain what decolonising education meant to fellow comrades who seemed unfamiliar with it. “One comrade asked a follow-up question, ‘What is decolonising education?’ So I had to start by explaining to them what decolonising education is.”

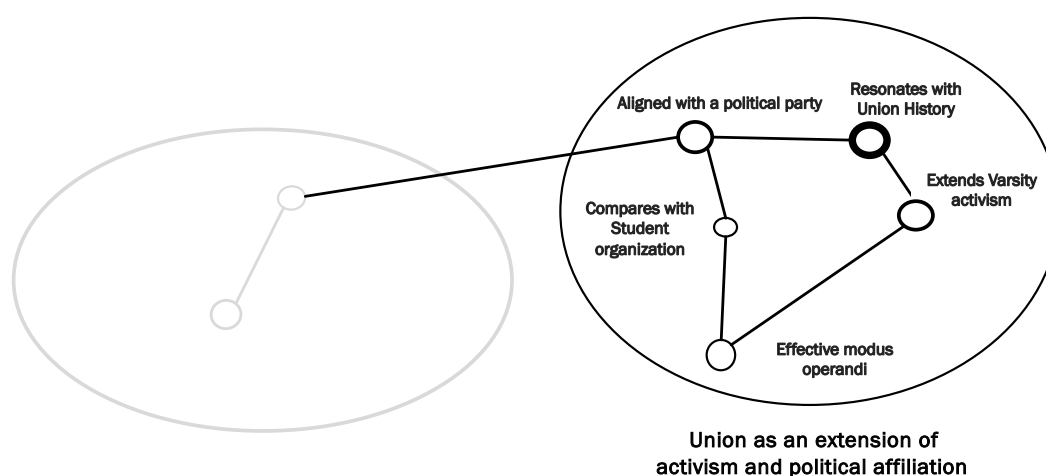
Alex’s position as a site secretary places him in a unique role where the expectation might naturally agree with the union’s party lines. Instead, the inadequacy of this shared understanding among union members highlights a critical gap. Alex’s perception exposes the perceived contradiction between the union’s proclaimed goals and its actual operations. When he added, “They said, ‘Oh, that one needs the department people, the curriculum developers,’” it underscores a revealing admission that other entities bear responsibility for decolonising education, thus relinquishing agency from the union itself. This interaction suggests an abandonment of responsibility that frustrates ECTs like Alex, who likely feel that they joined the union with certain expectations of advocacy and action that remain unmet.

6.3.2 Union as an Extension of Activism and Political Affiliation

Three out of the 86 (4%) data points that ECT social identity which is constituted by their political, experiential, religious, and educational experience informs what they look for in a union. ECTs’ university activism is an example of the importance of experience, while political alignment is an example of belonging to a social group. Specific to this cluster, ECTs seek a union that show actively participates in transforming the education space and a union that appreciates the politics of the day are some of the attractions leading to ECTs joining a union. It is worth noting that all evidence recorded under these classifications came from SADTU ECTs, who are self-identified activists. As shown in the cluster in

Figure 6.7 below, the ECTs have a history of activism and some of these ECTs were politically affiliated before leaving the university. In some cases, the affiliation may be by extension of partisan student organisations such as the South African Students' Congress (SASCO), ANC Youth League Student Societies, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) Student Command, and other organisations that have similar ideologies to the political parties in society.

Figure 6.7 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Union as an Extension of Activism and Political Affiliation*



Some ECTs understand the link between teachers' work and education as a political act. There is a general belief that teacher unions are inherently political in nature and that affiliating with a union is an appreciation that education is a political act. David boldly remarked that, "Teacher unions are miniature political parties," revealing his perspective that the operations of unions mirror those of political entities. Such insights demonstrate an awareness of the political dynamics at play within educational settings. David highlights the similarities in the operations and workings of both teacher unions and political parties. Consequently, belonging to a union develops a teacher to be a "conscious teacher who appreciates the political impact of decisions," said Clive. Similar to Clive's position, Mat said unions help when it comes to "growth [in] the education politics system." These ECTs believe that decisions that are taken on education issues and teachers' work are politically influenced and driven. For other ECTs, there is an understanding of SADTU's historical affiliation with the ANC. For instance, Irvine said, "I chose SADTU because it's aligned to the ANC and its historical importance." (ER-,

SR+) This ECT is influenced by his existing affiliations and seeks validation of his political beliefs through union membership. For Trevor, the comment was negatively charged, as he said, “Even though I hate everything about ANC, I felt joining SADTU will be the best to do.” (SR+) However, for Trevor, the sentiment is mixed as he acknowledges the ANC’s influence while expressing hesitation, indicating a more complicated relationship with that political identity. His remark reveals a struggle with reconciling personal convictions with institutional affiliations, potentially leading to feelings of alienation. A significant thread throughout the interviews is the acknowledgment among ECTs that education is intertwined with politics.

For some ECTs, particularly those with a history of university activism, their choice to join unions was influenced by a deep-rooted desire for collective engagement and meaningful contributions to the educational landscape. Take Clive, for instance, who explained his motivations for joining the union as stemming from his “varsity activism.” His statement reflects a profound commitment to communal involvement, emphasising his intention to “be involved in shaping the education space.” Clive’s positive perception of agency through union affiliation suggests that he seeks continuity between his activist ideals and his professional journey as a teacher. His belief in the potential for collective action converges with his personal passion for impacting educational practices, which amplifies his sense of purpose within the union framework. In contrast, Fatima’s experience sheds light on a less favourable view of union effectiveness, revealing a disconnect between her expectations and reality. She reflected on her disappointment, “I realised that the organisation, unlike the one I was part of at university, is toothless.” This observation speaks volumes about her need for the union to embody the activism she experienced in student organisations, which she perceived as more potent and successful in achieving their objectives. By comparing SADTU, the union she joined, to a powerful yet unnamed student organisation, Fatima highlights a notable analysis. Her grounds for choosing one union over another hinge not only on the union’s stated goals but also on her schema informed by previous successes in collective movements, thus demonstrating the procedural criteria she uses to evaluate union efficacy. For Fatima, the essence of identity as an activist shapes her expectations of what a union should accomplish. This sense of betrayal illustrates how ECTs navigate their professional identities using their histories as activists, culminating in a nuanced understanding of what they expect from their unions.

Additionally, some ECTs may not have the same activist backgrounds as Clive or Fatima, yet they exhibit a proclivity for activism within teaching environments. Alex serves as a descriptive example, noting his willingness to confront systemic issues within the education sector. He expressed the risks involved in addressing leadership capabilities by stating, “Once you start challenging such people, you are going to hate the job. They are going to victimise you or kill you. Such things make you want to just do your job and go home.” Here, Alex’s proactive stance exemplifies a form of active agency that often demands personal sacrifice, reflecting negatively charged sentiments associated with the fear of retaliation, demonstrating weaker epistemic relations and stronger social relations (ER-, SR+, a knower code). Despite recognising the intrinsic value of advocacy, he highlights the isolating consequences of stepping outside established boundaries—suggesting that while his actions stem from a place of commitment, they also lead to feelings of vulnerability and alienation.

Erna introduced another perspective on the dilemmas associated with activism within teaching contexts. She shared her observations on activism that is met with both appreciation and resentment from colleagues: “It’s like you want to change everything and then some will agree with you because some will appreciate your energy in the space. But some will think that you are overdoing it and you want to take over in their space.” Erna’s reflections demonstrate the dual-edged nature of activism, where engaging passionately for change can result in both support and ostracisation. This charge of conflicting perceptions surrounding her agency embodies a deeper exploration of identity, highlighting how individual beliefs around activism can be received differently based on workplace culture and social dynamics. While some ECTs like Clive maintain a predominantly positive outlook aligned with their collective aspirations, others, such as Fatima, Alex, and Erna, reflect the complexities and dilemmas inherent in advocating for reform within teaching contexts. Their narratives reveal that for many ECTs, the pursuit of activism within teaching contexts is laden with both hope for transformation and caution against the repercussions of challenging the status quo.

The relationship between unions and political parties significantly shapes the perceptions of ECTs in their professional landscape. Many ECTs expressed a sense of disappointment regarding this political alignment, believing it undermines the unions’ ability to remain neutral and effectively serve the interests of their members. The implications of these

sentiments reveal both negatively charged frustrations and the critical aspirations for agency that characterise the experiences of ECTs such as Hlobisile and Ndumiso. For instance, Hlobisile made an important observation, “Unions are the ones that invite the political aspect of the system of education.” This acknowledgement introduced a nuanced understanding of the role unions play within the education system. While recognising the inherent link between some unions and politics, it also highlights a common thread among ECTs who feel that this entanglement can lead to negative outcomes for educators. The dissatisfaction arising from this relationship is echoed in Ndumiso’s assertion that unions are “not effective because unions are political.” David’s reflection provides further context to this sentiment, illustrating how the perception of unions overlaps with the functioning of political entities. His comparison of unions to political parties captures a critical image that indicates mistrust, particularly when he describes unions like SADTU, “SADTU and all trade unions are political parties and they are sort of reactionary.” Fatima accentuated this by highlighting that, “Our situation in the country is unique. Unique because of the connection the ruling party has with the biggest teacher union. I think as teachers, it puts us in a tricky position.” She noted how that relationship complicates their capacity to truly represent worker interests. She said, “We have seen unions across the board, we saw on campus, that unions who had a relationship with the ANC were simply not representing workers.” This perspective is shared by Gugu who said that, “Teacher unions are in the pockets of the government. So their roles are not visible as such; their mandate is no longer clear.”

Notably, these perspectives suggest a blanket critique of all unions based on their perceived political affiliations, it fails to recognise the diversity within union ideologies. This point raises conceptual grounds through which ECTs evaluate union membership, suggesting that many believe efficacy is directly correlated with political neutrality or independence. This statement blatantly conveys the erosion of trust in transitions from individual teachers to collective action mediated by the unions. Gugu’s claim reflects a prevalent feeling of disappointment, implying that the intersection of education and political influence has complicated the original goals and mandates of these labour organisations. This lack of clarity reinforces the identity and beliefs of some of the ECTs, who were perhaps motivated by ideals of advocacy, social justice, and effective representation in entering the teaching profession. Taken together, these perceptions illustrate a broader turmoil among ECTs, characterised by their aspirations for meaningful

participation in pedagogical reform, often spoiled by perceived political compromises within unions. The prevailing sentiment suggests a search for agency that not only involves joining a union but also seeks a union that prioritises authentic representation and collaboration over political allegiances.

Unions that highlight various ideologies, strategies, and aspirations act as critical determinants in ECTs' decision-making processes regarding union affiliation. The rhetorics of different unions create pathways for establishing social cohesion among ECTs. The personal identities of ECTs, shaped by political, religious, and educational influences—significantly inform their union affiliations. Connections forged through prior experiences in university activism play a vital role in shaping ECTs' perceptions of unions within their identity development. However, not all ECTs feel welcomed in unions that exhibit political affiliations inconsistent with their beliefs. Trevor shares his hesitance toward SADTU's association with the ANC, expressing concerns over joining entities that appear misaligned with the interests of newer teachers. Such political narratives complicate the landscape for ECTs, who seek innovative approaches while grappling with the tension between 'progressive representation' and perceived political inaction. This dilemma reveals a crucial desire for unions to evolve beyond traditional roles and redefine themselves in ways that resonate with the motivations and values of ECTs.

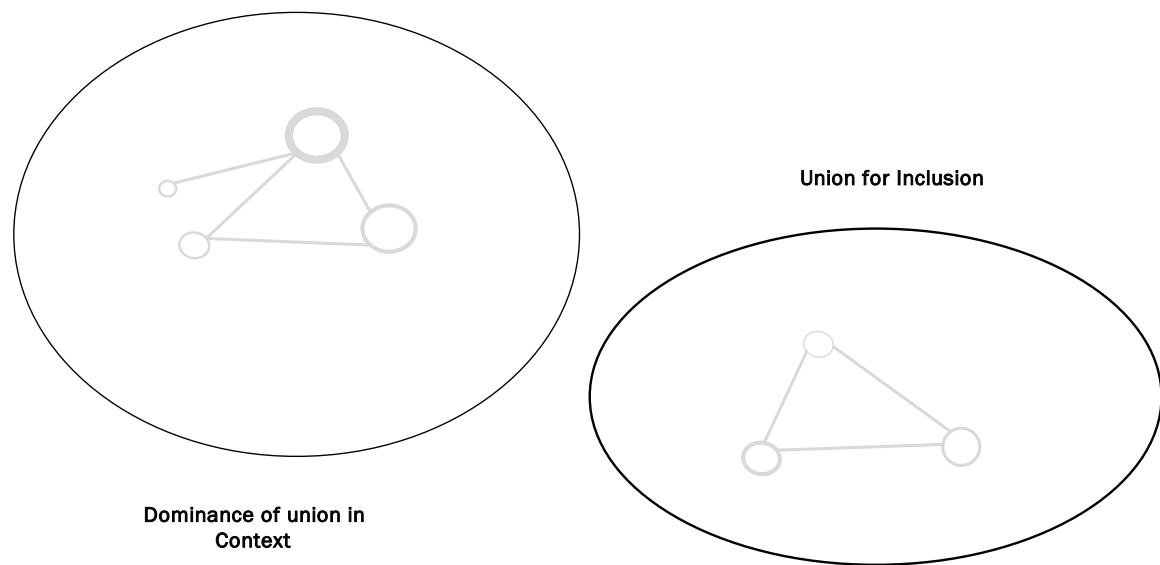
The *seeking alignment* formed by the shared values between ECTs and their unions illustrates how personal convictions drive union affiliation. By intertwining ethical considerations, social relations, and ideological commitments, ECTs not only seek protection and advocacy but also strive for environments that align with their aspirations for equitable education. Ultimately, their experiences convey a profound narrative about the need for unions to be responsive, inclusive, and reflective of the dynamic identities and values of new educators. However, the interplay of political orientation and union effectiveness presents intricate dilemmas for ECTs navigating their professional identities. While some ECTs resonate with the vision of collective power embodied by unions, others succumb to feelings of frustration and disappointment as they grapple with the implications of political entanglements. As they articulate their experiences, it is evident that for ECTs, agency transcends mere membership; it encompasses their hopes for robust advocacy, clear mandates, and ultimately, fulfilling representation within the educational sector.

6.4 Seeking Strategic Association

This section presents evidence that shows that ECTs often join teacher unions for the sake of strategically associating with senior members of staff who belong to specific teacher unions. The decision of ECTs to become part of teacher unions is typically influenced by the prevalent union in their contexts. Among the total of 86 ECTs examined across the primary teacher unions in South Africa, 44 ECTs (51%) chose a union in an attempt to position themselves with powerful groups within the school context. The cluster in Figure 6.8 shows that the influence that drives these ECTs ranges from the dominant advocacy in their school, family, and friends' counsel, to colleagues' recommendations, and a sense of belonging. The survey and interview findings also reveal that the reasons provided are influenced by the histories of the teacher unions in various contexts.

Under the first cluster, the *dominance of union in context*, there are three main nodes. The node with the highest frequency of the data points is the popularity of the union in the school context. In this constellation and cluster, a lot of ECTs join a specific union because it is popular at the school in which they teach. The popularity of the union in context also means that ECTs consider the number of teachers in their school contexts who belong to that specific teacher union. Lastly, the popularity of the union is linked to other reasons ECTs gave, such as retrospective knowledge of the union during the time they were learners. All three nodes under the '*dominance of union in context*' cluster contribute to what ECTs call 'pressure.' The second cluster, although close, is quite different and focuses on the numbers instead of what the numbers mean. In the second cluster, *union for inclusion*, ECTs cited specific attributes linked to the numbers. One of the main attraction points is the sense of belonging, which is linked to representation in terms of race and gender, which allows the ECTs to have some form of comradeship.

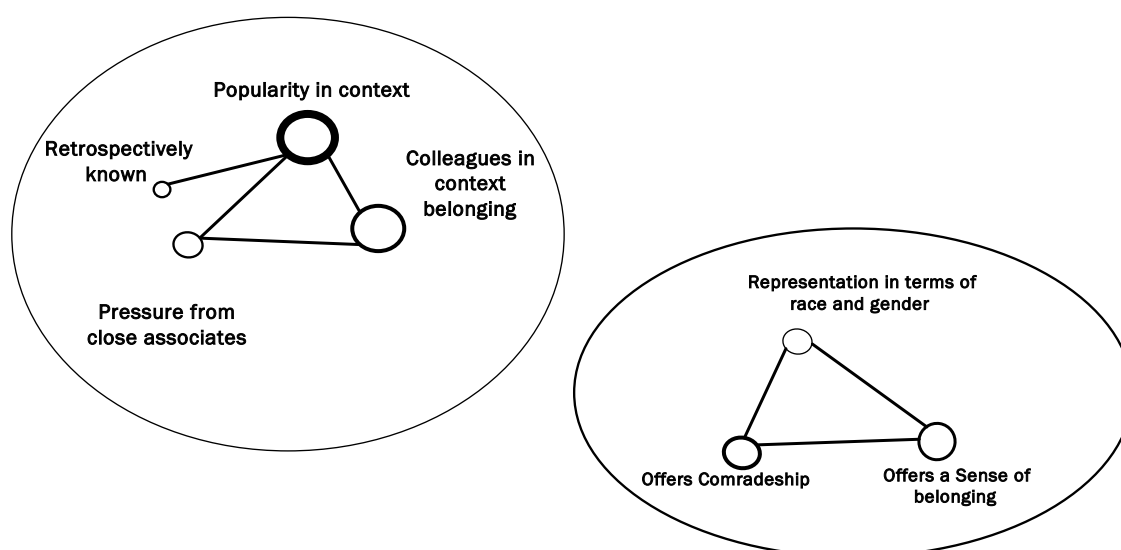
Figure 6.8 Constellation diagram showing nodes for clusters in the *Seeking Strategic Association Constellation*



6.4.1 Dominance of Union in Context

In some instances, ECTs shared their experiences of being recruited into the predominant teacher union within their specific context. The recruitment process ranged from direct invitations to join a particular union to a sense of loyalty and allegiance towards the union. Within this subgroup of ECTs, analysis revealed that 26 out of 86 data points (30.2%) indicated that ECTs opted to join a union based on its popularity in their teaching environments. This decision was often influenced by the ECTs' existing awareness of the union and the endorsements from their colleagues.

Figure 6.9 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Union Dominance of Union in Context*



The data indicated that ECTs opted to join unions based primarily on their dominance within their teaching environments. This indicates that affiliation with a popular union is indicative of a desire for belonging within a collective community. Nkosinathi articulated this sentiment when he stated, “It’s best to join a union that is publicly known.” His position underscores the significance of visibility and acceptance that popular unions, like SADTU, offer. Joining a well-known union creates a sense of solidarity among teachers, which some ECTs appear to value highly. However, along with the positive aspects of joining a recognised union comes a concerning lack of agency. David’s comment illustrates this notion: “I had no clue about unions and went with what the majority had” (ER-, SR-), enacting a relativist code. Trevor’s reflection also encapsulates the same reason where he said, “Most of the staff belongs to that union so I wanted to fit in.” This perception illustrates how the popularity of a particular union profoundly affects this ECT’s decisions, demonstrating stronger social relations (SR+). The need for acceptance in an often intimidating new environment leads some ECTs to align themselves with those whom they perceive as part of their community. Similarly, Siyabonga said, “I joined without understanding, just to belong in a union.” (SR+) Here, Siyabonga emphasises the primacy of belonging over comprehension of the union’s advantages or limitations. His acknowledgment of joining “without understanding” indicates an acceptance of the dominating union in context. These statements reflect a common phenomenon where some ECTs feel compelled to conform to the choices made by others. The absence of prior knowledge or understanding about the unions suggests a significant dependency on the

community surrounding them, rather than an informed choice based on personal values or union principles.

The crucial role of prior exposure to unions is also pertinent in the accounts of ECTs like Nkosinathi and Natasha, who chose their respective unions based on family influence and historical presence. Nkosinathi noted, “It’s the only teacher union I’ve known since I was a kid,” (ER-, SR+), indicating how familiarity and early encounters with union activities, either directly or indirectly through teachers or family, can shape decisions. Similarly, Natasha shared that her “mother who was in the education system for 35 years guided [her] to [the] union”. This emphasises a knower code (ER-, SR+), in that their background experiences equip them with a sense of familiarity and a level of comfort while making their choice.

Conversely, for some ECTs, such as Mdu who felt compelled to join under phrases like “significant and compulsory,” the recruitment process can lead to feelings of coercion. This reliance on senior colleagues diminishes the opportunity for self-directed choice, thereby illustrating weaker epistemic relations (ER-) and weaker social relations (SR-). Mdu’s experience points to a stark reality where ECTs may lack the autonomy to explore and select their affiliations based on personal conviction or informed reasoning. Additionally, Tebello and Sipho's experiences also highlight a fundamental reliance on peer influence, as noted through sentiments of being “suggested” or led to join a particular union. The prevalent influence of established teachers further complicates the ECTs’ capacity to assert their professional agency. Bheki’s observation about “the influence of senior teachers” reinforces the idea that ECTs often navigate a challenging landscape dominated by established norms and expectations imposed by more experienced peers.

For some ECTs, the decision to join a specific union may arise from persuasive recommendations or, in some cases, coercive pressures. Tebello reflected on this process, noting that “someone suggested it to him” when discussing his choice to join a union. Similarly, Sipho echoed this sentiment, saying, “My colleagues led me.” Hlobisile, another member of SADTU, reinforced this perspective, noting that her motivation was fueled by “the comradeship.” David, too, expressed a similar sentiment, stating that joining a teacher union would provide him with a “sense of belonging” as he felt like an “outsider.” Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that ECTs often prioritise social cohesion over strategic considerations related to union efficacy. These responses suggest

a situation where personal agency is often overshadowed by communal expectation, a phenomenon that indicates weaker social relations (SR-) at play in deciding which union to join. The input from established teachers creates a network of influence that carries substantial weight for the ECTs, demonstrating how their perceptions of the agency may be both positively and negatively charged. David's experience further supports this interpretation; he joined SADTU simply because "everyone joined it." Here, David's decision reflects an inherent desire for belonging and solidarity within the cohort of new teachers. This indicates a positive charge in his perception of agency, whereby collective affiliation provides an essential sense of security and camaraderie.

Conversely, there are accounts where the recruitment into unions approached coercively, considerably diminishing the autonomy of ECTs. Mdu's testimony stands out as he stated that joining was "highlighted as significant and compulsory," signifying the pressure felt to align with certain expectations within the teaching context. Moreover, Thabiso added, "Because of pressure," reinforcing the notion that decisions borne out of coercion can lead to reluctant compliance rather than genuine affirmation. Zethu's comments encapsulate this well: "I was forced by the senior teachers and was never afforded the opportunity to choose." Such statements reveal the social dynamics within schools, where the power plays established by senior members can marginalise the voices and choices of incoming teachers, demonstrating stronger social relations (SR+).

This interplay between suggestion and coercion points to factors underlying some ECTs' decision-making processes. In instances where colleagues entice or compel their peers to join unions, the rationale often hinges on the perceived benefits, such as protection from adverse workplace conditions or support during disputes with management. However, terms like "compulsory" and "protection" muddle the possibilities for some ECTs to assess their affiliations critically. For example, Mdu's recognition of membership as "compulsory" suggests that his decision lacked room for negotiation, reducing his agency in favour of conforming to established norms rooted in obligation. This dynamic speaks volumes about the complexities surrounding agency in their professional identities, as these young teachers grapple with external influences that can either empower or constrain their choices. For instance, findings reveal that many ECTs find themselves relying on the counsel of their colleagues when making decisions regarding union membership. However, such adherence to group dynamics can simultaneously signify a lack of

independent evaluation regarding the value and efficacy of the union itself, raising questions about the depth of understanding ECTs possess regarding their chosen associations.

Contrastingly, for some ECTs, like David, who emphasised the importance of representation, the decision ultimately intertwines with deeper reflections on identity dynamics within educational settings. His assertion regarding “representation in terms of race and gender” highlights a crucial aspect of his union choice. By aligning himself with a union that reflects diversity, he actively engages with his self-perception and situates his membership in a broader socio-political context. David’s specific criteria, representation, serves as the conceptual grounds guiding his union affiliation. This awareness signifies a move beyond collective belonging to an assertion of identity shaped by personal experience and societal structures. Moreover, the prominence of SADTU as “the largest union in the South African education system” is depicted as a key factor influencing ECTs’ recruitment into its ranks. The knowledge that affiliating with such a well-established union equates to increased power and voice within their professional environment can be attractive to ECTs striving for assurance and solidarity.

The reliance on the historical knowledge and established practices of established teachers highlights a distinct dilemma faced by some ECTs, the struggle to forge their own identities and advocate for their needs amid prevailing power structures. As established educators wield considerable influence over ECTs, their identities as both developing professionals and newcomers come into conflict. The narratives of ECTs navigating their choices around union membership reveal the nuanced textures of agency, belonging, and coercion. Positive perceptions of collective solidarity coexist alongside negative feelings of exclusion and pressure, forming a complex landscape where ECTs must define their roles.

In this constellation, the union becomes more than just an organization; it serves as a vital space for building connections that enhance both individual confidence and collective identity, effectively enacting the knower code. Peer influence plays a significant role in ECTs’ decisions regarding union affiliation. Many ECTs echo similar sentiments about how their colleagues were influential in the decision-making. This demonstrates how social networks reinforce the legitimacy of union membership, reaffirming the importance of collective identity. Such communal encouragement reinforces identity and belonging,

enacting the knower code, which recognizes the collective identity gained through peer interactions.

The prevalent presence of specific teacher unions within a school environment becomes a determining factor for ECTs when choosing to join. The ability to leverage existing social networks shaped by collective attractions demonstrates how established unions attract incoming educators based on their visibility and perceived effectiveness. Statements like ‘everyone here belongs to this union’ demonstrate this reality. This reflects a desire to associate with unions endorsed by seasoned educators, thereby easing feelings of isolation commonly experienced by new professionals. Additionally, prior exposure to unions significantly influences ECTs’ perceptions. Some ECTs shared their familiarity with SADTU before they even joined the profession. This familiarity creates immediate trust and commonality, enabling ECTs to draw comparisons between well-established organizations and their future careers. Such early encounters play a crucial role in shaping their expectations and understanding of union involvement.

The motivations grounded in association reflect deeply rooted desires for camaraderie, shared experiences, and inclusive practices as ECTs navigate challenging educational landscapes. While the widespread popularity of certain unions may lend them cultural validity, they also signify a growing awareness among ECTs who aspire to advocate for broader social reforms that resonate with their identities as educators. Ultimately, these intertwined narratives reveal a rich tapestry of connection and community among ECTs as they embark on their professional journeys.

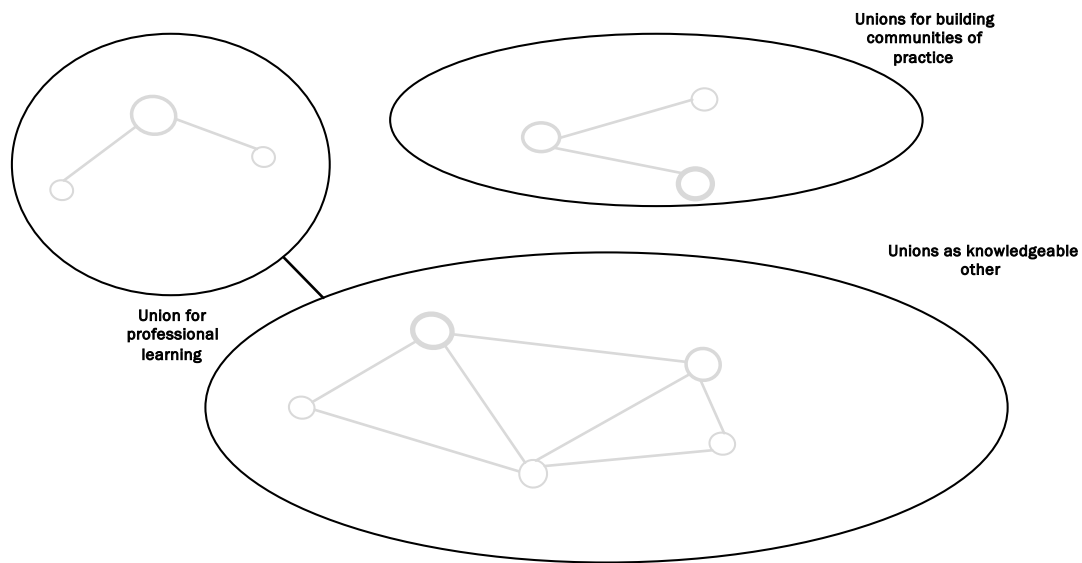
6.5 Seeking Opportunities for Professional Learning

Teacher unions offer various platforms for professional advancement. As such, some ECTs join the union to secure a place where they can achieve their professional ambitions. Specifically, 16 out of 87 data points (19%) indicated that ECTs choose union membership because of the opportunities they offer to pursue professional growth. The findings suggest that ECTs’ union choices are influenced by their career priorities and aspirations within the profession. The cluster of ideas in this category includes unions’ ability to enable opportunities in the teaching sector, a chance to get a promotion, the union provision of training, keeping teachers up to date on policies, and the educational workshops that unions provide.

Figure 6.10 shows various clusters and connections of nodes under the *professional learning* constellation. The isolated node ‘promotion’ speaks to the gravitation to unions intending to secure promotion prospects. However, ECTs’ views under this cluster note that the drive for opportunities leads to ambitions within the union. For instance, Sbu alluded to the union’s inclination to occupy “leadership positions in order to get promotions.” Fatima emphasised that there is a tendency to vie for “leadership positions and getting a promotion” through unions. The discussion under this constellation is divided into two parts; the first part is ‘union development initiatives,’ which is made of the collection of nodes. In the first group of nodes, we deduce that a high frequency of reasons shows that ECTs join the unions to gain training. The training is linked to what constitutes the union’s conferences and seminars. The training that ECTs seek from teacher unions is often driven by the second group of nodes, with a high frequency on employees’ rights, and provides ECTs with protocols to follow within the education environment. Further to this, the employees’ rights are covered in the policies and various documents that the union uses in training sessions.

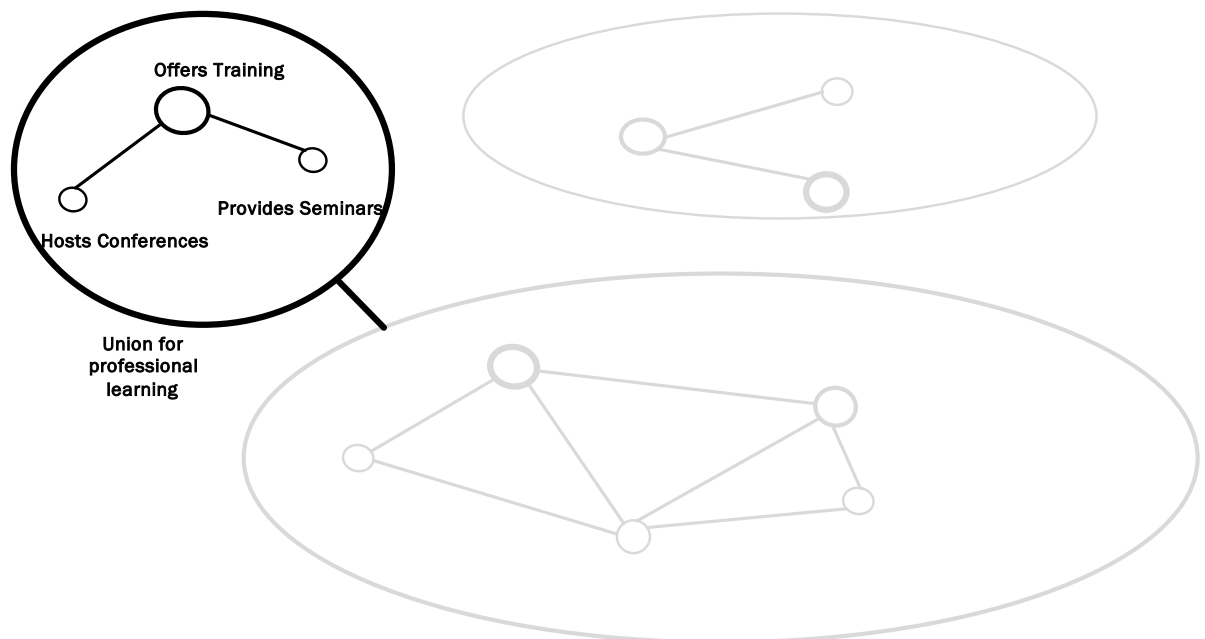
The second part of the discussion will be on ‘*union for building communities of practice*’ where ECTs indicate that they join a union because they learn from interacting with other members. This is connected to their need to collaborate and share teaching practices with other teachers belonging to the same unions.

Figure 6.10 Constellation diagram showing nodes for clusters in the *Professional Learning Constellation*



6.5.1 Union for Professional Learning

Figure 6.11 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Union for Professional Learning*



ECTs are attracted to the professional development programmes offered by unions. These initiatives aim to equip ECTs with essential knowledge, policy information, and skills necessary to navigate their roles effectively. However, ECTs' perceptions of these

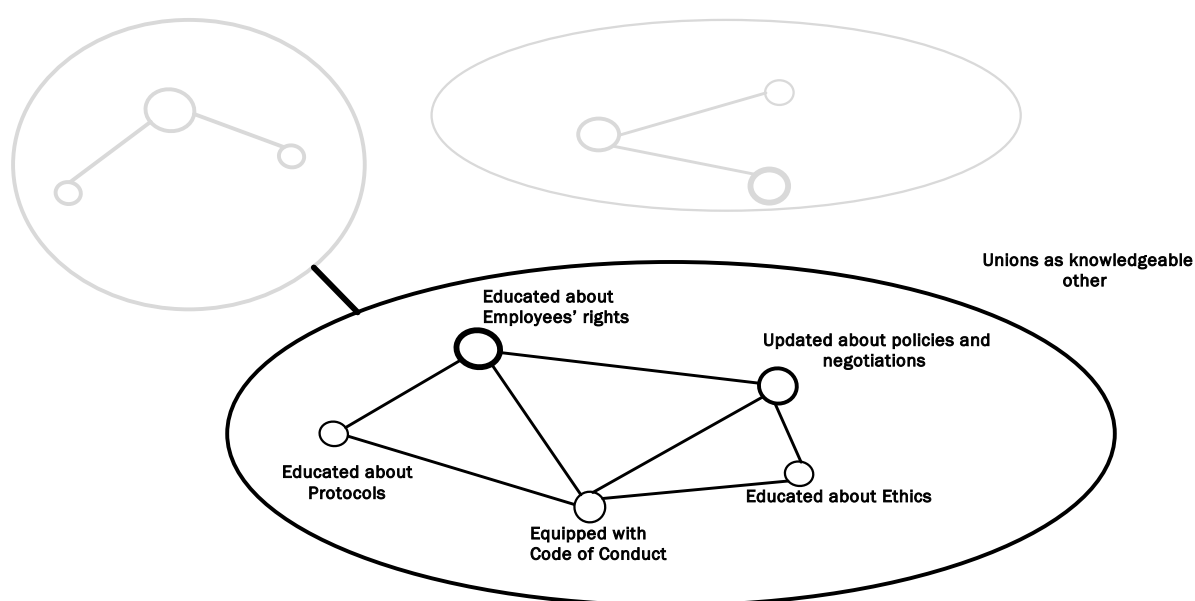
programmes vary significantly, revealing intricate dynamics of agency, and highlighting both positive and negative experiences. For example, Bongani found that “Teacher unions provide some training once in a while on how teachers are to conduct themselves at work and do what they are expected to do.” In addition to foundational training, Jane highlighted the timely relevance of union offerings: “They help you stay up-to-date with what is going on in the world of education as a teacher.” The workshops, seminars, and conferences organised by the union—characterised by Jane as vehicles for staying current—demonstrate a proactive approach toward personal and professional growth. Jane provided conceptual grounds based on the content and structure of these professional development opportunities to justify her union choice. She articulated clear procedural avenues—workshops and seminars—that contribute to enhancing her pedagogical practice. Jane’s comment that, “You can see what you can change or do differently in your teaching,” supports the view that union-led programmes offer tangible improvements in educational methods, reinforcing their value in an ECT’s professional toolkit. Lucas and Natasha corroborated this claim, with one stating, “They provide training and development that I benefit from,” and these “keep me updated on policies and negotiations happening within the education department.” For Joseph the union equips him to “follow every protocol”, and for Ntombi the union shows “how to apply ethical norms within the school environment.” Thomas described how teacher unions provide “guidance in the code of conduct of teaching” which is part of the freedoms and restrictions. Consistent with these views, is Trevor’s observation that, “The union arranges some educational workshops.”

Despite the apparent benefits highlighted by some ECTs, scepticism persists regarding the efficacy and priorities of some teacher unions. Thapelo expressed a more critical view, stating, “I don’t think being a member of a union benefits my pedagogy.” This assertion indicates a negatively charged perception related to agency; he feels disqualified from accessing valuable growth through union involvement, positing that, “For one to become a better teacher, they should develop themselves.” By distinguishing personal development from his union activities, Thapelo implicitly critiques the transformative potential of his own union, suggesting that they may fall short in facilitating pedagogical improvement. This highlights a misinformed expectation that deviates from the legislative mandate of unions and their function in the education space.

Thapelo further noted that some unions have been “turned into stepping ladders for those who want to progress in their careers,” reflecting a troubling shift in focus that compromises core missions such as advocacy. Lisa echoed Thapelo’s scepticism, stating, “Except for deducting money from my pay, [there is] no support and programmes set for its members.” Her statement reinforces doubts regarding her union’s fulfilment of ECTs’ professional development expectations. Consequently, Lisa embodies a critical aspect of agency that emerges when trust in organisational support wanes, demonstrating a disconnect between the anticipated and actual outcomes of union membership.

The narratives of ECTs regarding professional development underscore the multifaceted relationship between union affiliation and teachers’ empowerment. For some, union involvement represents an opportunity for meaningful engagement with educational practices, while for others, it serves as a reminder of unmet promises and shifting priorities within the realm of teacher support.

Figure 6.12 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Unions as knowledgeable other*



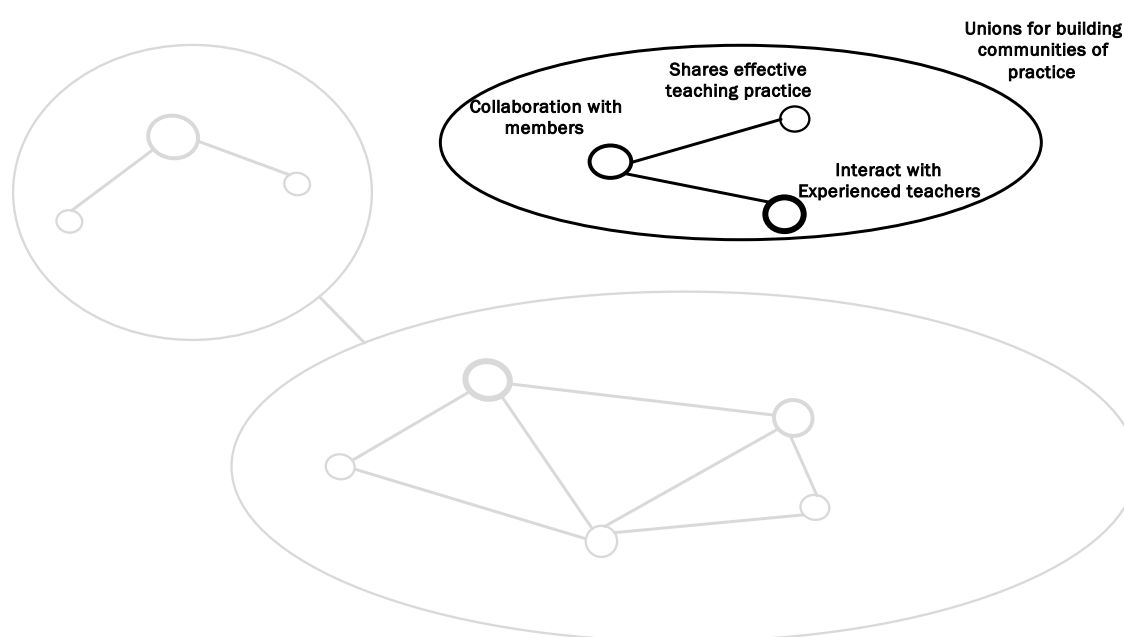
ECTs are drawn to specific unions due to the knowledge and resources these unions provide their members. According to these ECTs, the teacher unions play an integral role in teaching them about the benefits and dilemmas within the teaching practice. The application of ethical expectations in their daily school practice is crucial for ECTs. Despite being introduced to these expectations at the university level, beginner teachers

face the challenge of balancing various responsibilities while upholding these ethical conduct expectations. The support provided by unions is highly valued by ECTs, as it addresses the need for assistance highlighted in previous discussions.

It is important to highlight the significance of teachers' knowledge regarding their rights. For instance, Kevin said, "A union holds seminars" that ensure "that teachers' rights are respected." ECTs feel the need to know policies so that they are informed of their rights and responsibilities. As such, these ECTs feel that to curb this practice, their best option is to join the teacher unions to keep themselves informed and up to date on various issues.

6.5.2 Unions for Building Communities of Practice

Figure 6.13 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Unions for Building Communities of Practice*



Teacher unions establish invaluable community connections among teachers. As Ben observed, a union "can make you come into contact with people from different places who can share effective teaching practices." This demonstrates the positive aspects of relational dynamics where ECTs can thrive through collaboration and shared knowledge. Similarly, Tshepo's insight about being exposed to "a lot of people" highlights the inherent strength of these unions in enabling ECTs to learn directly from more experienced teachers. The interaction and communal learning environment are important for ECTs, who often seek mentorship and guidance as they navigate the complexities of

their new roles. Khumalo's perspective that he is "able to collaborate with other educators who share similar experiences" reinforces this notion, suggesting that the collective sharing of experiences provides emotional and professional support, which is crucial for ECTs during their early careers.

Moreover, engaging with established teachers has a significant impact on identity formation among ECTs. Sanele's comment reflects this occurrence, stating that such interactions enhance his "identity as a teacher." This transformation reveals the intertwining nature of professional development and personal growth within supportive educational communities. The opportunities for ECTs to obtain insights from experienced peers indicate a constructive approach to knowledge and experience sharing. Through participation in informal discussions and formal gatherings, ECTs may gain access to practical teaching strategies and pedagogical insights that might be absent or under-explored during their teacher education. Ben reiterated this institutional function apprehensively by emphasising the value of meeting others who "can share effective teaching practices." In this way, these ECTs find themselves enriched by direct, experiential learning while they navigate new roles. The opportunity for ECTs to share and discuss challenges with peers creates a space for personal and professional reflection. Khumalo's appreciation for receiving "support from colleagues" illustrates how mutual sharing can lead to collective problem-solving.

The legitimacy of unions founded on their expertise emerges as a crucial element for early career teachers navigating their early careers. ECTs here look for unions that support, guide, and provide resources to help them understand emerging issues in the education sector. These motivations indicate stronger epistemic relations (ER+) in which the union's specialized knowledge empowers ECTs to effectively handle professional dilemmas, activating the enacting the knowledge code. For these educators, the expertise provided by the union is integral to their developmental journey, offering informed perspectives about their rights and responsibilities.

The emphasis on continuous professional learning is prevalent among ECTs, who appreciate the enriching coursework, conferences, workshops, and mentorship opportunities provided by unions. ECTs in this study acknowledge how the knowledge imparted by senior members manifests as both informal guidance and concrete skills applicable in teaching contexts. This nurturing of productive assignments highlights how

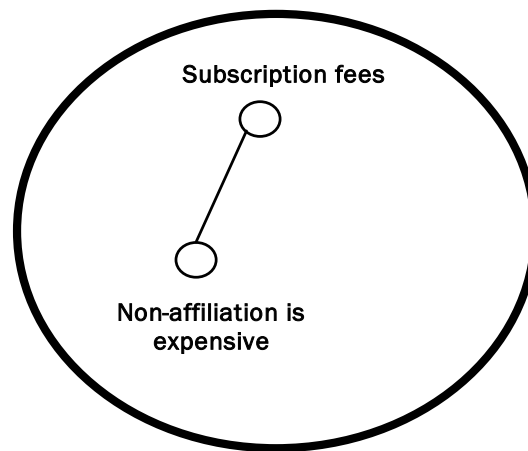
organizational resources significantly contribute to professional independence and growth. For instance, they articulated their appreciation for how unions facilitate training tailored to contemporary challenges, demonstrating stronger epistemic relations (ER+). This proactive approach demonstrates how effective unions create essential pathways toward student-centered and policy-driven programming, equipping educators with the necessary skills to adapt their pedagogical practices to rapidly evolving societal contexts. By working together, ECTs enhance their classroom competency, benefitting from shared intents and collective expertise. However, the pursuit of knowledge does not come without its complexities. Personal agency often navigates through varying perceptions regarding the unique roles of unions in professional development. There are critique that point to a perceived lack of emphasis on developmental initiatives within the union structure, suggesting that structural barriers may undermine opportunities arising from union participation.

Amid these complexities, union membership cultivates essential networks that foster interaction among educators, encouraging collaborative sharing practices that enhance pedagogical discourse. ECTs' evidence showcases how communities of practice yield substantial returns through dynamic engagements. This sense of empowerment nurtured within these spaces fosters reciprocal learning and enables novices to thrive in their early careers, highlighting the interconnectedness of their journeys. Both Loyiso and Nkosi echoed sentiments that strengthen the idea of collaboration as a governing principle for new teacher understanding. This camaraderie transcends mere collegial connections, promoting resilience amidst uncertainties faced by early-career professionals.

By reinforcing professional learning avenues through communities of practice, ECTs reveal the reciprocal nature of mentorship and support within union structures, creating cohesive environments conducive to effective teaching changes. The agency resulting from this interconnectedness thrives as shared narratives shows collective strategies central to advocacy within unions, fostering a supportive community for fresh cohorts of educators. Ultimately, the constellation of professional learning manifests as a powerful tapestry of development, resilience, and interconnected support that propels ECTs toward success in their educational endeavours.

6.6 Seeking Affordability

Figure 6.14 Constellation diagram showing nodes for cluster: *Union alignment as affordable*



For a few of the ECTs who participated in the study, affordability impacted their decisions when considering union membership. The motivations behind joining a teacher union, as expressed by Bongo and Tania, reflect a pragmatic approach to financial management rather than an intrinsic belief in the value of collective bargaining or professional support. Bongo stated, “I was told it is cheaper” (ER-, SR-), indicating that economic considerations primarily guided his choice to join one union rather than the others. This reliance on financial incentives suggests a commodification of union membership, where ECTs perceive their affiliation predominantly as a cost-saving measure. Tania shared a different sentiment by stating, “You pay an expensive fee if you are not part of the union.” Both remarks highlight a transactional relationship with the union; these ECTs view their membership through a lens of monetary necessity rather than a commitment to solidarity or collective action. Such a perspective may limit deeper engagement with the union’s broader mission or objectives, suggesting that social ties and collaborative goals could be downplayed in favour of individual economic interests.

6.7 Basis of Legitimacy for choosing teacher unions

Utilising survey and interview data, the analysis employed constellation representations from LCT, revealing that various clusters of meaning derived from individual values and beliefs significantly influence the decision-making process. The table below provides a summary of the findings.

Table 6.1 Summary of Main Findings: ECTs Reasons for Joining Unions

Constellation	Core Motivation	Description of ECTs' Rationale	Key Insight
1. Seeking Protection	Safety and Security	The need for job security, legal protection against unfair labour practices, and representation in disciplinary matters. This is the most dominant motivation, reflecting a primary concern with the vulnerable nature of their employment.	Focuses on the union's service delivery and perceived reliability as a shield against the state/employer. This motivation is often transactional.
2. Seeking Alignment	Ideological Affinity	Joining a union whose political and philosophical stance aligns with the ECTs' own values, especially for those with an activist background. This includes a desire for the union to be an extension of their political affiliation or activism.	Reflects the ECTs' habitus and need for coherence between their personal beliefs and their professional collective.
3. Seeking Strategic Association	Peer Influence & Dominance	Choosing a union based on recommendations from trusted peers or because of the union's overt dominance within the specific school context or geographical area.	Driven by Social Relations (SR), where the ECT is seeking validation and ease of assimilation into the prevailing culture of the school's field.
4. Seeking Opportunities for Professional Learning	Professional Development	Joining to access workshops, professional development programs, and opportunities to build communities of practice (CoP) that enhance their teaching skills and knowledge.	This motivation is often critical and contrastive, with ECTs noting a dissatisfaction when unions fail to prioritize pedagogical improvement over labour issues.
5. Seeking Affordability	Financial Prudence	The decision is based on practical, financial considerations, viewing membership as a transaction where the cost and benefits (e.g., insurance, discounts) outweigh ideological commitment.	Reflects a pragmatic and highly individualized perspective, where the economic factor is prioritized over solidarity or collective goals.

The *seeking protection* constellation focuses on how unions are perceived as protective institutions against workplace conflicts and misconduct. It highlights the importance of collective bargaining and advocacy for individual rights, illustrating that these protections are a primary concern for many ECTs. In the *seeking alignment* constellation, many ECTs prioritise unions that reflect their ethical principles and professional aspirations. This alignment fosters a deeper connection between educators and labour organisations, subsequently affecting their membership choices. In the *seeking strategic association* constellation, a significant number of ECTs seek to align themselves with established

unions within their schools, emphasising social relationships and the dynamics of power that come with collective organisation. In the last constellation, *seeking opportunities for professional learning*, unions are viewed as platforms for ongoing professional development, contributing to ECTs' growth through training, networking, and sharing educational resources, which are crucial for enhancing their effectiveness in the classroom.

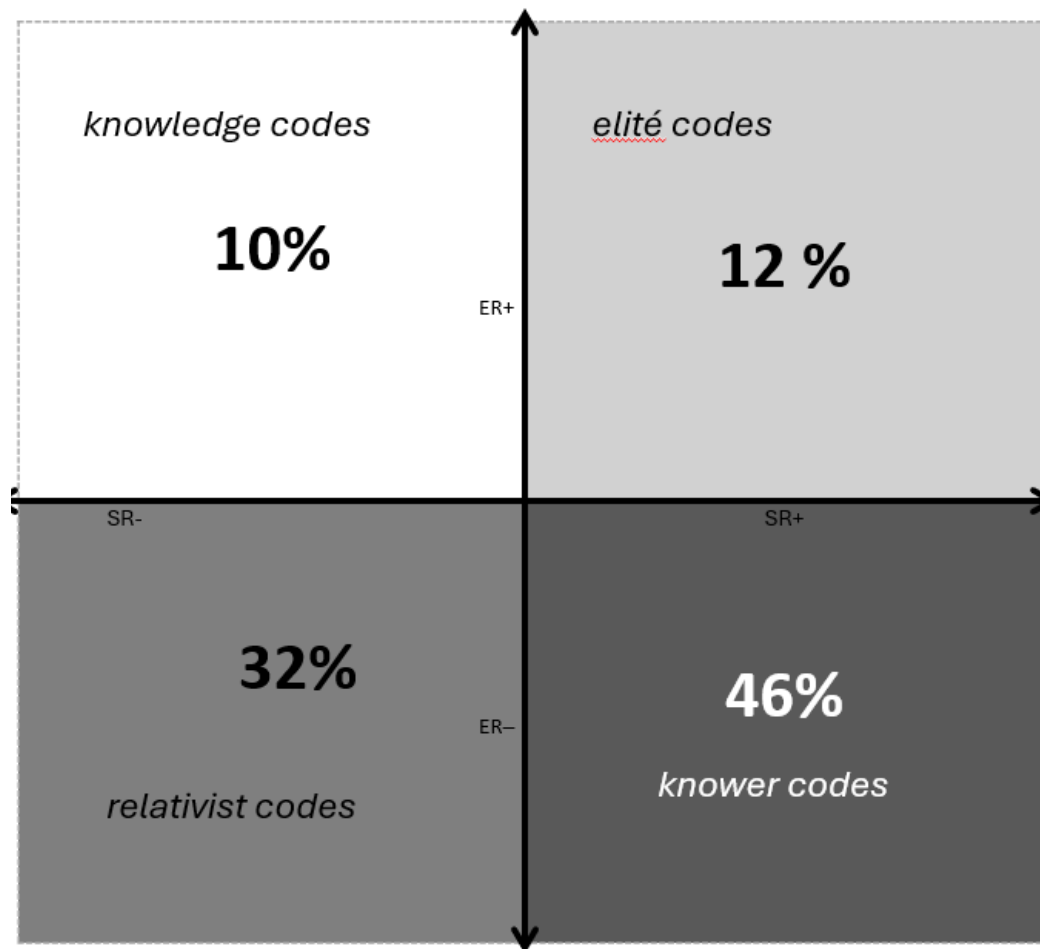
The examination of the constellations of *protection*, *alignment*, and *association and professional learning* reveals a complex interplay of epistemic relations (ER) and social relations (SR) that legitimize ECTs' choices regarding union membership. By situating these motivations within the framework of the specialization dimension—highlighting the knower code, knowledge code, relativist code, and elite code—we gain deeper insights into how ECTs construct their professional identities and seek agency within their educational contexts. Recognizing these diverse motivational frameworks enhances our understanding of the pivotal role unions play in fostering career development and collective advocacy among novice educators, ensuring their voices are heard and valued within the broader discourse of educational reform and community empowerment.

The findings revealed that all the reasons provided by ECTs for joining specific teacher unions vary. Coding these reasons revealed that nearly half of the ECTs seek unions based on personal factors such as being protected from potential conflicts in teaching contexts, shared vision and priorities, and aligning with like minded professionals. Table 6.1 below shows captures the foregrounded codes in ECTs' interaction with the idea of joining unions and how these vary in terms of concentration of reasons:

Table 6.2 Codes emphasised in ECTs' reasons for choosing unions Legimation Codes

Epistemic Relations (ER)	Social Relations (SR)	Code	Prevalence
weaker (ER-)	stronger (SR+)	knower codes	46%
weaker (SR-)	stronger (ER+)	knowledge codes	10%
stronger (ER+)	stronger (SR+)	elite codes	12%
weaker (ER-)	weaker (SR-)	relativist codes	32%

Figure 6.15 Union choices reasons codes distribution



Chapter Summary

In the first section of the chapter, the dynamics within SADTU and NAPTOSA were examined through the lens of epistemic and social relations. This analysis has illustrated how union documentation and manifestos reflect broader ideological commitments, resonating strongly with the aspirations of ECTs. Specifically, the recruitment strategies employed by SADTU highlight its historical significance rooted in the anti-apartheid movement. By projecting a political commitment to transformation and equality in education, SADTU appeals to ECTs who identify with social justice ideals. Conversely, while asserting collective strength through its political affiliations, SADTU faces challenges when it comes to integrating diverse perspectives, particularly from those ECTs seeking more innovative changes in educational practices. Moreover, SADTU's narrative positions it as a defender of its members, promoting solidarity among them, but

it also demands conformity to established ideologies, which can be constraining for ECTs eager to express individuality.

In contrast, NAPTOSA distinguishes itself by being politically non-aligned, focusing solely on delivering quality education. This professional framing appeals to ECTs who prioritise educational integrity over political influence. NAPTOSA emphasises continuous professional development and personal advocacy, creating support structures; however, it lacks specific tailored support for ECTs, which might limit its effectiveness in addressing their unique needs. This approach fosters a sense of belonging but may not fully resonate with the experiences of newly qualified educators navigating complex departmental requirements.

Most ECTs share similar ideas regarding the need for protection, strategic association, and learning opportunities; however, opinions on alignment vary more widely based on individual experiences and personal convictions. ECTs place high importance on unions that offer a sense of security against injustices in the workplace, demonstrating a strong desire for representation during labour disputes. This focus on collective bargaining underscores the value of collaboration in negotiating equitable working conditions. Additionally, ECTs encounter complexities posed by a variety of stakeholders, such as school administration and experienced colleagues, creating a landscape where union involvement is essential for receiving adequate support and advocacy.

The constellation focused on alignment emphasises the intricate relationship between an ECT's personal goals and the perceived values represented by the union. Individual identity plays a critical role in these decisions, revealing the significance of aligning with an organisation's mission. However, some ECTs expressed dissatisfaction when they perceive discrepancies between the promises made by unions during recruitment and the actual level of support received. This highlights the necessity for unions to fulfil their commitments to maintain trust among their members. The decision to join specific unions often stems from communal affiliations within the workplace, where the prevalence of a particular union can cultivate a sense of social validation and belonging among teachers. This phenomenon indicates that peer pressure frequently supersedes personal agency, as ECTs may feel compelled to conform to the preferences of their colleagues instead of making independent evaluations regarding union benefits. Moreover, historical

connections, such as family ties to certain unions, embed these decisions within broader social contexts, further shaping perceptions of legitimacy and comfort in those choices.

ECTs frequently view union membership as integral to accessing essential training and resources required for effective teaching practices. This perspective sets up a contrast to other findings, indicating dissatisfaction with union support for pedagogical improvement. Furthermore, unions serve as vital spaces for fostering connections among educators, providing emotional backing and collaborative networks that enhance confidence and learning opportunities for novice teachers. For some ECTs, financial considerations have a considerable impact on their decision to join a union, driven mainly by practicality rather than a commitment to solidarity or collective action. This approach positions union membership as a transaction, where the costs associated with joining outweigh potential ideological motivations. While economic factors play a role in selecting a union, this narrow perspective may limit engagement with the broader goals and missions of these organisations.

In conclusion, Chapter 6 has delivered a thorough examination of the diverse motivations influencing ECTs in their decisions to join particular teacher unions. The interplay between individual values, social pressures, perceptions of safety, and the pursuit of professional growth emerges as a complex yet essential aspect for understanding these affiliation choices. The findings highlight the need for unions to build authentic relationships with new teachers, addressing both their professional needs and individual aspirations, while effectively navigating the intricate dynamics present in educational environments.

Chapter 7: Portraits of three early-career teachers from the study

The framework that has been set up throughout this study now enables me to consider how three ECTs—Erna, Clive, and David—enact their professional agency. The selection of these three ECTs is based on their status as former activists and the transfer of this identity into their teaching careers. It is precisely this background that forms an integral focus of the study, allowing for an exploration of its impact on their transition into professional practice. The survey and interview data offer a glimpse into their journey into the teaching profession, marked by both optimism, struggle, their choices and the weight of diverse responsibilities. Each teacher’s unique perspective has been shaped by their social identities, personal and educational histories, aspirations, and the opportunities and dilemmas they face within the South African educational system and schooling institutions, many still plagued by systemic inequalities.

All three participants are members of SADTU, reflecting a shared engagement with union initiatives to influence educational practices and advocate for teacher rights. All three participants are Black African, two are male, and one is female. Each teacher identifies as an activist to varying degrees, highlighting their commitment to addressing systemic challenges in education. Their activism is rooted in their personal experiences and societal context.

7.1 Erna’s Portrait

Erna, a recently qualified teacher, graduated in 2016 with a Bachelor of Education degree from an urban university. This university played a significant role in the #feesmustfall movement and is actively involved in student politics. She currently teaches in a quintile two rural public school. A quintile 2 school signifies a school located in a community that is within the second-poorest 20% of the country, based on socioeconomic factors, and is part of the five quintiles used for allocating financial resources. A self-identified activist, Erna has been involved in various student organisations, clubs, and societies, including non-political ones and university leadership structures. She is also a member of SADTU.

Erna’s professional identity is fundamentally shaped by her personal history and deep commitment to social change, reflecting a knower code (ER-, SR+) where personal dispositions and experiences are highly valued. Hailing from a “very humble background” and what she perceives as a “hopeless society,” Erna’s primary professional priority is the social agenda (being a community builder). Her motivation is driven by a desire to use education to

“go back and change the situation at home,” positioning her ideal teacher as an agent of transformation. This ideal teacher is characterized as being open-minded, performing a situational analysis of learners’ lives to account for the “baggage” they bring from “broken communities,” and teaching a “hidden curriculum” of morals and values alongside academic content. This ethical orientation (micro level) grounds her professional conduct and commitment to the integrity of the teaching profession.

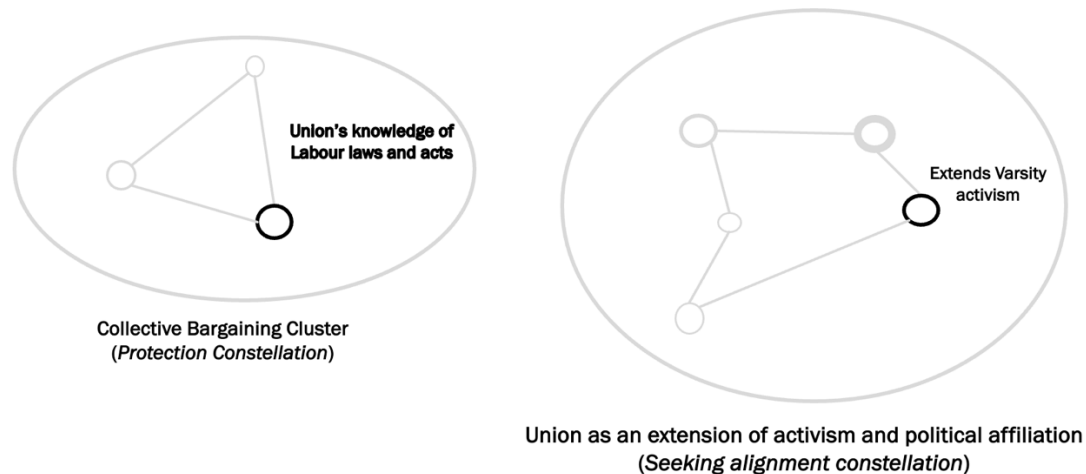
This conception of ideal teaching immediately leads to professional dilemmas across various systemic levels. At the supermacro level, Erna expresses concern over policies such as the learner progression policy and mark adjustment practices, often referred to as “pass one, pass all.” These policies are viewed as compromising academic mastery and integrity, creating a sharp conflict between compliance with administrative policy and her micro-level ethical commitment to rigorous standards. The challenge of compulsory compliance with policies that violate teacher-learner ratios, resulting in classrooms of up to 70–75 learners, further restricts her transformative pedagogical goals. At the macro level, Erna reports disappointment with the lack of support and structure provided by school leadership, specifically citing insufficient mentorship, poor teacher induction, and poor school functionality due to a “lack of planning.” Her aspiration for guided professional growth clashes with these systemic failures, reflecting a dilemmatic space where relational support is absent despite her strong personal commitment.

The struggle continues at the meso level of classroom practice. Erna’s progressive vision is in direct conflict with prevalent teaching methodologies that are considered to be outdated. She resists the common teacher-centred approaches that promote “surface learning,” advocating instead for pedagogy based on critical thinking and genuine understanding. This resistance is mirrored in her frustration with assessment practices that focus narrowly on “teaching for exams” and prioritizing test scores over comprehensive conceptual development. Her ethical orientation ensures strong alignment between her personal values and her desire for professional excellence, but this is constantly tested by the conventional practices dominant in the field.

Erna’s identity as an activist suggests her union choice would be an extension of her commitment to reform. Erna is most aligned with the seeking alignment constellation. This constellation is characterized by ECTs who choose a union based on its ideology, shared vision, mission, and the alignment of the union's agenda with their individual social justice principles and aspirations. Within the constellation, Erna’s reasons are contained within the cluster ‘union

as an extension of activism and political affiliation’, while acknowledging the knowledge base of unions, which is in the protection constellation. The interaction is shown in Figure 7.1 below.

Figure 7.1 Erna Portrait: Alignment with the broader union constellations



Her decision is grounded in the union’s perceived capacity for effective advocacy and its political or ideological alignment with her transformative vision, rather than purely transactional factors like financial benefits. Her primary disappointments stem from the perceived stagnation of the field, the reluctance of senior colleagues to adopt emerging, engaging pedagogy, and the sense that institutions, including unions, may be “captured by the state” and thus restrict the potential for genuine reform. Nevertheless, Erna enacts her agency through active resistance—both overt and covert—to practices she deems harmful or outdated. By deliberately choosing to remain in the profession as an agent of change, she leverages her unique habitus and critical gaze to subtly or explicitly subvert the established norms, demonstrating a clear commitment to integrating her progressive ideals into the realities of the school system. Erna enacts her agency through both overt and covert active resistance to outdated pedagogical practices and by leveraging her critical gaze to subvert established norms. The system is not ready for Erna, as it presents continuous dilemmas, forcing her transformative vision into sharp conflict with prevailing compliance requirements and structural issues like extremely high teacher-learner ratios. Her choice of SADTU is a conscious alignment, seeing the union as a necessary extension of her social justice drive.

7.2 Clive's Portrait

Clive, a recently qualified teacher graduated in 2019 with a Bachelor of Education from an urban university, renowned known for its student political activism and central role in the #feesmustfall movement. Now, Clive teaches at a semi-private school in the fifth quintile. A quintile 5 school signifies a school serving the least poor 20% of learners in a province and is typically a fee-paying school, receiving less government funding than schools in lower quintiles. He is also a member of SADTU. During his university days, Clive was not involved in student politics but was an social activist in his own right through volunteer work.

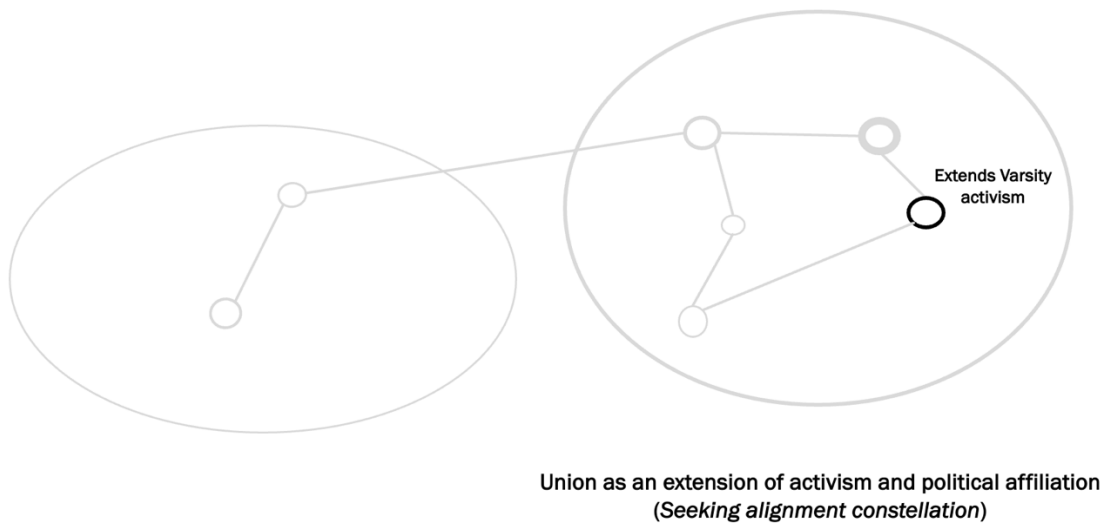
Clive is a non-partisan activist, a designation that fundamentally defines his approach to the profession as one prioritizing assimilation, survival, and professional development. Clive's habitus aligns more closely with the established expectations of the field, reflecting a pragmatic disposition focused on stability. He is driven by a social agenda, seeking to build the community by "decreasing the number of young people who are doing drugs and alcohol." However, he expresses exasperation when he finds himself sidelined during disciplinary processes, where "with all evidence that you can submit," (ER+) systemic barriers remain unyielding. Clive confronted significant dilemmas regarding authority and support; he articulated a grim reality, stating, "[But] I have no control...once it gets there, if ever, these learners return to class..." (ER-, SR+) His frustration on school disciplinary processes "I have no control... once it gets there" culminates in disappointment about the effectiveness of the support he champions, wherein his preferred approach to resolve discipline issues clashes with the formal processes. The dilemmas he faces are linked to bureaucracy, which he views as a deterrent to urgent issues affecting learners and students. This struggle demonstrates a code clash between knowledge code and knower code. While he values good teaching, his immediate goal is to successfully adopt the prevailing practices and secure his position, thereby minimizing the code clashes that define the activist experience.

The logic of this concerns informs his reaction to systemic constraints. His primary concerns revolve around the macro-level challenges of obtaining adequate mentorship and professional development opportunities, as these directly impact his professional competence and capacity to assimilate. The resulting dilemma for Clive is often a practical one: the desire for the professional capital necessary for success vs. the field's failure to provide adequate relational support.

At the meso and micro levels, Clive's focus means his agency is expressed through a will to consensus. While he, like other ECTs, may aspire to engaging pedagogy and be trained in technology integration, he is more inclined to adopt the prevailing teaching practices and exhibit passive resistance or silent subversion when faced with practices he views as ineffective, rather than overt confrontation. He prioritizes adaptation and operational continuity over ideological revolution. His internal conflicts concerning assessment integrity or ethical conduct are likely to be resolved through a strategy of individual survival and assimilation into the established field norms. Clive is therefore a crucial case study of an ECT whose habitus matches the field's demand for competence, allowing him a convenient assimilation pathway than other ECTs, but expressing his agency through adaptation and adherence to the established norms.

His involvement with the teacher union stems from past activism during his university days, which influenced his perception of unions as necessary mechanisms for communal welfare in schools. Clive is driven by his desire to "be involved in shaping the education space," (ER-, SR+), making him inclined toward participation in union activities to amplify his voice against systemic injustices impacting teachers and students alike. However, Clive's experience of union leadership in this context has disappointed him as he perceived their lack of action in certain contexts as being of a relativist code (ER-, SR-). He said, "We have union reps who are sitting and watching whilst there are employees who have concerns and that are dissatisfied. We have a [union] executive (site stewards) that can quietly watch the leader of the school ridicule members in front of other members, and they keep quiet about it." Clive's portrait aligns with seeking alignment constellation (see figure 7.2) driven by an expectation that the union organizations will embody and actively pursue his own principles of social transformation and communal welfare. This section explores this to understand how different or similar he is from Erna and his location within the broader constellations.

Figure 7.2 Clive Portrait: Alignment with the broader union constellation



Clive, driven by a social agenda to build the community, enacts his agency in a way that prioritizes assimilation and professional development. He is frustrated when systemic barriers impede his social work. As explored, Clive’s approach to professional dilemmas is characterized by a will to consensus, where he is inclined to adopt prevailing practices and secure his position, thereby minimizing the dilemmas. His role as an agent for social transformation is therefore one of adaptation and adherence to established norms, with resistance primarily expressed as passive subversion when confronted with practices he deems ineffective. While aligned with the seeking alignment constellation due to his belief in the union’s role in communal welfare, his disappointment with SADTU’s inaction underscores the limits of his agency when organizational support fails to match his expectations for principled, effective action. Clive’s desire for transformative impact is, in effect, subdued by the pragmatic demands of survival and assimilation in his school context. For Clive, the system is only conditionally ready, accepting the part of his identity that aligns with assimilation. The system is prepared for the teacher who seeks consensus and attempts to adopt prevailing practices, but it is not ready to provide the necessary support structures for his vision of social transformation.

7.3 David’s Portrait

David, a self-proclaimed activist and newly qualified teacher, graduated with a Bachelor of Education in 2019 from an urban university. The university is known for its central participation and role in the #feesmustfall movements. His university experience included

involvement in non-political student clubs and societies, youth leadership within his community and religious organisation, and volunteer work. David currently teaches at a Quintile 4 public school and is a member of SADTU. A quintile 4 school means a public school that receives less government funding than schools in quintiles 1, 2, and 3, and is therefore allowed to charge school fees to supplement its revenue.

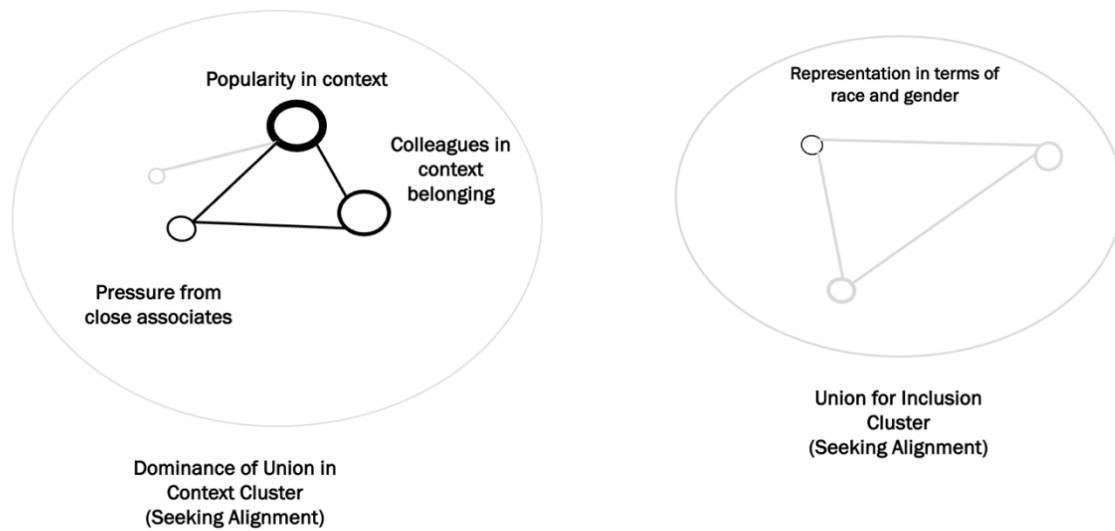
David's habitus reflects a strong conviction that the purpose of teaching is transformative, positioning him directly against prevalent, outdated, or ethically compromised field practices. He is driven by the social agenda to transform communities. He believes that schools have the potential to transform society, stating, "They are one of the biggest institutions that we have in society that can change or steer society in a different direction." However, his aspirations are hindered by the limitations imposed by the educational system. David is also characterized by a dominant knower code (ER-, SR+), where his professional legitimation hinges on social relations (SR+), specifically, his high ethical orientation, moral clarity, and commitment to social justice principles. This strong social relations disposition means he tends to view the field through a moral lens, making compliance with flawed systems challenging and thereby maximizing the potential for code clashes.

With an inherent belief in structure and organisation, David values time management as part of effective teaching practice. He insisted, "Every institution needs to have structure, and that structure needs to be known by educators and learners," (ER+, SR-) but encounters continual obstacles in realising such foundations within his school environment. David's predominant struggle lies in navigating the lack of transparency within his school's hierarchy. "There is no structure," he lamented, emphasising how the unpredictable nature of administrative tendencies affects his instructional efficacy. The chaos of uncoordinated schedules leaves him often uncertain about basic operations, such as when school assemblies occur (ER-, SR-). The resulting code clash between David's systematic and scheduled approach (enacting a knowledge code) and his experiences of the disorganisation at school (reflecting a relativist code) is a source of grave frustration for him. He experiences macro-level dilemmas. David is likely to engage in open or principled resistance when confronted with policies like mark adjustment or learner progression, viewing them as a corruption of the educational purpose. His other macro level disappointment is the ethical failing of school leadership and colleagues. He confronts the environment of poor leadership and unsupportive mentorship with a strong demand for an where both moral conduct and technical competence are high.

At the meso and micro levels, Davids agency is expressed as moral resistance. He does not resort to the passive resistance or silent subversion of other ECTs; his disposition compels him to question and challenge practices that compromise his ethical standards. He raised an issue with a specific teaching approach, reading from a textbook, which he deems as inefficient and ineffective. For David, the idea that “history is taught by taking a textbook and reading from it and then learners make their own notes, is not working.” His concerns about assessment integrity and teacher professional conduct are central to his experience, turning any unethical practice into a personal dilemma. David’s resistance is a direct attempt to apply his moral habitus to the field, creating tension not simply over what is being taught, but over how the profession is being conducted. He is a critical study in how an inflexible moral standard, while driving powerful agency, can also lead to deeper professional alienation when the field demands pragmatic compromise. He gets frustrated that there are teachers that “teach like that every single day and that person leaves the classroom and says, ‘I have taught’”. By way of criticising, David revealed a struggle he has with an observed prevalent teaching practice. This presents a code clash between a knower code (ER-, SR+) and knowledge code (ER+, SR-) wherein he did not reveal what works as an efficient method but criticised a specific practice.

While he shares the high positive charge on shared vision and ideology with other activists, David’s stance is often more uncompromising. For him, the union must be a vehicle for radical advocacy and ethical governance; it must actively challenge the state and the school leadership on fundamental issues of professional conduct and academic integrity. However, this comes as a result of a code shift. He expressed that initially he “had no clue about unions and went with what the majority had,” he admitted, indicating a choice driven by peer influence rather than ideological conviction. His perspective enhances his emerging agency—as he recognises the potential of collective action, expressing hope that participating in union dialogue might eventually empower him to articulate his concerns more confidently, saying, “Joining a union allows me to have a voice.” This demonstrates a code shift from relativist code (ER-, SR-) to knower code (ER-, SR+), a shift marked by his growing awareness of union benefits. David, is primarily aligned with the seeking strategic association constellation, with a specific focus on the cluster dominance of union in context. Figure 7.3 below demonstrates how his portrait is located within the broader constellations.

Figure 7.3 David Portrait: Alignment with the broader union constellations



As seen through the discussions above, David enacts his activism through moral resistance rooted in a belief that teaching's purpose is transformative. He is fundamentally resisting the ethical failures and pervasive lack of transparency and structure in his school's hierarchy, framing the administrative disorganization as a profound ethical problem. David enacts his agency by directly challenging policies refusing to resort to the passive resistance. The school system is not ready for David because his activism is fundamentally an ethical challenge to the status quo. A system that tolerates or even necessitates practices such as administrative disorganisation will have a challenge accommodating an agent who insists on radical transparency and accountability. David's open questioning and refusal to passively subvert or ignore these issues signal a profound code clash, making the environment hostile to his specific form of moral resistance.

7.4 Connected Narratives

All three ECTs express a degree of dissatisfaction with various issues ranging supermacro to micro issues in the schooling system. For Erna and Clive, the dissatisfaction is ideological. They are disappointed when the union or school fails to live up to the transformative ideals they were seeking, leading to criticism of union leadership (Clive) or institutional rigidity (Erna). For David the dissatisfaction is structural and procedural. He is frustrated by the chaos and lack of structure in the school and views joining the union as a hopeful means to eventually address these practical issues and gain a voice.

The portraits reveal several implications for professional agency. For instance, confronting policy misalignments, particularly with the annual teaching plan, highlights Erna's frustrations with the lack of flexibility in educational frameworks. Her insistence on incorporating contemporary issues into the curriculum evidences her role as an advocate for change, a transformative educational agenda, rooted in her lived experiences. Furthermore, her mixed interactions within SADTU reveal the dilemmas of navigating activist impulses against institutional expectations, emphasising the complexities of establishing agency in structured environments. Through these dynamics, Erna navigates between knower, knowledge, and relativist codes, further complicating her position as both an agent of change and a participant in formal systems.

A comparative analysis (see table 7.1) of the three ECTs, Erna, Clive, and David in the context of the broader union choices' constellations demonstrates a range of motivations for joining a union, primarily aligning with two constellations: seeking alignment and seeking strategic association.

Table 7.1 Comparative Analysis of the Three Portraits

ECT	Primary Constellation Alignment	Key Characteristics	Core Motivation (Why they Joined)	Dominant Code(s)
Erna	Seeking Alignment and Protection	Self-identified activist; graduated from a politically active university; joined SADTU specifically to challenge outdated practices and effect reform.	Ideological alignment: Union is an extension of her social justice activism and desire for community upliftment and reform.	Knower Code (ER-, SR+): Prioritizes her personal, lived experience and transformative vision over existing policy or curriculum knowledge.
Clive	Seeking Alignment	Background in volunteering and youth mentorship; disappointed by union inaction (perceived as Relativist code), confirming he expected a strong, principled response.	Communal welfare: Union is a necessary mechanism for social transformation, youth mentorship, and shaping the education space.	Knower Code (ER-, SR+): Driven by his conviction to create supportive structures and address social issues; frustrated when the union fails to act.
David	Seeking Strategic Association	His subsequent frustration is with the lack of structure (challenging disorganization).	Pragmatic/Utilitarian Choice: Joined based on peer influence and convenience (what the majority did); seeking a voice/representation.	Initial: Relativist Code (ER-, SR-): No strong ideological or knowledge-based rationale for joining. Evolving: Knower Code (ER-, SR+): Hope that joining will allow him to have a voice.

Clive's participation in SADTU stems from a desire to contribute to shaping educational discourse, viewing unions as platforms for communal welfare. However, his disappointment with union inaction illustrates the barriers he faces in advocating for necessary changes in the education system. Clive's situation demonstrates a clash between knowledge and knower codes in his desire for impactful intervention and the disillusionment he feels toward collaborative

efforts for reform, showcasing the ongoing negotiation of professional agency in complex settings.

Unlike Erna and Clive, who actively engage with their unions based on ideological beliefs, David's connection to SADTU is initially more pragmatic, stemming from peer influence rather than conviction. Yet, as he begins to understand the benefits of collective bargaining, his perspective shifts towards recognising the union's potential as a platform for voicing concerns—signifying growth in his professional agency. Such a shift demonstrates how engagement with institutional structures can empower educators, moving from a relativist to a knower code orientation as he strives for greater effectiveness in his practice.

Through the portraits of Erna, Clive, and David, we witness the diverging paths and shared aspirations of ECTs. Their stories illustrate not only distinct backgrounds and approaches to teaching but the complex struggles they encounter in navigating a system that often minimises their voices while concurrently fueling their advocacy for transformative change. As each ECT navigates their chosen unions, the layered conflicts, grounded in ideology, experience, and hierarchical structures, underscore the critical need for inclusive dialogues that respect diverse perspectives. By acknowledging these code clashes, the educational landscape stands to benefit from richer contributions, paving the way for innovative reforms invigorated by these passionate educators.

Summary of Chapter

This section presents detailed portraits of three ECTs, Erna, Clive, and David, who were selected based on their status as former activists and the demonstrable transfer of this identity into their professional teaching careers. These case studies demonstrate how individual social identities, personal histories, and political aspirations interact with the opportunities and dilemmas presented by the South African education system, particularly its entrenched systemic inequalities. All three participants are Black African, and all maintain membership in the SADTU, reflecting a shared commitment to collective action within the field. Through survey and interview data, these portraits allow for an exploration of how each teacher navigates the transition into practice, enacting professional agency amidst optimism and significant struggle.

Erna embodies the agent of transformation, driven by a powerful social agenda and a desire to use education to effect community change in her quintile two rural school. Her professional

identity is defined by a knower code (ER−, SR+), where her ethical orientation and lived experiences are prioritized over existing field knowledge or policy. This disposition immediately precipitates a sharp conflict between her commitment to rigorous academic standards and her required compliance with supermacro-level policies, such as the learner progression policy, which she views as compromising academic integrity. Furthermore, macro-level systemic failures, including poor school functionality and a lack of mentorship, test her resolve. Erna enacts her agency through both overt and covert active resistance to outdated pedagogical practices and aligns her union choice with the seeking alignment constellation, viewing SADTU as a necessary extension of her social justice activism.

Clive's portrait presents a more pragmatic approach, defining himself as a non-partisan activist focused on assimilation, survival, and professional development. While motivated by a social agenda (community building through mentorship), his habitus aligns closely with the established demands of the field. His primary concerns are centered on macro-level deficiencies in relational support, specifically the lack of adequate mentorship and professional development needed to build competence. Clive's agency is characterized by a will to consensus, where he is inclined to adopt prevailing practices and employ passive resistance or silent subversion rather than overt confrontation. He, too, is aligned with the seeking alignment constellation, motivated by the union's role in communal welfare, yet expresses disappointment when he perceives union leadership as failing to actively pursue transformative principles, demonstrating a clash between his ideal and the observed reality.

David enters the profession with a strong belief in teaching as a transformative force, and his dominant knower code (ER−, SR+) maximizes the potential for code clashes. His professional legitimation hinges on moral clarity and ethical governance, causing him significant macro-level frustration with the pervasive lack of structure and transparency in his school's hierarchy. David frames administrative disorganization as an ethical failure, actively seeking structure (ER+, SR−) where chaos prevails. His agency is expressed as moral resistance; unlike his counterparts, he does not resort to passive subversion but directly challenges practices, such as policies on mark adjustment or ineffective, textbook-centric teaching, that compromise his ethical standards. While David's initial union choice was utilitarian, a relativist code (ER−, SR−) driven by peer influence, his subsequent engagement reflects a shift toward the seeking strategic association constellation, where he hopes collective action will empower him to articulate and address structural concerns.

A comparative analysis of the three ECTs reveals divergent paths rooted in their shared activist background. Erna and Clive align with seeking alignment, motivated by an ideological expectation that the union will champion their social justice vision. In contrast, David aligns with seeking strategic association, having joined based on pragmatic and social influence, though his growing awareness of the union's potential as a platform signifies an evolution in his professional agency. Crucially, the source of their dissatisfaction differs: Erna and Clive are frustrated by the ideological failings of the institution (the perceived abandonment of transformative ideals), whereas David is primarily frustrated by structural and procedural deficiencies (disorganization and lack of ethical leadership). These layered conflicts, grounded in individual habitus and institutional constraints, underscore the necessity for inclusive dialogue within the educational landscape to leverage the critical perspectives and advocacy of these passionate, early-career educators.

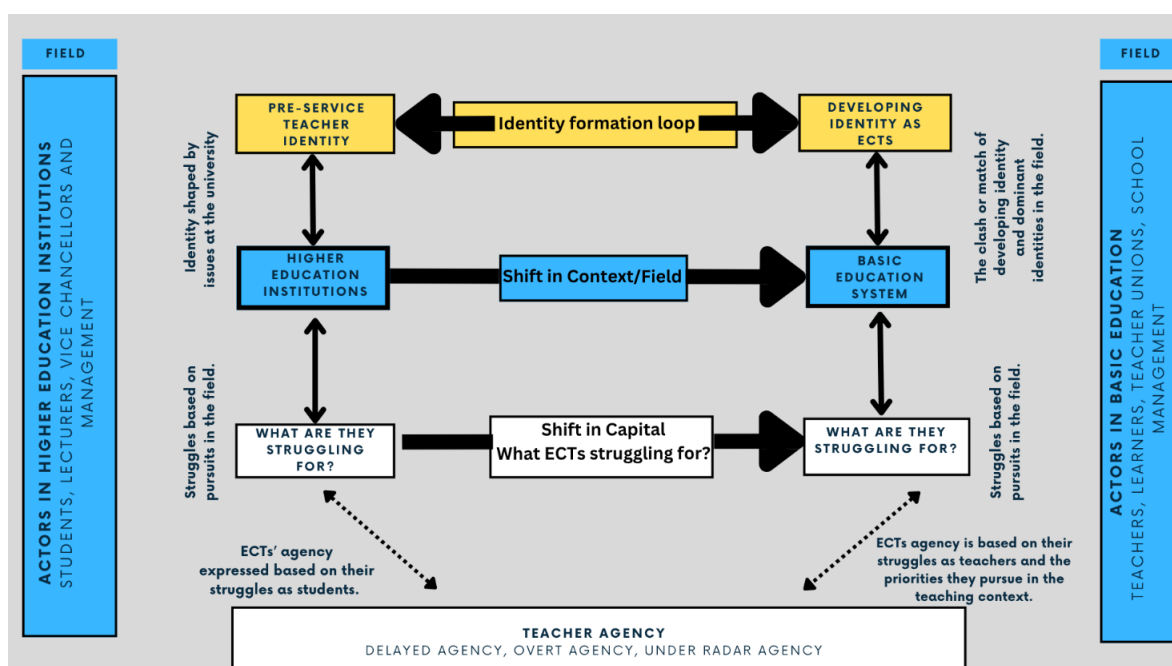
Chapter 8: The convergence of ECTs' teacher unions' choices and prevalent teaching practices

In this research study, I aimed to explore how ECTs comprehend and implement their professional practice, and how they align with existing teachers' unions. I hypothesised that ECTs who joined the profession after the #mustfall movements possess a distinct identity in professional settings, leading them to adopt transformative practices within the field. Furthermore, I hypothesised that these ECTs would seek alignment with unions to continue confronting systemic dilemmas and issues. The findings partially supported my hypothesis, indicating that ECTs deeply reflect on prevalent practices, suggesting that they enter the profession with a transformative identity. However, I was unable to determine the extent to which their transformative identity influences their teaching practices. Regarding union alignment, only a small number of ECTs chose unions to continue confronting systemic dilemmas and issues. Their reasons for joining unions were primarily focused on the services unions could provide rather than their ideological stance within the education system. One challenge I encountered in this study was the reliance on ECTs' perceptions of prevalent issues in teaching contexts and their views of unions to understand their alignment motivations. As a result, the findings present individual-level dilemmas faced by ECTs and cannot be further validated through additional research.

In Chapter 2, I established that existing literature portrays ECTs as underprepared, powerless social actors. Consequently, ECTs are marginalised in teaching contexts (Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008); where the 'old-timers' are expected to show the 'newcomers' the ropes (Lave & Wenger, 1991), that initial teacher education makes little difference in preparing teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), and that teacher education institutions fail to prepare new teachers for the complexities in the schooling system (Gravett *et al.*, 2014). This study built on these positions, revealing how ECTs' individual priorities, foundational knowledge, and professional mandates birth a new identity of new teachers who are not powerless social actors. By exploring the motivations behind why ECTs choose to affiliate with particular unions rather than others, I uncover the underlying principles guiding their professional decisions and the issues they seek to address. My findings reveal how ECTs' choices of specific teacher unions provide insights into their enactment of professional agency, a concept that encompasses the ability to make informed decisions, assert influence, and advocate for one's rights and interests. By

synthesising these findings, I aimed to show, through substantive theories and my conceptual framework, how ECTs navigate their professional landscape, particularly in relation to their resistance towards and adoption of dominant practices within the teaching contexts. While this chapter explores all the findings in general, it will point out notable differences and similarities between two groups of ECTs: those with a history of activism during university and their non-activist counterparts.

In this chapter, I rely on the framework developed in Chapter 3 (figure 3.1) as demonstrated below.



8.1 ECTs' Agenda: Towards Education Transformation

In this section, I answer two of my research questions:

- i) How do ECTs envisage a transformed education system? And
- ii) To what extent do ECTs regard themselves as agents of transformation in the basic education system? Although this section focuses broadly on the findings, I reveal the distinct findings of a specific subgroup of participants: those ECT self-identified as activists and nonactivists. It is important to recognise that all of these individuals emerge from a historical context marked by vigorous student movements, such as the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall campaigns, as well

as broader calls for transformation and free decolonised, quality education. These movements have not only influenced their educational journeys but have also shaped their identity. My research examined how individuals who emerged from intense activism enact their professional agency as teachers.

Building on previous research that examined how cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds shape teacher identities (Achinstein *et al.*, 2004), in this discussion, I argue that there are multilayered ways in which these diverse experiences gained at university influence various aspects of ECTs' professional lives. The investigation focused on how these factors affect their professional identity, engagement with teaching practices, decisions regarding union membership, and the manner in which they exercise their professional agency. As highlighted in Chapter 3, fundamental organising principles within a field validate both the field itself and the individuals who operate within it (Maton, 2014). The findings of this study show that these organising principles reveal how ECTs grapple with the dilemmas they encounter in their teaching environments. Grappling with these dilemmas significantly informs their identity and professional agency—their capacity to act independently and make choices aimed at achieving their goals.

Moreover, unions emerge as a crucial means through which these teachers can navigate their professional landscape. By providing support and resources, these organisations enable teachers to advocate for their rights, seek improvements in working conditions, and enhance their collective voice within the educational system. Ultimately, this discussion seeks to show the intricate interplay between individual experiences and broader structural factors, shedding light on how ECTs can leverage their unique backgrounds to foster professional growth and engage meaningfully with their practice. Through exploring these dynamics, I aim to contribute to a richer understanding of teacher identity formation and agency in an evolving educational landscape.

The first subsection will look at the priorities that ECTs pursue in teaching contexts, to answer the question: How do ECTs envisage a transformed education system? In the second subsection, I focus on the ECTs' developing identity and how it relates to their professional agency, answering the question: To what extent do ECTs regard themselves as agents of transformation in the basic education system?

i) ECTs' Priorities

The positioning of ECTs in relation to prevailing teaching practices is significantly shaped by their backgrounds and foundational beliefs. Their habitus, as described by Bourdieu (1991), influences their experiences within educational contexts. The broad patterns of the findings include the prevalence of classroom dilemmas that arise from the culture of teaching and learning in schools. Additionally, policies that do not align with the realities faced by ECTs in teaching contexts contribute to these dilemmas. Frustration with teachers who assess content that has not been taught, providing learners with memoranda before assessments, and outdated teaching approaches further exacerbate these issues.

The analysis shows that the diverse clusters of ideas held by ECTs directly result in them taking different professional stances. The findings revealed that there are critical areas wherein ECTs hold distinct views on the same issues, revealing the sense of professional agency, that is, the envisaged education system, response to policies, and professional development (see Table 8.4 below).

Table 8.1 ECTs' Different Stances on the Same Issues

Issue	Stance 1	Stance 2
Envisaged education system	Emphasise a transformative social agenda, willing to engage learners beyond academics, focusing on moral values and character development.	Focus more on immediate satisfaction through subject expertise and classroom interaction.
	Advocate for education as a tool for societal change and community building, inspired by personal and historical narratives.	See education as a vehicle for individual academic success, emphasising subject mastery rather than broader societal roles.
Response to Policies	Display resistance to restrictive policies, particularly those perceived to undermine academic rigour (e.g., learner progression policies).	Generally comply with policies, despite recognising their flaws, reflecting a belief that institutional guidelines are non-negotiable.
Professional Development	Seek mentorship and collaborative opportunities actively, stressing the importance of communal practice in facilitating growth.	Express dissatisfaction with the lack of support and mentorship but may not seek out alternative channels for professional development.

Self-identified activists, among other ECTs, tend to notice but are often not provided the platform to voice their concerns. There are some instances where ECTs have quickly assumed leadership positions and have been invited to contribute, wherein they actively resist conformity, advocating for innovative methodologies and rejecting perceived

outdated practices. These teachers emphasise stronger social relations (SR+) in their pursuit of effective teaching. Their identities as activists seem to empower them to challenge prevalent practices, thereby becoming advocates for transformative pedagogies. In contrast, non-activist ECTs tend to demonstrate compliance and passive resistance, expressing concerns but offering little actionable feedback. For instance, there were cases wherein ECTs highlighted leadership negligence that destabilises teaching functions, but there was no evidence of pursuing a platform to address these frustrations. While they may have robust social networks among peers, their impact on meaningful educational practices remains limited, constrained by a lack of external support and critical engagement with entrenched norms. This dynamic highlights Bourdieu's concept of the "model of practice," which describes actions as a product of the interplay between habitus, capital, and field (Swartz, 1997, pp. 141-142).

A differentiation in identity formation can be articulated through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, highlighting how varying identities among ECTs delineate their perceptions of roles in educational settings and the entrenched norms shaping their practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Self-identified activist ECTs tend to emphasise advocacy and social transformation. The findings reveal that this tendency is linked to their histories and experiences of university student activism, challenging boundaries, and seeking more socially-just educational opportunities. They continue to perceive themselves as agents of change committed to enhancing communities through education, guided by ideals of social justice (Freire, 1985). Conversely, non-activist ECTs tend to conform to established educational norms. While they genuinely care about student outcomes, their identities predominantly foreground compliance to existing practices and policies with limited critical engagement (McIntyre & Dunne, 2002).

ECTs express concerns that reveal essential aspects of their identities as teachers and their career aspirations. Both self-identified activists and non-activists share a commitment to social change and community building; however, both of these groups face resistant practices that impact how they articulate aspirations for transformational educational practices. The findings reveal that activists tend to have a deep sense of their background, which encourages them to seek inclusive practices at school in order to address socio-economic challenges. Likewise, non-activist ECTs tend to shape their identities through personal experiences or observations, focusing on what schools can do to impact the

learners' journey within the confinements of the school environment. The findings show that the type of learner both ECTs seek to produce is somewhat similar, but the motivations foregrounded are different. Both grounds exhibit stronger social relations (SR+), with activists explicitly positioning themselves as agents of transformation within the education system, while nonactivists show an emergence of the transformative trait. What is clear is that most ECTs construct their identities through a lens of social critique and advocacy, shaped by backgrounds in activism or exposure to activism. This activist's commitment to educational reform is particularly evident in cases where ECTs seek to effect societal change and where their vision aligns with empowering learners beyond the standard curriculum. Similarly, nonactivists—who show some compliance with existing norms—demonstrate awareness of necessary critiques. Seeking to produce economically competitive graduates suggests a desire to transform learners' lives.

Both activist and non-activist ECTs exhibit identities influenced by personal experiences and socio-political movements, although the degree of this influence varies. They engage with their teaching contexts in ways that prioritise student engagement and equity, reflecting a deep connection to community needs. This aligns with Paulo Freire's assertion that "education is simultaneously an act of knowing [and] a political act... it is never neutral" (1985, p. 17). The data suggests that both activists and non-activists face practices that are challenging and raise concerns about them. There are contestations in their developing identity wherein they seek different approaches in their teaching contexts. In some cases, both these groups of ECTs have to adhere to prevalent practices because of the lack of opportunities to raise their issues in formalised ways. This is critical for their identity formation, since the control exerted by those influencing the epistemic pedagogical landscape determines legitimacy in key social spheres, in this case, the teaching contexts (Jackson, 2014).

ii) ECTs' Professional Agency

It is evident in my findings that schooling environments often marginalise ECTs by way of exclusionary practices, lack of support, and not providing them with platforms to actively influence ideas within the context (Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008). The findings show that these contexts often feature resistant school cultures that can undermine the idealistic visions many ECTs hold of a transforming education system. Cherubini (2009) illustrates this by suggesting such oppressive atmospheres "figuratively drown" the enthusiastic

spirit of beginning teachers, eroding their emotional resilience and hindering their ability to navigate classroom challenges. The section will demonstrate that while exclusionary practices contribute significantly to the difficulties faced by ECTs, these individuals actively engage with these issues by raising concerns. The findings indicate there is a prevalence of classroom dilemmas that arise from the culture of teaching and learning in schools. Additionally, policies that do not align with the realities faced by ECTs in teaching contexts contribute to these dilemmas. Frustration with teachers who assess content that has not been taught, providing learners with memoranda before assessments, and outdated teaching approaches further exacerbate these issues. These ECTs' experiences come as a result of a misalignment between their idealistic expectations and the realities of their teaching contexts. The struggle these ECTs face may be exacerbated by the hierarchical organisation of schools that often expects the newest members to "pay their dues" and "survive the first few years" before earning acceptance into the school culture (Renard, 2003, p. 63). Additionally, a lack of support and guidance, which was raised by the ECTs in this study, consistently impacts their overall experiences (Kim & Cho, as cited in Botha & Rens, 2018), leading novice teachers to feel overwhelmed.

While the ECTs identify marginalising practices, the findings reveal that some ECTs' experiences have reinforced their commitment to adopting inclusive teaching methods. This is evident in the agendas they hold and the issues they raise concerns about. Rusznyak and Walton (2017) note that many educators possess an inherent will to exercise professional agency despite various adversities. The findings reveal that rather than yielding to contextual pressures, many ECTs still advocate for inclusive practices aligned with their foundational beliefs about education. Despite significant obstacles—including cultural barriers and emotional turmoil—the experiences of ECTs create a potent impetus for growth and change. This is consistent with Biesta and Tedder's (2006) emphasis that agents act through their environments, underscoring the complexity of teaching as both challenging and rewarding, requiring resilience, support, and unwavering educational ideals. Both self-identified activist and nonactivist ECTs in this study tend to exhibit their professional agency through active participation in discussions on educational policies and practices. The findings show that they criticise the current policies in place, and advocate for involvement in policy decisions that resonate with their transformative ideals, seeking reforms that enhance their teaching environments and improve educational outcomes for all students. There were two positions wherein ECTs revealed distinct views,

i) Displaying resistance to restrictive policies, particularly those perceived to undermine academic rigour (e.g., learner progression policies) and ii) Complying with policies, despite recognising their flaws, reflecting a belief that institutional guidelines are non-negotiable. The first position aligns with Darling-Hammond's (1989) concept of professional accountability, which emphasises the role of teachers as active agents, redefining their responsibilities within existing frameworks. However, findings show that ECTs who raise important issues often lack the platforms to do so and sometimes face unwelcome responses. Marshall and Anderson (2008) argue that activism can be seen as troublesome, while Paul and Smith (2000) describe non-conforming teachers as "troublemakers" (p. 137).

The ability of ECTs to articulate their voices is closely tied to their identity development and perceived agency within their contexts. The findings revealed that activist ECTs often position themselves as stakeholders discussing their roles within the educational system, exemplified during debates around the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP). Their advocacy showcases commitment to shaping educational practices. In contrast, non-activist ECTs tend to grapple with systemic constraints that inhibit their voices, leading to frustration about unnoticed insights regarding induction processes. The dynamics of school culture highlight themes of agency and voice among ECTs. The ECTs revealed a range of issues ranging from varying engagement levels with educational content and institutional expectations, representing distinct struggles. They expressed disappointment at being overlooked, which limits their ability to express opinions. In other cases, ECTs proactively engage in critical discussions, embodying effective agency committed to positive change, while in some instances, the ECTs oscillate between acceptance and desire for more assertiveness.

The findings show that ECTs frequently encounter barriers to their ability to enact their professional agency—rigid school cultures, unsupportive leadership, and limited opportunities for dialogue, that impede their ability to express concerns or propose innovative ideas. The findings reveal that ECTs tend to be frustrated over inadequate support systems, revealing how such limitations lead to internalised grievances, further reducing their capacity for proactive engagement, as highlighted by Sachs (2016). The overlap between activist and non-activist ECTs identifies a critical dilemma: the need for supportive and adaptable infrastructures that encourage teacher agency. Activists in this

study tend to embrace roles as disruptors, utilising their confidence and motivation to challenge norms and advocate for necessary changes. As Macrae (2008, p. 1) points out, activists work beyond the confines of their own classrooms to challenge assumptions about curriculum and teachers' roles. Conversely, non-activists tend to reluctantly raise critical conversations about educational improvements.

The findings reveal that there were some issues, such as the learner progression policy, that ECTs felt were out of their control since they were largely due to external pressures from bureaucratic accountability systems, discouraging them from challenging norms. Even though they raise these critiques, there is an understanding that they are being stifled within hierarchical structures, fostering passive participation (Gamble, 2010; Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, findings show that on issues that are located within the schooling environment, ECTs critically engage with issues of classroom management and develop inclusive methods reflective of equity commitments (Dunne, 2003). On one hand, the ECTs' critical stance supports their flexibility toward curricula, aligning with Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge model (1987). Conversely, ECTs' tendency to conform limits their engagement with innovative practices, as seen in some ECTs' apprehension towards school policies, indicating a superficial interaction with educational practices (Urbanski, 1998).

Ultimately, the comparison between activist and non-activist ECTs highlights fundamental disparities in agency, voice articulation, and professional positioning within educational practices. Activists tend to leverage their experiences to raise concerns, while non-activists tend to face systemic impediments without leveraging their experiences or exposure to ways of resistance in their university days. Addressing these differences is imperative for cultivating inclusive environments supportive of open dialogue and professional development across all ECT backgrounds. Recognising these distinctions is crucial for informing inclusive approaches that enable all ECTs to navigate the complexities of the teaching profession effectively. Dismantling barriers inhibiting dialogue can allow ECTs to play pivotal roles in reshaping the future of education, informed by their aspirations and broader socio-political contexts.

8.2 New teachers, New expectations: Insights into the Interface of ECTs' Union Choices and Professional Agency

The complex landscape of education requires ECTs to navigate their initial years with a keen understanding of both professional identity and the support systems available through union affiliations. By exploring social relations (SRs) and epistemic relations (ERs), we can gather insights into how these ECTs interface with their chosen unions and how that shapes their engagement in the educational environment.

i) ECTs Positioning within Union Mandates: Activists vs Non-activists

Teacher unions' founding manifestos were along racial, language, and provincial lines (Heystek & Lethoko, 2006; Mafisa, 2017). The formation of teacher unions, especially Black teachers' unions "was to fight for the rights of teachers, (e.g., to oppose strongly the implementation of the Bantu Education Act of 1953) and to pursue political interests of African teachers (e.g., the abolishment of the pass laws)" (Heystek & Lethoko, 2006, p. 223). Since then, South Africa and its education system have evolved, meaning that unions are required to adapt their founding objectives to address the current challenges. An additional important consideration is that new teachers enter the profession with reformed social and education aspirations. New teachers are no strangers to influencing the directives of unions. As seen in Chapter 2, By the 1980s, young teachers called for teacher unions to "confront the government head-on and use militancy if necessary." (Heystek & Lethoko, 2006). This call was reflective of younger teachers' distinct advocacy, which was informed by their activism experience as students. The findings (see table 8.2) revealed that there are constellation clashes wherein two groups of ECTs view the same issue differently.

Table 8.2 Constellation Clashes Wherein Two Groups of ECTs View the Same Issue Differently

Constellation	Stance 1	Stance 2
<i>Seeking Protection Clash 1</i>	Unions as representatives for members' interests, attend to grievances, etc.	Union as biased representatives work who advance self-interests, government interests or school leadership, do not attend to members' grievances.
<i>Seeking Protection Clash 2</i>	Unions as relevant for support, and their continuity is justified.	A revolution and/or complete overhaul is required.
<i>Seeking Alignment</i>	Union's history and political affiliation are deemed important, viewed in light of the inherent political nature of education.	Union's political affiliation is seen as compromising neutrality and raises an issue of conflict of interests.

Consistently, the evidence shows that activists in this study tend to identify themselves as change-makers within the educational system, motivated by a legacy of political action and social justice through their activism. There is an emphasis on their humble background and commitment to improving educational equity. Their activism past, rooted in university movements, cultivates a strong alignment with unions that advocate for broader societal reforms. For instance, SADTU's historical mission underscores this sentiment by aspiring toward a transformation of education that dismantles apartheid legacies (Kumalo & Skosana, 2014). For the activist ECTs, a union's history and political affiliation are seen as important, viewed in light of the inherent political nature of education. ECTs in this study display stronger social relations (SR+) when discussing unions linked to progressive movements such as SADTU, which champion radical educational change informed by historical struggles against apartheid. Their affiliation with SADTU reflects not only their personal narratives of activism but also a deeper socio-political agenda aligned with their development as teachers. This connection demonstrates stronger social relations (SR+), allowing them to experience a sense of belonging and collectivity necessary for effective advocacy.

The voice of activist ECTs emerges strongly, enabling them to articulate concerns about local practices that do not align with their vision for education reform. For example, the findings reveal that their assertiveness about joining a union to enact systemic changes illustrates their proactive stance, indicating a robust engagement with the union's political framework. This leads to a greater professional agency, empowering them to push against norms that clash with their aspirations, akin to the potential discussed by Toom *et al.* (2015) regarding the ability of teachers "to act in new and creative ways" (p. 615).

However, this strong voice can present dilemmas; the findings reveal that activists encounter resistance from established union members who prioritise maintaining cohesiveness over endorsing transformation. The ECTs noted the tension experienced when attempting to introduce new ideas, revealing potential conflicts within union spaces. This shows that even after joining a union, there is a critical view of the structure within. Such encounters highlight the complexities of exercising agency within collective structures, suggesting that while their agency allows for opposing voices, they may also face isolation when advocating for transformative perspectives.

In contrast, the findings show that for the non-activist ECTs, there are tensions around alliances of some unions and the government that employs them. These ECTs view the union's political affiliation as compromising neutrality, and raise the issue of conflict of interests. As such, these ECTs tend to adopt a more conformative position when choosing their unions, often joining based on influences from peers or established colleagues. The findings reveal that ECTs often cite feeling compelled to join SADTU due to its popularity, which signifies a reliance on social relations rather than an intrinsic belief in union advocacy. Unlike activists striving for collective change, these individuals frame their union membership primarily as a mechanism for job security rather than a platform for transformative action. This dynamic showcases stronger social relations (SR+) because their reasons for affiliation are not grounded in reflective understanding of the union's role but are instead influenced by external pressures and perceived needs for acceptance. This lack of critical engagement points to an absence of the transformative potential associated with union participation discussed by Hindle (1991), who notes the disconnect between non-active affiliations and the educational movement stakes. These ECTs expressed appreciation for their unions, but they simultaneously conveyed scepticism, highlighting that they often feel disconnected or excluded from union conversations. Their positions communicate a profound sense of disconnection, signaling a missed opportunity for engagement and empowerment and the challenges highlighted regarding the need for recognition of diverse identities and their contributions. They experience social relations characterised more by assimilation and compliance than community; interactions with unions become obligations rather than platforms for active involvement. This limited engagement creates barriers to enhancing their agency, portraying them as passive recipients of information rather than empowered advocates for their profession. Their failure to leverage the potential of unions as vehicles for

professional growth runs counter to the ideals stipulated by LCT knowledge-building, which emphasises the importance of engaging with knowledge practices to create social justice outcomes (Maton, 2014).

ii) ECTs' Shared Experiences and Diverging Outcomes

Despite observable differences between activists and non-activists, several trends highlight their shared reasons for aligning with unions. Both groups exhibit a desire for protection and support, viewing unions as critical avenues for securing their rights. This mutual perception demonstrates the importance of social structures established through union networks, creating a sense of solidarity among teachers navigating their careers. Two sets of stances show the fundamental differing views on seeking protection, wherein for one group of ECTs unions are seen as neutral representatives who work for members' interests, attend to grievances, and unions are seen as relevant for support, and their continuity is justified. However, on the contrary, unions are seen as biased wherein representatives work for self-interests, government interests, or school leadership, do not attend to members' grievances, and that a revolution and/or complete overhaul is required. Nevertheless, the difference demonstrates why and how ECTs align with unions, revealing fundamental disparities in their agency. While activists strive to leverage union mechanisms for transformative change and aspire to reshape educational philosophies, non-activists predominantly seek to maintain stability and conformity without questioning the status quo.

The findings point to how social relations (SR) shape ECTs' perceptions and experiences. Activist ECTs who align with SADTU often express strong emotional ties to their unions and broader social agendas that reflect and champion equality within education. As encapsulated in SADTU's priorities,

“We teachers of South Africa, having committed ourselves to the transformation of education and dedicated ourselves to the development of an education system which is fully accessible, equal and qualitative, free of apartheid legacy and which the just expression of the will of the people—as enshrined in the Constitution of the country hereby proclaim the need for a single teachers' union in our land” (SADTU, 2001, Section 1).

In the same breath, activist ECTs are critical of the established order of the union, criticise it, and seek to transform it. In contrast, non-activist ECTs exhibit more utilitarian approaches, emphasising personal comfort over broader ethical or political engagements. The difference in value systems reveals how different motivations root their identities, influencing their level of assertiveness and agency in challenging existing norms. Epistemologically, both groups grapple with contrasting access to knowledge. Activist ECTs possess the historical insight and critical discourse necessary for engaging with pedagogical transformation, while non-activist ECTs often feel inadequately equipped to make informed decisions about their alignment. This divide further compounds the differences between those empowered by accumulated knowledge about the political landscape of education and those who struggle with a lack of awareness regarding how to enhance their practices and advocate for themselves amid a familiar but oppressive space.

In conclusion, the distinct experiences of activist and non-activist ECTs highlight a complex interplay involving their union choices, professional agency, and broader identity formations. While activists tend to utilise unions as vehicles to advance educational ideologies and initiate meaningful change, non-activists tend to find themselves negotiating compliance and existing relationships to secure personal stability and inclusion. Recognising these patterns offers valuable insights for educational stakeholders aiming to devise strategies that empower all ECTs, encouraging unions to facilitate environments that nurture reflective practices, foster inclusivity, and strengthen individual contributions within collective spaces. By doing this, unions can “retain the complexion of the historical character of the political culture of the period before the dawn of democracy in 1994” (Mafisa, 2017, p. 10554), while recognising that the social actors in this day and age come with different stances and priorities, and unions must reflect these. By ensuring that the voices of both activist-minded and compliant ECTs are acknowledged and amplified, the potential exists for greater transformation across the education system, ultimately benefitting teachers and learners alike.

8.3 Addressing the Literature Gap: Contributing to New Knowledge

A significant gap in the literature exists in how ECTs are perceived during their transition into the teaching profession. Traditional narratives often depict these individuals as passive and compliant subjects, subjected to various external forces without agency or influence (Botha & Rens, 2018; Steyn, 2004; Whitelaw *et al.*, 2008). The experiences and

priorities of ECTs are receiving long overdue attention. Mabunda and McKay (2024) argue that professional learning communities (PLCs) provide safe spaces for ECTs to experiment, share experiences, and engage in collective reflection and problem-solving. This collaborative environment creates social capital, which is crucial for confronting early career dilemmas and enhancing their professional development and agency (Mabunda & McKay, 2024). My study extends on these findings, conceptualising teacher unions as a potential space for engaging prevalent issues in practice and how ECTs are activating their professional identities in the school and in their choice of unions. Both studies show that the ECTs are not blank slates but come with their own educational histories, political agendas, and professional interests that can either act as a code match or a code clash with their school contexts. In response to this critical oversight, I have drawn upon Cochran-Smith's concept of "teaching against the grain" to propose a new perspective on ECT identity within the current socio-educational landscape. Cochran-Smith (1991) articulates that 'teaching against the grain' not only arises from but also promotes critical insights concerning macro-level power dynamics, labour relations, and ideological constructs. She further highlights that

teaching against the grain is also deeply embedded in the culture and history of teaching at individual schools and in the biographies of particular teachers and their individuals or collaborative efforts to alter curricula, raise questions about practices, and resist in appropriate decisions (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 280).

The findings of this study suggest the emergence of a different kind of ECT, one significantly shaped by experiences rooted in the university environment, an environment characterised by activism and social consciousness, particularly as exemplified by movements such as #FeesMustFall. Transitioning from the academic world into the teaching context entails more than just a superficial change in the field. It represents a profound transformation—marked by shifts in operational contexts, changes in forms of capital, and redefinitions of personal and professional identities. Crucially, this transformation does not imply a straightforward replacement of one identity for another; instead, it signifies an ongoing interplay, a feedback loop, wherein ECTs continuously negotiate and reconcile their accumulated experiences from school and university with their evolving roles in the teaching context.

The ECTs involved in this study have navigated power struggles and struggles for legitimacy throughout their university experiences, particularly in terms of confronting issues related to tuition fees and funding disparities. The shift into their teaching roles presents its own unique set of dilemmas. For many in this cohort, these obstacles include tensions between their aspirations for transformative education and the entrenched resistance found in teaching environments; compliance with educational policies that frequently conflict with their pedagogical ideals; inadequate resources, which hinder their ability to deliver high-quality instruction; feelings of being unsupported; and discord between established pedagogical methods and their personally preferred approaches.

What emerges is a reliance on *habitus*, the set of embedded practices and experiences that inform their understanding of dilemmas faced in their teaching contexts (Bourdieu, 1991). ECTs often find themselves questioning prevailing pedagogical practices (Cochran-Smith, 1991), indicating a critical engagement with teaching norms rather than a mere acceptance of the status quo. While this study does not solely focus on the strategies employed by ECTs to overcome these obstacles, several instances illustrate how they actively seek alternatives to address the difficulties inherent in their professions. Teacher unions constitute one avenue through which ECTs endeavour to tackle the dilemmas faced in their teaching contexts. For most participants in this research, the decision to join a particular union stems from a thoughtful process, taking into account considerations related to social relations, which were driven dispositions and, at times, epistemic relations, which based on knowledge-driven reasons. This insight highlights the active role that ECTs assume within their professional landscapes—they are not passive recipients of circumstances but rather thoughtful agents who critically reflect on what they desire to achieve in their educational settings.

Unlike studies that categorise ECTs as passive and disempowered subjects, this investigation reveals their proactive engagement in the continuous process of defining and re-defining their identities within their teaching environments. They grapple with inconsistencies in values and priorities, and they are determined to explore and advocate for viable solutions to the dilemmas they encounter. This connected endeavour engages their *habitus*, ultimately informing their capital within the field and the evolving identities they adopt. Through framing these complex interactions and insights, this study contributes meaningfully to bridging gaps in existing literature surrounding ECTs,

highlighting their active participation and critical reflection in shaping their educational journeys and professional identities.

The proactive engagement of ECTs with their professional environment provides a clear answer to how they envisage and enact their agency in their school and beyond. Professional agency for this cohort is not simply about performing tasks; it is intentionally transformative, driven by an underlying sense of social consciousness (*habitus*) derived from their activist histories. They envisage their agency through a dual commitment: critical reflection on established practices and strategic affiliation to collective bodies.

Within their school contexts, ECTs enact agency by adopting a stance of critical questioning, which aligns strongly with Cochran-Smith's concept of 'teaching against the grain.' They do not passively accept the status quo, instead, they utilize their foundational knowledge from university now enriched by their political *habitus*, to engage in a code clash with the school's established norms. This is seen in several ways, that is, firstly, challenging pedagogical norms wherein ECTs demonstrate agency through the quiet, daily act of questioning or subtly reforming their own classroom practices in defiance of ineffective or entrenched pedagogical methods. While large-scale, overt resistance is often constrained by their limited capital, their professional agency is enacted in the choice to seek out alternatives to address the dilemmas, focusing on what they can control in their immediate teaching domain. Secondly, they employ resilience and a will to consensus not as a sign of compliance, but as a strategic manoeuvre to survive the demanding, dilemmatic spaces of the field while preserving their critical perspective. This allows them to avoid outright marginalisation while positioning themselves for potential, gradual change, a form of covert agency. Their focus is often on navigating issues of ethical conduct, policies, and professional learning. Thirdly, ECTs enact agency by making conscious, value-driven decisions about their practice, informed by their new identity that prioritises systemic improvement. This contrasts sharply with the passive assimilation, instead showing ECTs as developing practitioners actively defining and redefining their role.

Beyond the confines of the classroom, ECTs extend their professional agency through strategic alignment with teacher unions. This union choice is not merely an

administrative or financial decision; it is a deliberate act of socio-political affiliation that addresses the dilemmas encountered in the school environment.

The decision to join a union is the most explicit form of collective agency enacted by this cohort, fulfilling their need to confront macro-level issues that are too large to tackle individually. The motivation to join is framed by key reasons identified in the study, each representing a specific manifestation of their agency in response to a professional need. For the activist cohort, in particular, the union represents an extension of activism and political affiliation, serving as a formal, sanctioned space to continue the struggle for legitimacy and transformation that began on campus. Furthermore, the analysis using LCT's Specialisation codes revealed the mechanism of this agency. Their choice is often a conscious effort to align their habitus and professional values with the union that most legitimates their own vision for the future of teaching. By making an informed choice for collective action, ECTs are actively contributing to the redefinition of the field itself, projecting their activist-informed vision onto the larger professional landscape. They envisage their agency as a powerful, necessary force for education transformation, a vision that their union alignment is intended to help realise. This demonstrates that for the ECTs in this study, agency is simultaneously individual (critical reflection) and collective (strategic affiliation).

This study makes a significant contribution to the field by challenging the conventional portrayal of ECTs as passive recipients of institutional norms. It introduces a new framework for understanding the professional identity of ECTs, particularly those who were shaped by recent social movements. The research demonstrates that these teachers see themselves as agents of change rather than just novices, entering the profession with their own unique histories and political ideologies. This perspective provides a crucial extension to existing literature, which often overlooks the critical agency and transformative potential of new teachers. Furthermore, the study adds nuance to the discussion of teacher unions, revealing them as spaces where ECTs can either exercise their professional identities to advocate for systemic change or simply seek personal and professional stability. By drawing a clear distinction between activist and non-activist ECTs, the findings reveal how backgrounds and motivations shape professional practices and union engagement, offering a more complex view than is currently available. Ultimately, this research posits that this new generation of teachers is defined by their

social consciousness and desire to ‘teach against the grain,’ underscoring the important role they can play in driving positive transformations within the educational system.

8.4 Implication for Teacher Preparation, Recruitment, and Induction

The emergence of a renewed wave of student activism since 2015, exemplified by movements like #RhodesMustFall, #TransformWits, and #FeesMustFall, has significantly reshaped the higher education landscape. This transformation raises critical questions regarding how these ECTs translate their activist experiences into their professional roles within the basic education system. Understanding this transition can greatly inform teacher preparation, recruitment, and induction processes.

i) Learning Towards Professional Teaching Standards

Professional teaching standards offer a framework through which interactions in the teaching profession are guided by specific benchmarks to promote successful teaching practices. SACE Professional Teaching Standards (PTSs), with a particular focus on SACE PTSs’ central claims, posit that professional standards will promote a professional teaching practice and enact a comprehensive teaching culture; inform and strengthen the teaching profession; and that professional teaching standards will create and develop a common understanding of professional teaching practice (SACE, 2018). The findings from this research distinctly demonstrate how the experiences and actions of ECTs resonate with four critical SACE PTSs. First, the findings emphasise Standard 1: *Teaching is based on ethical commitment to the learning and well-being of all learners*, as many ECTs emerged from activist backgrounds and advocate for inclusive teaching methodologies that prioritise student welfare. Second, in relation to Standard 2: *Teachers collaborate with others to support teaching, learning, and their professional development*, the responsiveness of ECTs to prevailing educational challenges reflects a desire for collaborative engagement, although the extent of their participation in union activities varies significantly. Third, the alignment of ECTs with Standard 3: *Teachers support social justice and the redress of inequalities within their educational institutions and society more broadly*, as evidenced by ECTs’ focus on equity and community-building over mere academic success. Lastly, connecting with Standard 4: *Teaching requires that well-managed and safe learning environments are created and maintained within reason*. ECTs’ discussions surrounding their frustrations with existing classroom practices reveal

not only their aspirations for improved learning conditions but also the barriers they face due to systemic factors within their schools. This interplay between standards and findings showcases how ECTs grapple with their identities and authority amidst marginalisation in teaching communities. Thus, analysing these professional teaching standards allows us to ascertain their potential to nurture collaboration and create a unified value system among ECTs and their more experienced colleagues, ultimately enriching the discourse on professional agency within the educational landscape.

This notion invites us to ask: Are ECTs sufficiently equipped to navigate this challenging terrain? While their journey is fraught with dilemmas as they reconcile their activism informed by their educational experiences with the realities of an entrenched traditional school system, the question is if schools are ready to embrace the emergence of a new kind of ECTs. The study prompts reflection on whether ECTs seek merely to fit into existing structures or endeavour to innovate and transform them, sparking necessary debates around power dynamics and agency in their professional contexts. Emerging tensions stemming from historical exclusions and current systemic inadequacies inform the second aspect of SACE's claims regarding professional development frameworks. For ECTs, acknowledging the oppressive residues of previous educational policies necessitates specific preparation focused on inclusivity and diversity in learning environments. Retaining the essence of their training while conforming to the school's prevailing practices presents a duality that many may struggle with.

Thus, mentorship and structural support become crucial. Without adequate guidance, ECTs face potential disillusionment, where their aspirations clash with entrenched school cultures that may resist inclusive practices. Moreover, union membership becomes a pivotal decision for ECTs, offering pathways to collective action against these entrenched norms while providing support networks. The intricate relationship between ECTs and teacher unions reveals another dimension of their professional journey. Unions offer a platform for ECTs to advocate for the ethical standards they are taught during their education. The choice of which union to join can reflect their aspirations, fears, and strategies for affecting change. Understanding these choices as sociological phenomena indicates how ECTs navigate their professional landscapes—seeking empowerment, advocacy, and affiliation with like-minded peers. Their decisions may also be influenced by the need to align with established norms or challenge existing hierarchies. SACE's

claims about professional teaching standards encapsulate a complex interplay of enhanced identity, transformation capabilities, and ongoing professional development for ECTs. As these educators enter an education system striving for inclusivity and systemic change, their journeys will be defined by how well they can balance assimilation with their aspirational roles as change agents. The broader implication points toward a collective responsibility in nurturing a supportive environment that not only prepares these new teachers for immediate dilemmas but equips them with the resilience and agency required to instigate lasting change in South African education. The question is, could this mean a promise of a new dawn in professional teaching communities wherein there is a full integration of ECTs in the communities and a shared meaning and understanding is established between ECTs and established teachers?

ii) ECTs' Experience of Dilemmas in Teaching Contexts: Resilience and Will to Consensus

While SACE PTSs seek to promote integrated teaching contexts, ECTs in this study navigate various dilemmas within their teaching contexts. In this study, three code clashes were noticeable in ECT's priorities—seen when engaging with three issues, that is, i) envisaged education system, ii) response to policies, and iii) professional development. On the union alignment, code clashes exist between the seeking protection and seeking alignment constellations. The noticeable clash is between the knower code, knowledge code and relativist code. Drawing from the findings presented, this exploration highlights the dual pressures ECTs face in striving to enact their ideal teaching practices while contending with existing institutional norms and policies that often conflict with their aspirations. Central to this narrative are the concepts of 'dilemmatic spaces,' resilience, and the 'will to consensus,' which frame ECTs' professional journeys amidst systemic dilemmas.

The notion of dilemmatic spaces—borrowed from Honig's (1994) framework—refers to the inherent conflicts experienced by individuals within educational settings. In this context, dilemmas arise from competing values and priorities, leading ECTs to grapple with questions around the right course of action when faced with conflicting directives. These dilemmatic spaces reflect broader systemic issues impacting teacher identities and practices. Roblin and Margalef (2013) delineate two types of dilemmas: interpersonal dilemmas, which stem from collaboration and relationship dynamics within a community,

and intrapersonal dilemmas, related to individual pedagogical choices and classroom management strategies. Findings reveal that ECTs in this study navigate relationships with established educators and adhere to potentially outdated bureaucratic policies, which create a complex web of dilemmas. Each decision, whether to conform, resist, or negotiate these tensions shapes their paths forward. The policies governing educational practices—such as learner progression and annual teaching plans—often define the boundaries of these dilemmatic spaces. Notable among the frustrations expressed by ECTs is the conflict stemming from administrative expectations, which can hinder educational integrity. They may feel compelled to adhere to policies that compromise their professional ideals, breeding frustration and disillusionment.

For ECTs in this study, their reasons for union alignment reveal code clashes in the dilemmas that manifest not only in interpersonal conflicts with colleagues or school administration but also in intrapersonal struggles concerning pedagogical approaches and classroom management strategies. On the knowledge code, ECTs often explicitly state identifiable procedures and processes that influenced their alignment. However, this code clashes with the knower code, where ECTs align with unions based on personal motivation. Both of these codes clash with the relativist code, where ECTs do not provide any grounds for alignment. The essence of these ECTs' experiences is rooted in the tensions created by institutional expectations, personal aspirations, and the realities of their working conditions. As articulated by Fransson and Grannas (2013), these dilemmatic spaces are constructed socially and relationally, highlighting that the dilemmas teachers face are often embedded within systemic frameworks rather than isolated incidents, which dictates that they seek systematic ways to address them. ECTs' union choices involve grappling with external pressures ranging from departmental policies to entrenched school cultures characterised by power imbalances. These external forces demand a high level of adaptability as new teachers strive to establish their professional identities while addressing their foundational beliefs and pedagogical aspirations. The presence of established teachers can create a landscape rife with both mentorship opportunities and potential marginalisation, intensifying the dilemma of balancing respect for authority with the need for self-assertion.

Wiredu's (1996) concept of 'will to consensus' embodies the philosophy of seeking collaborative solutions amidst conflicts. By transitioning from adversarial methods of

dialogue traditionally practiced within many educational systems toward one that embraces consensus-building, ECTs could have an avenue to advocate for change while respecting the diverse perspectives of their colleagues. Through adopting a culture of negotiation and dialogue, ECTs can better navigate their roles within hierarchically structured education systems. Engaging peers in discourse aimed at reaching common goals allows new teachers to cultivate agency and assert their educational ideals effectively. This approach, rooted in historical practices of consensus in communal decision-making, recognises that addressing conflict while valuing minority opinions strengthens the teaching community. Despite the potential for fostering collaborative environments, ECTs in this study often struggle with institutional resistance to transformative practices. Factors such as entrenched power dynamics, normative expectations from mentors and administrators, and systemic constraints may inhibit open dialogue and collective problem-solving. Thus, cultivating a willingness for consensus necessitates a conscious effort from both ECTs and experienced educators to champion facility over friction.

Consequently, resilience, defined as the ability to withstand and adapt to stressors, plays an essential role for ECTs grappling with the demands of their profession. As Day *et al.* (2011) note, the cultivation of resilience is critically dependent on contextual factors established by school leadership, including collegial support and effective communication systems. Given the high attrition rates among educators, fostering resilient practices is crucial for sustaining job fulfilment and educational quality. Resilience is not merely an innate trait but can be developed through supportive environments. Research illustrates how protective factors such as familial support, mentoring, and community engagement fortify educators against adversity (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 2013). The collective experiences of ECTs in this study indicate the significance of structured support frameworks that validate their professional development needs. As these ECTs encounter the emotional landscape characterised by the highs and lows of teaching, a community of practice becomes invaluable. They express desires for mentorship opportunities and collaborative exchanges with seasoned teachers to facilitate personal and professional growth. Schools that prioritise nurturing structures can empower ECTs to embrace dilemmas as learning opportunities.

As per the findings, seeking effective school leadership fosters resilience, allowing ECTs to interact responsively with their students without fear of burnout. Ongoing training and tailored professional development activities empower ECTs with knowledge about their rights and responsibilities, thus enhancing their confidence and agency in practice. Building collaborative relationships with peers can significantly support ECTs' resilience. Experiences of sharing, mentorship, and community strengthen their professional identities and provide emotional support, illustrating the interconnected nature of resilience and social relations. While ECTs express a desire for support and solidarity within their educational environments, many articulate feelings of disillusionment regarding union representation and efficacy. ECTs' perceptions that unions prioritise governmental interests over those of members exemplify how perceived disconnects can undermine ECTs' professional identity and resilience. Moreover, the struggle for a voice within established practices highlights the inherent dilemmas faced by ECTs as they transition from activist students to agents of change within educational institutions. The desire to contribute positively to pedagogical reform can clash with existing norms, presenting another layer of complexity as ECTs seek validation and recognition in their roles.

A will-to-consensus approach could enable ECTs to navigate external pressures collaboratively, fostering an environment of solidarity against potential adversities posed by hierarchical systems. By encouraging inclusive discussions, ECTs can tackle issues of marginalisation and seek representation for diverse voices within their schools, promoting a culture of equity and justice. The application of consensus empowers ECTs to shift power dynamics, facilitating engagement strategies that validate their aspirations while challenging outdated practices. Equipped with a willingness to cultivate consensus, ECTs emerge not only as participants in their professional landscapes but also as advocates for broader systemic reforms. Understanding these dilemmas—and how ECTs endeavour to resolve them—is critical for shaping effective pathways toward improving educational practices and fostering environments in which teachers can flourish. This analysis underscores the need for educational leaders, policymakers, and teacher unions to recognise and support the nuanced dilemmas faced by ECTs. By investing in their resilience and fostering cultures of collaboration, the educational system can harness the transformative potential of ECTs, ultimately benefitting students and the broader society.

The interplay between resilience and the will to consensus emerges as crucial for ECTs aiming to reconcile their aspirations with the realities of their professional environment. Through awareness of their positions within dilemmatic spaces, ECTs can leverage resilience to adapt and evolve amid pressure while utilising consensual strategies to engage meaningfully with colleagues. The journey of ECTs in the study navigates a landscape laden with complexities, yet framed by opportunity. Their aspirations for educational reform supported by resilience and collaborative engagement hold the promise for meaningful change within South Africa's educational context.

iii) Teacher Preparation, Recruitment, and Induction

The current waves of activism highlight the necessity for teacher preparation programmes to integrate themes of social justice and equity, and transformation within their curricula. As ECTs move from an environment that fosters critical thinking and activism into the structured realm of basic education, it becomes essential for teacher education institutions to emphasise the importance of agency and transformative practices. By preparing prospective teachers to envision and enact changes in educational settings, programmes can encourage them to carry forward their activist spirits and commitment to social justice into their teaching practices. Such a shift in teacher preparation could include coursework that discusses the dynamics of educational equity, schooling structures that reproduce inequality, how exclusion is perpetuated in prevalent practices, pedagogy centred around critical consciousness, and practical engagement with local communities. Additionally, integrating mentorship opportunities with alumni who are actively pursuing transformation within schools can provide ECTs with real-world examples of how to embody their ideals in practice.

Recruitment strategies must also evolve to align with the values and motivations of ECTs who are passionate about societal transformation. Traditional recruitment methods may fall short in accommodating those candidates who view teaching as a platform for change. Therefore, recruitment campaigns should be designed to showcase the potential for activism within the teaching profession. Job descriptions should highlight the school's commitment to social justice, community involvement, and collaborative efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes. Moreover, during recruitment processes, school leaders and hiring panels can engage applicants in discussions surrounding their views on educational reform, their past experiences in activism, and how they foresee their role as

agents of change within the classroom. This approach not only identifies individuals who are aligned with a transformative mission but also reinforces the notion that teaching is laden with opportunities for advocacy and activism.

Induction programmes present a crucial opportunity for supporting ECTs as they transition into the teaching profession. These programmes can play a vital role in creating environments that allow for continued expression of agency and activism. Rather than adopting a purely prescriptive approach, induction should encourage open dialogues about the realities of the classroom, the challenges of enacting change, and ways to operate within existing institutional frameworks while still advocating for transformative practices. Implementing mentoring systems in which established teachers support ECTs can help bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application of their activist principles. Opportunities for ECTs to participate in school-based initiatives or partnerships with teacher unions can foster a stronger sense of community and shared purpose. Such mechanisms can serve as platforms for ECTs to voice concerns, advocate for their needs, and work alongside peers towards common objectives in teaching and learning.

Teacher unions have historically functioned as advocates for teachers' rights and interests. The study suggests that unions can serve as instrumental spaces for ECTs to realise their professional agency. Analysing how ECTs align themselves with specific unions can unveil important insights into their perceptions of power, collaboration, and activism within their new roles. Unions can enhance their relevance by connecting with ECTs' transformational goals, offering opportunities for engagement in union-driven initiatives that resonate with their activist backgrounds. This alignment gives ECTs a platform to amplify their voices, navigate educational dilemmas, and potentially influence broader systemic reforms within the education sector.

8.5 Limitations of the Study

Research findings are generally partial and provisional, and this is the case for this study too. Some limitations are from the sampling of data and some from the methodological choices. While this study has provided valuable insights into the alignment of ECTs with teacher unions and their professional practices, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the diversity in this research was limited. This case study analysed ECTs from specific backgrounds, which may not fully represent all ECTs across various geographical locations, teaching contexts, or socio-economic circumstances. Consequently, the experiences and perspectives presented might lack generalisability, suggesting that future research should involve a larger and more diverse sample to capture a broader array of experiences.

Another significant limitation is the self-selection bias encountered in participant recruitment. The individuals interviewed were primarily selected based on their self-declarations of activism or non-activism during their university experiences. This self-selecting sample may lead to inherent bias, as those with stronger commitments or more firmly held ideological stances might have been more inclined to participate. Therefore, the responses gathered could reflect a skewed representation of the broader ECT community, potentially overlooking the nuanced views of less-engaged individuals.

The qualitative nature of the research also presents certain constraints. While employing qualitative methodologies offers rich, context-specific insights, it can introduce subjectivity in data interpretation. My biases and perspectives may influence how my findings are articulated and understood. Additionally, the reliance on interviews with the activists vs non-activists highlights the potential for response bias, wherein participants may choose to present themselves in a manner they perceive as favourable, thus affecting the authenticity of the data collected.

The evolving context of this study further limits its findings. Reflecting a specific moment marked by recent social movements and educational reforms, the motivations, agency, and union engagements of ECTs may evolve over time as political and educational landscapes change. Longitudinal studies would, therefore, provide deeper insights into how these dynamics shift under varying circumstances, enhancing our understanding of long-term trends. In recognising these limitations, it becomes evident that future studies should aim to address these gaps, adopting broader samples, analysing union structures, capturing longitudinal changes, and employing mixed-method approaches that include quantitative measures. Such efforts would ultimately enrich our understanding of the evolving space surrounding ECTs and their professional identities.

8.6 My Reflections

Transformation has always been a core aspect of my professional and personal identity, and as I take a moment to reflect on this research journey, I am reminded of the deep passion I possess for the success of new teachers within the South African education system. I wholeheartedly believe that these individuals hold the potential to drive significant change within our education system. As articulated in the introduction of this thesis, my nearly five years of experience as a teacher, coupled with my aspirations for transforming the education sector, led me to align myself with the SADTU. As such, writing this thesis has been an emotional rollercoaster—a profound exploration that delves into the many dilemmas I faced as a new teacher, while simultaneously confronting the harsh reality that ECTs today continue to grapple with the same issues. This reflective journey has clarified the complexities surrounding efforts to advocate for meaningful changes in my school without the backing of the dominant union structure. The lesson learned here is that it is not uncommon for ECTs to seek support from unions to navigate their day-to-day professional concerns, including the often-stifling nature of certain teaching practices. These motivations echo my own experiences and were fundamental in my decision to join a union.

In conceptualising this research, I made a conscious effort to foreground the idea of agency, addressing a notable gap in the literature that tends to portray ECTs as passive subjects entering into a complex schooling system. Moving away from the reductionist view, I framed their experiences and identities—shaped significantly during their university journeys—to emphasise that they are not merely beginner teachers but a distinct type of new teacher. This perspective is particularly meaningful to me because I belong to a generation that emerged from an activism-charged university environment, which substantially influenced my identity formation as I entered the teaching profession.

My personal mission, as I go forward, is rooted in a desire to support and empower new teachers, ensuring they can make substantial contributions to the educational field. By encouraging these newly qualified educators to embrace their professional agency, we can unlock the potential to reinforce their confidence and effectiveness in practice. Therefore, this study has equipped me with invaluable tools to traverse this complex journey and to continuously reflect on how we conceive of what it means to be a new teacher. Through

this process, I hope to inspire a wave of proactive teachers committed to effecting transformative change within our schools and beyond.

8.7 Conclusion

This research has sought to explore the intersection of activism, professional agency, and union affiliation among ECTs within the basic education system in the context of recent student activism. The findings underscore the significance of ECTs' transformative ideals as they navigate their roles in a tightly regulated educational landscape shaped by previous experiences as activists in higher education. This study reveals that the identity formation of ECTs is not merely shaped by institutional expectations, but also by their aspirations for meaningful change in educational practices. The analysis highlights that ECTs envision a transformed education system that promotes social justice, equity, and critical engagement. Their active participation in teacher unions emerges as a vital avenue through which they can express their professional agency and advocate for systemic changes. The choice of union affiliation, rather than being a mere formality, is profoundly linked to their values and perceptions of what it means to be a teacher in today's sociopolitical climate.

This thesis has demonstrated the critical intersection between ECTs' union choices and their professional practices, revealing a complexity that shapes their identities within the education spaces. Through a nuanced exploration of both activist and non-activist ECTs, I have captured distinct narratives that highlight not only differing motivations but also contrasting strategies in facing systemic dilemmas. Activist ECTs, driven by their historical ties to social movements, embody an ethos of change and advocacy, positioning themselves as proactive agents of reform in a space where they often encounter resistance. Their activism informs their union affiliations and energises their commitments to transformative pedagogy, emphasising strong epistemic engagement with both educational content and social justice.

Conversely, the experiences of non-activist ECTs reflect a more constrained approach, primarily rooted in compliance and a quest for stability. While they acknowledge the need for support from their unions, their affiliation tends to function more as a safety net rather than a platform for advocacy. The insights gleaned from their narratives reveal a significant disconnect from the broader dynamics influencing teacher unions, suggesting

a pressing need for these teachers to cultivate critical agency and engage actively in discussions that shape educational policy and practice.

This analysis demonstrates that both groups of ECTs occupy vital roles within the educational ecosystem, yet their capacity for agency varies significantly based on their backgrounds and experiences. It is crucial for educational stakeholders, that is, schools, teacher preparation programmes, and unions to recognise and harness these differences to create more inclusive frameworks that value all voices. By creating environments where ECTs can exercise their professional agency and articulate their aspirations without fear of marginalisation, the potential for positive structural changes in education can increase exponentially.

In moving forward, it is essential to continue exploring how ECTs can bridge the divide between their activist ideals and the realities of educational practice, ensuring that their collective journey contributes not only to personal growth but also to a more effective education system. Ultimately, embracing the diversity of experiences among ECTs will enrich the educational narrative, cultivating an environment where every teacher's voice matters as we collectively strive towards impactful transformations in our schools and communities.

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APPENDICES

Data Instruments

Appendix A: Survey – New Teachers:

N:B this survey has been adapted for online use: Link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSciZJJHugzKW3pTJMx00f02Rn_WlhRBHMXtMcRbx5PdVdPAg/viewform?usp=sf_link

Email Address:

Consent:

Yes, I would like to participate and I agree that my responses can be used in the PhD study by Philip Hlatshwayo/

No I do not wish to participate in this research

When did you qualify as a teacher?: 2015/2016/2017/2018/2019/2020/2021

Qualification:

Have you joined a teacher Union?: Yes/No

If so, which union did you choose to join?

SADTU

NAPTOSA

NATU

SATU

PEU

Other

I prefer not say.

I participated in the following activities during my undergraduate degree / teacher education:

- *Student political organizations;*
- *Student clubs and societies (non-political);*
- *Student Leadership Structures at University;*
- *Youth leadership in my community/religious organization.;*
- *Volunteer work; Sporting activities at university or in my community;*
- *None of the above;*
- *Other:*

Which kind of school best describes where you work?

- **Quintile:** Quantile 1, Quantile 2, Quantile 3, Quantile 4, or Quantile 5
- Suburban / Township / Inner city / Rural

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly agree	More agree than disagree	More disagree than agree	Strongly disagree
1. I chose to study teaching because I wanted to see educational change in my community.				
2. In my current school environment, I am able to be the type of teacher I always aspired to be.				
3. I felt supported in my transition from student teacher to a beginner teacher in this school environment.				
4. There are some teaching practices that I observe in my school that I don't feel comfortable with.				
5. I have made suggestions to the school leadership about some practices in the school that I think should change.				
6. Most teachers at my school belong to the same teacher union.				
7. I felt pressured to join to the same union as the senior teachers in my school.				
8. Teacher unions help me become the kind of teacher I envisage.				

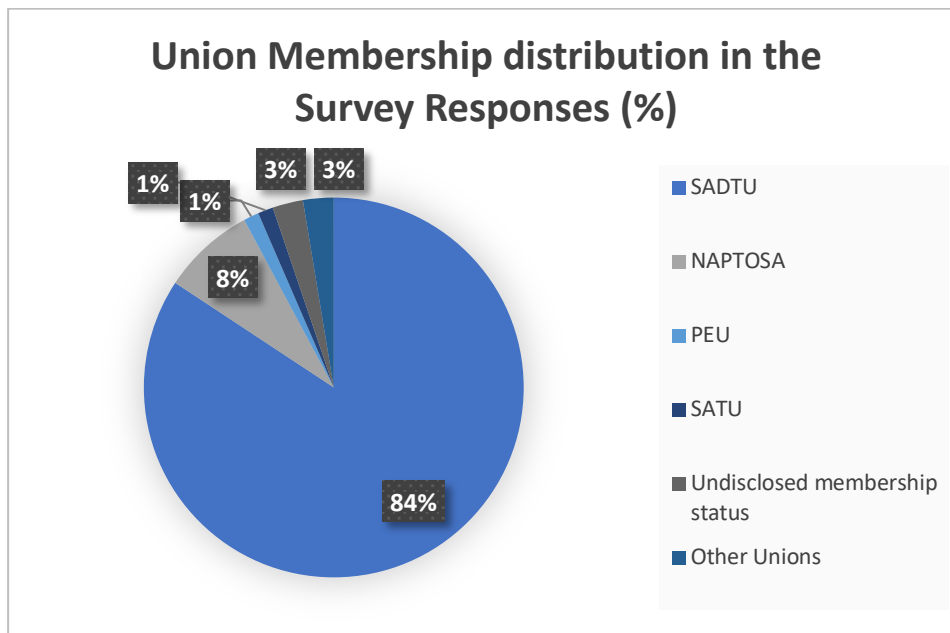
In light of the survey, please answer these extended questions

9. Describe any teaching practices you have noticed in your school that you wish could be changed.
10. What led you to join the teacher union you chose? Or what has prevented you from joining a teacher union to date?
13. How do you think that belonging to a teacher union will enable you to be a better teacher?

Appendix B: Interview Schedule for New teachers

1. Why did you choose to become a teacher?
2. Describe the kind of teacher you would like to be.
3. To what extent are you able to be the kind of teacher you envisage? What enables you? What challenges are you facing to be this kind of teacher?
4. If you could change something about the professional work in this context, what would it be? Why is this change necessary? Have you made suggestions? To whom or why not? What was the response to your suggestion/s?
5. In what ways does union activity affect how teachers work in your schooling context?
6. In what ways has teacher unions enabled or constrained you in becoming the kind of teacher you envisage?

Appendix C: Union Membership Distribution in the Survey Responses



Invitation Letters and Consent Forms

Permission Letter



University of the Witwatersrand,
Wits School of Education

March 2022

Dear Principal

Re: Permission to conduct research at your School.

My name is Philip Hlatshwayo, a Doctor of Philosophy in Education student registered with Wits University. I am currently conducting my research; *Early career teachers' Professional Agency in Relation to Prevalent School Practices within the School Structures and Teacher Unions*. New teachers are integral to the improvement of schools in South Africa, and the research is committed to establish how new teachers utilize mediums such as teacher unions to enact their professional agency. The research findings will contribute to the development of a national strategy for the induction of early career teachers in South Africa. My research project is being done with ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and the permission from the Gauteng Department of Education.

I will invite you early career teachers working within your school to participate in this research project. If they agree, they will be asked to be interviewed for about 45 minutes remotely. This means that the interview will not interfere with their working hours or duties at school. I would like to request to audio-record the responses of the participants for accurate information capturing. There are absolutely no negative consequences to you or the school for taking part in the research instead the research data gathered will be a contribution to an existing knowledge base. Furthermore, the research will not negatively affect or tamper with the performance of the teachers in their duties to the school. I assure you that if you do decide to participate by means of support and permission for the research to be conducted, confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed for the participants and the school. This means that the names of the teachers and the schools at which they work will never be made public. In all publications arising from this study, a pseudonym (false name) will be appropriated to each participating teacher. All information and data collected about participants would be kept confidential.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Therefore, no form of coercion will be used to force the teachers to take part without their full consent. If you chose not to grant permission for the research, there will be no negative consequences implicated in your decision. The participation of teachers may form part of a staff professional development initiative. We expect that our research findings will be used to inform and contribute to

All research data (electronic and material) will be kept securely in locked offices at the University of the Witwatersrand and will be destroyed five years after completing the project. The findings of the research will be used for academic purposes (including my book chapters, journals and conference papers). A summary of findings will be made available to participants on request and submitted to the Gauteng Department of Education.

Kind regards

Prof. Lee Rusznyak(Supervisor)
Lee.Rusznyak@wits.ac.za
 011 717 3004

I, therefore, do grant the permission to the researcher to conduct the study in my school and to work with the selected teacher/s **Yes/ No**

240

Early career teachers ' Individual Interview Information letter

UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG



University of the Witwatersrand,
Wits School of Education

Information sheet and invitation to participate in research

March 2022

Dear Colleague,

My name is Philip Hlatshwayo, a Doctor of Philosophy in Education student registered with Wits University. I am currently conducting my research; *Early career teachers ' Professional Agency in Relation to Prevalent School Practices within the School Structures and Teacher Unions*. New teachers are integral to the improvement of schools in South Africa, and the research is committed to establish how new teachers utilize mediums such as teacher unions to enact their professional agency. The research findings will contribute to the development of a national strategy for the induction of early career teachers in South Africa. My research project is being done with ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and the permission from the Gauteng Department of Education.

I would, therefore, like to invite you to take part in this research study. An outline of the specifications and parameters of your participation in the study are;

As a participant you are going to be asked to complete an individual interview with the researcher. You will be asked to be interviewed for about 45 minutes remotely. This means that the interview will not interfere with your working hours or duties at school. I would like to request to audio-record your responses for accurate information capturing. Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed for you and the school. This means that your name and that of the school will never be made public. In all publications arising from this study, a pseudonym (false name) will be appropriated to each participating teacher. There are absolutely no negative consequences to you or the school for taking part in the research instead the research data gathered will be a contribution to an existing knowledge base. Furthermore, the research will not negatively affect or tamper with your performance duties to the school. All information and data collected about participants would be kept confidential.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Therefore, no form of coercion will be used to force you to take part without your full consent. If you chose not to take part in the research, there will be no negative consequences implicated in your decision. There are no direct benefits to you, but we expect that our research findings will be used to inform and contribute to the ongoing research on building the professional practice and the successful induction of new teachers into South African schools.

All research data (electronic and material) will be kept securely in locked offices at the University of the Witwatersrand and will be destroyed five years after completing the project. The findings of the research will be used for academic purposes (including my book chapters, journals and conference papers). A summary of findings will be made available to participants on request and submitted to the Gauteng Department of Education.

If you are willing to participate in this research project, I would ask that you complete and sign the attached consent forms. If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Kind Regards

Philip Hlatshwayo
670477@students.wits.ac.za
071 995 5975

Prof. Lee Rusznyak
lee.Rusznyak@wits.ac.za
011 717 3004

Early career teachers ' Survey Information letter

UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG



University of the Witwatersrand,
Wits School of Education

Information sheet and invitation to participate in research

March 2022

Dear Colleague,

My name is Philip Hlatshwayo, a Doctor of Philosophy in Education student registered with Wits University. I am currently conducting my research; *Early career teachers ' Professional Agency in Relation to Prevalent School Practices within the School Structures and Teacher Unions*. New teachers are integral to the improvement of schools in South Africa, and the research is committed to establish how new teachers utilize mediums such as teacher unions to enact their professional agency. The research findings will contribute to the development of a national strategy for the induction of early career teachers in South Africa. My research project is being done with ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and the permission from the Gauteng Department of Education.

I would, therefore, like to invite you to take part in this research study. An outline of the specifications and parameters of your participation in the study are;

As a participant you are going to be asked to complete a 15-minute survey. The survey will be completed online through the link that the researcher will provide. Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed for you and the school. This means that your name and that of the school will never be made public. In all publications arising from this study, a pseudonym (false name) will be appropriated to each participating teacher. There are absolutely no negative consequences to you or the school for taking part in the research instead the research data gathered will be a contribution to an existing knowledge base. Furthermore, the research will not negatively affect or tamper with your performance duties to the school. All information and data collected about participants would be kept confidential.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Therefore, no form of coercion will be used to force you to take part without your full consent. Completing and submitting the survey is taken to mean consent to participate. If you chose not to take part in the research, there will be no negative consequences implicated in your decision. There are no direct benefits to you, but we expect that our research findings will be used to inform and contribute to the ongoing research on building the professional practice and the successful induction of new teachers into South African schools.

All research data (electronic and material) will be kept securely in locked offices at the University of the Witwatersrand and will be destroyed five years after completing the

project. The findings of the research will be used for academic purposes (including my book chapters, journals and conference papers). A summary of findings will be made available to participants on request and submitted to the Gauteng Department of Education.

If you are willing to participate in this research project, I would ask that you complete and sign the attached consent forms. If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Kind Regards

Philip Hlatshwayo
670477@students.wits.ac.za
071 995 5975

Prof.Lee Rusznyak
lee.Rusznyak@wits.ac.za
011 717 3004

Teacher Unions Representative Information letter



University of the Witwatersrand,
Wits School of Education

Information sheet and invitation to participate in research

March 2022

Dear Colleague,

My name is Philip Hlatshwayo, a Doctor of Philosophy in Education student registered with Wits University. I am currently conducting my research; *Early career teachers' Professional Agency in Relation to Prevalent School Practices within the School Structures and Teacher Unions*. New teachers are integral to the improvement of schools in South Africa, and the research is committed to establish how new teachers utilize mediums such as teacher unions to enact their professional agency. The research findings will contribute to the development of a national strategy for the induction of early career teachers in South Africa. My research project is being done with ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and the permission from the Gauteng Department of Education.

I would, therefore, like to invite you to take part in this research study. An outline of the specifications and parameters of your participation in the study are;

As a participant you are going to be asked to complete an individual interview with the researcher. You will be asked to be interviewed for about 45 minutes. I would like to request to audio-record your responses for accurate information capturing. Please note that in your position as a public organization, the name of the organization will be used in the research. There are absolutely no negative consequences to your organization for taking part in the research instead the research data gathered will be a represented truthfully and not alterations will be made. All information and data collected about participants would be kept confidential.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Therefore, no form of coercion will be used to force you to take part without your full consent. If you chose not to take part in the research, there will be no negative consequences implicated in your decision. There are no direct benefits to you, but we expect that our research findings will be used to inform and contribute to the ongoing research on building the professional practice and the successful induction of new teachers into South African schools.

All research data (electronic and material) will be kept securely in locked offices at the University of the Witwatersrand and will be destroyed five years after completing the project. The findings of the research will be used for academic purposes (including my book chapters, journals and conference papers). A summary of findings will be made

available to participants on request and submitted to the Gauteng Department of Education.

If you are willing to participate in this research project, I would ask that you complete and sign the attached consent forms. If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Kind Regards

Philip Hlatshwayo
670477@students.wits.ac.za
071 995 5975

Prof.Lee Rusznyak
lee.Rusznyak@wits.ac.za
011 717 3004

Newly Qualified Consent Forms

Research Topic: Early career teachers ' Professional Agency in Relation to Prevalent School Practices within the School Structures and Teacher Unions.

Name of the Researcher: Philip Hlatshwayo

Institution: The University of Witwatersrand

Informed Consent Form (45 Minute Face to Face Interview)

I _____ (participant's full name) agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
I understand that I may withdraw my decision to continue with the research study without any negative consequence:	YES	NO

Being interviewed for 60 minutes at a convenient time and place

YES

NO

I understand that the data will be kept securely in a locked office and will be destroyed five years after completion of the research

YES

NO

Name of Participant _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of Researcher _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Teacher Union Consent Form

Research Topic: Early career teachers ' Professional Agency in Relation to Prevalent School Practices within the School Structures and Teacher Unions.

Name of the Researcher: Philip Hlatshwayo

Institution: The University of Witwatersrand

Informed Consent Form (45 Minutes Face to Face Interview)

I _____ (participant's full name) agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
I understand that I may withdraw my decision to continue with the research study without any negative consequence:	YES	NO

Being interviewed for 60 minutes at a convenient time and place

YES

NO

I understand that the data will be kept securely in a locked office and will be destroyed five years after completion of the research

YES

NO

Name of Participant _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

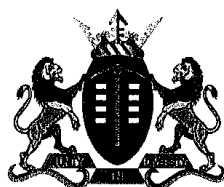
Name of Researcher _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Permission and Ethics

Gauteng Department Permission



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	16 February 2022
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2022– 30 September 2022 2022/57
Name of Researcher:	Hlatshwayo P
Address of Researcher:	128 Talavera Estate, Inchanga Road Craigavon Sandton
Telephone Number:	0769955975
Email address:	philip.hlatshwayo@outlook.com
Research Topic:	How newly qualified teachers envisage and enact their professional agency: A study of their relations to teacher unions.
Type of qualification	PhD (Education)
Number and type of schools:	Primary Schools and Secondary Schools
District/s/HO	15 Districts

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

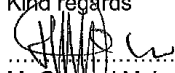
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. **Because of COVID 19 pandemic researchers can ONLY collect data online, telephonically or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate. The approval letter will then indicate the type of arrangements that have been made with the school.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to make arrangements with the schools via Fax, email or telephonically with the Principal.**
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Mr Gumani Mukatuni

Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 16/02/2022

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Approval



Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

R14/49 Hlatshwayo

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: H22/02/10

PROJECT TITLE

How newly qualified teachers envisage and enact their professional agency: A study of their relations to teacher unions

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Mr P Hlatshwayo

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT

Wits School of Education/

DATE CONSIDERED

18 February 2022

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved
Risk Level: Minimal

EXPIRY DATE

20 June 2025

DATE

21 June 2022

CHAIRPERSON

(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Professor L Rusznyak

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. I agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.

Signature

22 / June / 2022
Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES