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# The Plight of the Novice Teacher

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At the end of my first semester of teaching, my superintendent called a meeting for all beginning teachers in the district. He began by asking us to share how we were feeling about our teaching responsibilities. He sat back in his chair and motioned for the first person to begin. Seated in a circle, I waited for my turn to speak. I wondered what I would say. Could I share that each day I hoped I was helping my students, but that most days, I wasn't sure? Should I share my little secret that though I held the title of teacher, I still had no idea how to teach reading? Could I be truthful and share with this group how challenging, grueling, and exhausting my experiences thus far had been? Fortunately, it didn't take long for other members of the group to begin sharing heartfelt feelings similar to my own. I was surprised at their candor and noted how we resembled a mental health support group as story upon story was shared.

Being a novice teacher is a challenging and difficult position to be in. My first year of teaching was an emotional roller coaster filled with nerves, exhilaration, and uncertainty. The demands were great and the support was limited. The experiences of novice teachers are considered to be the most difficult time in a teacher's career (Gavish & Friedman, 2010) and have been described in the research literature as "sink or swim" (Lawson, 1992; Lortie, 1975), "baptism of fire", or "trial of fire" experiences (Hall, 1982; Pataniczek & Isaacson, 1981). Johnson (1986) suggested that "...promising young teachers are leaving the teaching profession after a year or two because they've been exposed to the most negative aspects of schools without having had a chance to work with the positive" (p. 36). Consider the thoughts of a novice teacher as captured in the study by McCann and Johannessen (2004):

I'd stay up late trying to get something that I thought was really good and have sleepless nights, but in the morning...I'd have almost a dry-heaving anxiety.... Just having those kinds of mornings was totally strange for me.... I kind of had to reinvent myself to do this.... (p. 139)

Another novice teacher shared these similar feelings (Lambson, 2010):

We're still learning and trying to figure out the way teaching works for us, our own styles, and I think, it's just constant, you know. I don't even feel comfortable with myself as a teacher in all areas. I don't think I got to develop that teacher side of me as much as (I) needed...and I think I really struggled with that when I was student teaching, just switching over between (being) a person who is working with kids to being a teacher. (p. 1660)

As a result of these types of experiences, it is not uncommon for novice teachers to leave the profession. Research has demonstrated that 20–25% of all new teachers leave the profession within the first 3 years of teaching (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002; Olson, 2000; Watkins, 2005) and Ingersoll (2002) maintains that 39% of all novice teachers leave the profession within 5 years. These sobering statistics climb even higher in low-income schools where teacher turnover rates are as much as 50% higher than in higher-income schools (Ingersoll, 2001). As a result of such high turnover, students are exposed to increasingly high numbers of novice and inexperienced teachers. Merrow (1999) concluded that, “Simply put, we train teachers poorly and then treat them badly – and so they leave in droves...” (p. 10).

Twenty-five years after my first teaching job, I realize that not much has changed for the novice teacher. As a teacher educator, I watch my students continue to struggle to make the transition from teacher training to full time teaching in many of the same ways I did. And just like the teachers I sat with in a circle so many years ago in my superintendent's office, these budding teachers need encouragement, modeling, and mentoring if they are to remain and succeed in the teaching profession.

Most attempts to curb novice teacher attrition usually involve various forms of induction and mentoring programs, yet simply having a mentoring or induction program is not sufficient (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson, 2009). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) reported strong correlations between novice teacher retention and beginning teachers who were provided (a) structured time to work with a mentor teacher who teaches the same grade or subject level, and

(b) time to collaborate with a network of teachers. Yet mentoring and induction programs vary widely by school in terms of the type of mentoring activities provided and the resources that are allocated for these activities resulting in limited success (Huling & Resta, 2007). In its technical report on teacher growth and development in the United States, the National Staff Development Council (2009) suggested that *how* these programs are implemented can make all the difference. The purpose of this article is to describe how two mentoring supports (structured time spent with a mentor who teaches the same grade or subject area and time to collaborate with a network of teachers) can be structured and organized to provide the support and meaningful mentoring novice teachers need to thrive in and survive the most vulnerable teaching stage.

### **Structured Time Spent With a Mentor Who Teaches the Same Grade or Subject**

Feiman-Nemser (2001) explains that “new teachers have two jobs – they have to teach, and they have to learn to teach. No matter how good a pre-service program may be, there are some things that can only be learned on the job” (p. 1026). The way teacher preparation programs have been traditionally organized leads to a generalized, limited, and surface level training. Teacher preparation programs have a limited amount of time to teach and a limited number of courses to provide. While this system may be the most efficient format, it leaves little time to focus on the specific grade level(s) or subjects that pre-service teachers will eventually teach. This is especially true for middle school teachers where the span of age groups included in licensure requirements is much larger. In the state where I received my teacher training, for example, one teaching license was issued for grades kindergarten through eighth grade. Therefore, the number of grades that teacher educators were required to cover in training was daunting at best, leaving little time to cover each grade level or subject in depth. In addition, the emphasis in many methods courses tends to be directed towards the beginning grades where

foundational skills are taught and studied, with only a cursory attempt to address the needs of students in the upper grades. Therefore, an assigned mentor teacher who teaches the same grade level or subject area as the novice teacher is critical. It provides an opportunity for the novice teacher to learn the nuances of the grade level or subject they have been hired to teach, how to differentiate instruction for a variety of learners, and how to manage the classroom and the curriculum in this specific context. School leaders in Singapore have gone so far as to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be expected at each stage of a teacher's career, and based on these expectations are providing novice teacher support in specific areas of training (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). Articulating these skills and attitudes is an important way to ensure that novice teachers are progressing and not reaching overload in their teacher development experiences. Acknowledging that novice teachers need more training before they are to be left alone to teach autonomously can go a long way towards supporting them.

Structured time with a mentor who has received training on how to mentor is essential and this aspect of mentoring has been demonstrated to reduce novice teacher retention as well (Bartell, 1995; Olebe, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In many circumstances, however, though novice teachers may be provided a mentor teacher, there is no time is allocated to meet with the mentor on a regular basis. How can the mentor teacher really mentor without time designated to do so? There are schools that are successfully doing this. Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) explained that novice teachers in Singapore receive two years of coaching from expert senior teachers who have designated time set aside to mentor and help beginning teachers. Additionally, beginning teachers are assigned a reduced teaching load (often  $\frac{2}{3}$  the amount of the teaching load assigned to novice expert teachers) so they are able to be mentored and attend courses on classroom management, counseling, reflective practices, and assessment. For

mentoring programs to influence novice teacher retention and teacher growth, proper mentoring partnerships need to be established with time allocated to develop these relationships and for learning to occur.

### **Time to Collaborate With a Network of Teachers**

As important as it is to spend time with a mentor who teaches the same grade or subject area, this practice alone is not sufficient. Beginning teachers also need a network of teachers working together to problem solve and learn from each other. Most novice teachers realize rather quickly that majority of their time spent teaching is done in isolation from other colleagues (Johnson, 1986; Ingersoll, 2001). In other words, most beginning teachers are left alone to succeed or fail. This is in great contrast to the experience pre-service teachers have in their training programs where they spend their time collaborating with peers, professors, cooperating teachers, and students. These cohesive relationships built ongoing dialogue and collaborative experiences which supported the budding teacher. Novice teachers need a continuation of these collaborative relationships as they make the transition from being a full-time student to a full-time teacher. Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) describe how school leaders in Finland allocate time during the school day for novice teachers to collaborate with teaching peers to develop curricula and assessments. It is this collaboration that builds unity, security, and confidence needed to handle demanding teaching tasks.

Adding further to these feelings of isolation, it is not uncommon for new teachers to be assigned the most challenging students and least desired subjects to teach, making their initial experiences overwhelming and frustrating. School leaders who assign the most challenging students and most difficult courses to beginning teachers without sufficient supports, are not recognizing the inherent danger to these new teachers or to the students they teach. Collaboration

allows for camaraderie and synergy. Wong, Brittan, and Ganser (2005) explain that effective collaboration among teachers should consist of a variety of learning activities including lesson observations, teaching demonstrations, discussions among colleagues, and feedback with critique. Being able to discuss and collaborate with more experienced teachers about the challenges inherent in teaching enables novice teachers to learn valuable skills and build instructional strategies and capabilities necessary to strengthen teaching ability and to grow in competence. Hitz and Roper (1986) captured the essence of the problem:

The risks are simply too great to allow a teacher to flounder for a few years hoping to learn many of the skills of teaching 'on the job.' One must remember that the people who suffer the most gaps in teacher training programs are the children that end up in these beginners' classrooms (p. 70).

Darling-Hammond (2010) strongly encourages models such as Professional Development Schools (PDS) for examples of how to provide the culture and environment budding teachers need to learn and develop as teachers. Highly developed PDS models are not just involved with teacher training, but they incorporate a broad agenda which involves curriculum development, school reform, action research, and professional development. PDS models provide great examples of how collaboration among teaching professionals (e.g. principals, school leaders, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, novice teachers, and expert teachers) is producing more effective teaching, and how PDS models are influencing student performance (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Reutzel and Clark (2012, in press) explain, "Classroom teachers are ordinary people who do extraordinary things. They are passionate and committed individuals who truly want to make a difference in the lives of their students. Many novice teachers enter the field of teaching with wide-eyed optimism, only to have their idealism dashed..." (p.1). Yet school leaders who

recognize the long-term benefits of investing in ongoing teacher training, support, and development for beginning teachers do indeed experience lower novice teacher attrition rates (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). It takes a new way of thinking about how schools are structured. It requires new ways of looking at instructional time, planning time, and time for collaboration. We must consider alternatives that are yielding success across the United States and the world.

Kouzes and Posner's (2008) work on transformational leadership suggests that school principals play a critical role in ensuring that high quality and effective mentoring experiences for teachers are indeed occurring. The catalyst to direct these complex, yet meaningful, changes requires a transformational leader. For example, when new teachers are hired, transformational administrators must, among other things, foster working relationships and remove roadblocks by providing resources necessary for successful mentoring and teacher development for novice teachers. Roberson and Roberson (2009) describe these transformational school leaders as those with the ability to "enable others to act." A school administrator has the resources and big picture view to create school structures that support the work of supporting beginning teachers (Roberson and Roberson, 2009). Transformational school leaders understand their investment will pay back dividends in the form of teacher retention and increased student achievement. Ingersoll (2002) maintained that local school administrators play a significant role in resolving many of the challenges inherent at the beginning stages of the teaching career.

As a profession, we should not be surprised with the results we get when we continue to perform the same inadequate practices. Actively providing the transitional support needed by novice teachers and addressing explicitly the areas of concern noted by novice teachers can help

provide a stronger foundation for beginning teachers and ultimately a stronger educational experience for students.

As I think back to that day in my superintendent's office, I remember wondering what Dr. Hetzel would say about our complaints. Would we all lose our jobs? Instead, I saw a caring smile creep up his face. He explained, "I want you to know I understand. For this reason, I've given you a gift. It is in the envelope in front of you. I know the challenge you are facing is a difficult one and I just want you to know you have my support." He slipped out of the room for his next meeting leaving us to open our envelopes. Inside the envelope was a short, typed note. Our superintendent was giving us 1½ days of time off. We were instructed to use the days throughout our first year of teaching at a time when we felt we needed a break. He had already set aside money in his budget to pay for the needed substitutes. His note explained that when we filled out the paperwork listing the reason for the absence, we were simply to write his name across the top. We didn't have to give an explanation to anyone. Slowly, we each filed out of the room. I was stunned. In a world of budget cuts and deficits, who would do something so kind? Who would be so understanding and supportive of a beginning teacher – both emotionally and financially?

Dr. Hetzel knew something about the reality shock of the move from preservice to novice teacher. How do you think Dr. Hetzel's kindness affected the retention rate of the budding teachers in his district? What did he know that could improve the survival rate of novice teachers everywhere? I've never forgotten how much his gift meant to me at a vulnerable time when I thought nobody understood. It gave me a desire to give my best to the district as a way of saying thanks. And for the record, I didn't ever use the days off. I didn't need to. I already felt all the support I would ever need.

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