A Study of Novice Teachers: Challenges and Supports in the First Years

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Abstract

An alarming number of teachers are leaving the profession in the first three years after graduation from a pre-service program. This phenomenon is common in North America and it is essential that educators identify the challenges and provide supports to assist new teachers. In this study, graduates from a two-year Master pre-service program were surveyed and two teachers were selected for case studies. Participants found informal supports such as teacher colleagues, friends and family to be vital in easing their transition to teaching. Weekly team meetings, a supportive school board that encourages professional development, and visible leadership on the part of principals were positive factors identified by participants as necessary for them to grow into the profession.

Keywords: New teachers, mentoring, pr-service teachers, professional development, transition to teaching

Background

In the years 1993-1999, the Ontario Teacher's Pension Plan reported a 22-33% attrition rate over the first three years for new teachers (McIntyre, 2004). Ontario Teacher Pension Plan records also indicate that each year approximately 3,500 teachers leave full-time classroom teaching prior to retirement. Similarly, the results of a 2000 survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation indicated that more than 60% of Ontario school boards consider teacher retention to be problematic (OCT, New Teacher Induction: Growing into the profession, 2004). In each of these studies, an alarming number of new teachers are leaving the teaching profession. This phenomenon is not restricted to Ontario, Canada. In an American study, Johnson (Black,

2004), director of Harvard University's Project on the Next Generation, followed fifty first and second year Massachusetts teachers. Of the original 50 teachers interviewed by Johnson, only 17 remained in the school to which they were first hired, another 17 relocated to jobs in the private school system and 11 gave up on teaching altogether (Black, 2004). Kardos' (2003) study of 486 teachers in California, Florida, Massachusetts and Michigan yielded similar results. Of the 486 teachers in Kardos' study, over half of them reported receiving no assistance from mentors or other school personnel. Many of the teachers studied reported becoming discouraged and giving up on teaching entirely. This indicates that the problem of teacher attrition and retention is widespread.

An earlier study by Konanc (1996) found that, of 81,000 teachers in North Carolina, one third had quit by their fifth year. A longitudinal study of 50,000 teachers over a 32 year period revealed that half of those studied chose to end their teaching career by the end of year four (Kirby and Grissmer, 1993). Additional research attests that first year teachers are 2.5 times more likely to quit the teaching profession than are more experienced teachers. A further 15% of educators will leave after their second year and another 10% will exit after year three. It is not until year five or six that the turnover rate of new teachers stabilizes to approximately 6%.

Meister and Melnick (2003) conducted a similar study on forty-two first and second year teachers from the states of Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina and Georgia in 2001. The novice teachers they studied reported the following difficulties as primary concerns: dealing with behaviour issues and the diverse needs of students, time constraints and immense workload, lack of communication skills when dealing with parents in difficult situations (Meister and Melnick, 2003).

Ingersoll's (2001) survey of 6, 733 teachers revealed a turnover rate of 13.2%. Specifically, the results of the survey named poor salary, lack of student motivation, inadequate administrative support, student discipline problems and inadequate preparation time as primary reasons for dissatisfaction among these teachers (McCoy, 2003).

An American national survey of 3,560 teachers in the public system cited their work environment as their main issue. In addition, the survey reported that only one third of the teachers surveyed felt strongly that they were supported by parents (Lewis et al., 1999).

Novice teachers are leaving the profession in alarming numbers. With 40-50% of beginning teachers leaving the profession over the course of the first seven years of their career, and more than half of these teachers leaving in the first four years, research in the field of the experiences of novice teachers is essential to identifying the challenges and the quality of supports in place or those required to assist them.

Hiring Practice

These alarming rates prompted the Ontario College of Teachers to conduct a series of studies on the experiences of first, second and third year teachers who graduated from Ontario teacher education programs in 2003, 2002, and 2001 respectively. The Ontario College of Teachers' *Transition to Teaching Report* (2004) provided a plethora of insights into the experiences of novice teachers. In particular, the study brought to the fore the extensive job trials and tribulations faced by our newest teachers, those in their first year. The research in this field indicates that "in many ways we make things toughest for those just starting out - handing them the more difficult assignments and asking them to juggle duties – even locations to piece together jobs" (Wilson, 2005, p. 10). In fact, many first year teachers report very negative experiences searching for and initiating work with Ontario school boards. In particular, new

teachers cited confusion, late hiring, poor communication, allegations of unfair hiring practices as common experiences at the outset of their career (McIntyre, 2004).

Many first year teachers also took exception to the common practices of hiring retired teachers for daily and long-term occasional positions. In particular, new teachers felt they were passed over for occasional teaching assignments losing jobs to retired members who can teach for 95 days without penalty to their pensions (Wilson, 2005). Frequent complaints among new teachers surround the extensive presence of retired teachers occupying many of the more desirable occasional teaching positions thus leading to new teachers' underemployment as daily occasional teachers or blocking them from moving on to the next step of a long-term occasional appointment (McIntyre, 2004).

Demanding and difficult first-year teaching appointments continue to be reported. According to the Ontario College of Teachers report, of new teachers with elementary school positions, about 20% teach in combined grade classrooms, 8% teach special education and about the same percentage teach French as a Second Language. For those first year teachers assigned a single grade elementary school position, grades three and six, are the most common (OCT, Transition to Teaching Report, 2004). This is particularly challenging as provincial assessments in literacy and mathematics occur in Grades 3 and 6. While a majority of first year teachers are positive about the match of their first year job to their teaching qualifications, McIntyre (2004) reports that one in five new teachers (21.7%) give negative accounts of the match of teacher qualifications to job and more than one in five new teachers also juggle teaching jobs in two or more different schools.

By the third year after graduation from teacher education programs, most of Ontario's new teachers are well established in teaching positions (McIntyre, 2004). Of the third year

teachers surveyed, 89% were satisfied with the way their careers were unfolding, 54% reported their current teaching job was an excellent match to their teacher qualifications and 34% reported a good match to their qualifications. *The OCT Transition to Teaching Report* (2004), however, reports that instability remains a central concern for second year teachers with more than half of them (54.3%) saying they expected to change teaching positions for the next school year. A seemingly realistic anticipation since more than half of second year teachers reported some form of job change. Specifically 21% reported a change of assignment, 12.2% changed school boards and 32.1% had changed schools upon completion of their first year (McIntyre, 2003).

Despite continued change, however, all measures indicate that the second year teachers surveyed were significantly more established in the profession than they or the 2003 graduates were in the first year. To this end, the report also indicated that by March of their second year of teaching, 71.7% of teachers were in regular teaching positions, 19.3% were on term contracts and 9% were teaching on daily occasional assignments (OCT, Transition to Teaching Report, 2004). Furthermore, 85% of second year teachers report being more confident than in their first year teaching and 66% consider themselves to be better prepared for the classroom in their second year (McIntyre, 2003).

Induction Programs

Essentially, teaching is the only profession that necessitates novices to fulfill the same duties and responsibilities as experienced workers (Tellez, 1992). The reality across the vast majority of school boards is that the beginning teacher is responsible for a full and often difficult teaching schedule. The novice is expected to adjust to the school facility, routines, board policies and procedures while becoming familiar with curriculum and school-or board-adopted instructional strategies and establish for the first time his/her own classroom management

structure and procedures (Mutchler et al., 2000). The research indicates that in this early development stage two major kinds of support are considered necessary: psychological support and instruction-related support (Feiman-Neser and Remillard, 1995; Huling-Austin, 1992).

This study investigates the induction programs and hiring practices reported by graduates of a teacher education program.

Methodology

The sample of participants was drawn from graduates of the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto from 2002 to 2004. The purpose for choosing participants from a sample of graduate students was twofold. The first reason was to work with a sample of teachers that have had extensive pre-service training with a considerable amount of practical experience in a classroom setting. The rationale for this component was to mitigate the lack of experience as a factor giving rise to the challenges faced by novice teachers. The second reason was to provide the opportunity for future research. Given that current research surrounding the study of novice teachers has been conducted primarily from samples of graduates from one-year Bachelor of Education programs, it was our objective to lay the groundwork for future comparative study between the experiences of graduates from both one and two year certificate granting programs.

Procedure

A mass e-mail to approximately 40 graduates of the Master of Teaching program from 2002 to 2004 was distributed in October of 2004. The e-mail indicated that a positive response to the e-mail including an attached completed copy of the survey would be sufficient as informed consent to participate in the study. Each participant was sent two subsequent surveys electronically. As noted, the first survey was distributed in October of 2004 with an aim to gain

general feedback on the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of the participants. This survey consisted of nine open-ended questions that probed the challenges that the participants faced and supports in place to assist them. The initial responses were analyzed and found to reveal common themes amongst participants.

The second survey was administered in November of 2004 and consisted of 14 questions, 13 of which are based on a Likert scale and one open-ended question. This questionnaire is one that was created by the Research Coordinator at the faculty as an assessment tool to obtain feedback from students after completing their first and second year of the program.

The purpose for administering this survey to graduates a third time was to match insights from their experiences to those of their pre-service training. The third and final questionnaire was distributed in February of 2005 and consisted of 12 questions, one of which was based on the Likert scale and 11 open ended. All communication was conducted via e-mail and responses to the first survey informed questions on subsequent surveys.

Findings

From the results of the study, two case studies were selected to illustrate the experiences of new teachers. Michelle was selected to illustrate a new teacher in a split grade while Sophie was selected to detail the experiences of a late hired teacher.

Michelle

Michelle is a first year elementary school teacher in a split grade junior classroom. Located in a lower to middle class area, the school population is approximately 530 students which she characterizes as ethnically mixed. The predominant visible minority is Filipino and approximately 30% of the students are identified as English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD).

As a first year teacher, Michelle is excited to finally have her own classroom and set it up in a manner of her choosing. Putting up borders and bulletin boards, organizing textbooks and instituting classroom rules has been a surreal experience for her as she has looked forward to doing so for a very long time. Despite the sense of empowerment forwarded to a first year teacher, she reports that there are many unforeseen duties and associated stresses that can tarnish the luster of a novice teacher. She states that some of the unforeseen duties she has become accustomed to are:

getting up extra early and trying to be one of the first teachers in the photocopy room so I can actually get my photocopying done before 9 am and not have to run to class, learning how to stand on my feet for 8 hours straight..., learning how to hold my bladder for hours on end and teach on an empty stomach. (October, 2004)

Compounding the challenges Michelle has had to face as a new teacher is the fact that she has been placed in a split grade. She feels that she does not have enough time to meet the needs of each individual student because her time is divided between the two grades. She has to split 45 minutes for science to teach one grade about Energy and then switching her train of thought to teach the other about Habitats, and then she takes time to work with students who may not be “grasping” the concepts or may be “ESL/ELD” and require accommodations. She believes that she is not giving the attention to individual students.

Michelle keeps motivated by finding comfort and excitement in the small reward of a student who finally understands long division after the smooth delivery of a creative lesson plan or a student who exclaims “that’s cool!” during an interesting science experiment keeps Michelle motivated. However, despite the excitement, Michelle describes her more common emotions in terms of anxiety, frustration and isolation. In describing the various roots of her anxiety which characterizes how she feels at least three times a day, Michelle states:

...each time I hear 'Mr. S..... can you please contact the office?' over the P.A. system, I wonder what have I done wrong or what they want me to do now or which parent is on the phone and what do I say to them if they say I'm giving too much homework? I feel anxious every time I see the principal, hear about report card comments, long-range plans, in-service meetings. (October, 2004)

Michelle reports feelings of frustration arise from the learning curve associated with learning how to fill out Scholastic book orders, completing the Student Register, booking field-trips, and teaching without teacher manuals, dictionaries, texts, or classroom supplies. As a first year teacher placed in her school one week prior to the beginning of the school year, Michelle was given a supply list to fill out later than usual which resulted in a 3 week delay for supplies to arrive, augmenting her level of frustration.

She also attributes the cause of her frustration to the need to create long-range plans. The middle of October is when she found herself in this process at which point it was difficult to know what she would be teaching the next day, let alone the remainder of the year. Creating report card comments, teaching students to take ownership and responsibility for their work, and trying to develop a good rapport with students in order to avoid the stigma of a mean teacher also caused feelings of frustration.

Coming to terms with the fact that she is only one person doing the best she can amid the overwhelming burden of challenges faced in her first year is a struggle for Michelle. Frequently, she feels isolated and alone as she has not yet formed relationships with other teachers on staff who seem to have developed friendships amongst themselves. At the same time, Michelle acknowledges that these teachers have been very effective in supporting her with planning and offer handouts and resources that they are using in their own classes. Michelle attests that it is the other teachers on staff that are most available and approachable to answer any and all

questions she has and they have reassured her that, although there are many challenges to first year teaching, she will get through it with their help.

While fellow teachers have proven to be a stronghold for Michelle, her experience with administration is quite a different story. She comments:

while administrative support is essential, unfortunately I do not feel I can turn to my principal as much as I should. Principals need to take the time to ask how it is going, [and] what they can do to help... while I think it is noble to create a fun environment for students, staff also need to feel supported, or at least that they can approach their principal. (October, 2004)

At the board level, Michelle identifies a similar lack of visible support. Phone calls are not returned, information processing is delayed by weeks and her sentiment is that the board contributes to more stress for new teachers than is necessary. She maintains that the board she works for likes to hire more teachers than required which leads them to place many new hires on Long Term Occasional Positions (LTO). Michelle expresses discontent in claiming that her board later hires newer pre-service graduates as full-time employees the following year, thereby disadvantaging those on Lot's.

When asked if she had considered leaving the profession at this early point in her teaching career, Michelle commented:

the first couple of months I started teaching were quite rough. Being placed in a split [-grade] class three weeks into the start of the school year, and not being prepared at all (how to run a split class, not having ...resources) was both emotionally and physically draining. On more than one occasion (I think about 5 times), I asked myself why I entered the profession. Honestly, it is not the students that I believed, and still do, was the problem. It is all the politics...and extra work that we encounter as teachers and do not get recognized for or paid for. (March, 2005)

Michelle's frustration due to a lack of recognition on a financial basis is very clear. Similarly, being placed in a multi-level (split-grade) classroom three weeks into the school year would

likely present itself as a challenge for even the most experienced teachers. Michelle considers “preparatory training” with a focus on “survival techniques” for novice teachers as a key requirement to teach multi-level (split) classes. It is important for this experience to occur in the first couple of weeks before the school year begins.

As a graduate of the Master of Teaching program, Michelle appreciates the exposure to a myriad of practicum settings and the diverse students that she has had the opportunity to learn from and teach. Although there are no formal channels of communication in place for novice graduates of the program, she is confident that any concerns or issues would be well received by faculty of the program whether it be to provide guidance or to hear of her experiences. Michelle highlights courses in assessment, anti-discrimination, and legal ethics as a good knowledge base for entering today’s classroom. However, while the foundation laid by the practical and theoretical experiences requisite to the MT program have instilled confidence in Michelle’s ability to succeed in the classroom, she states that “a focus on more of the ‘practical’ aspects of the profession and ‘real life’ teaching experiences” would ease the transition from pre-service to novice teacher.

Michelle suggests that mentorship programs would serve as a great benefit to novice teachers in their initial years in the profession. She admits that she has heard that many school boards have adopted some form of mentoring program and states: “Although the Board I am currently working for boasted about a ‘mentorship’ program for new teachers, I have yet to see any part of this program.” She also notes that in a growing board such as hers, new schools are being built and “are staffed with relatively new teachers with only 1-2 years more experience than a novice teacher.” Thus, she recommends that a successful mentoring program with

experienced teachers offered by the school Board is most conducive to serving the needs of the novice teacher.

Sophie

Sophie had high hopes of entering the teaching profession as a qualified professional with graduate experience under her belt. Unfortunately, as of October 2004, she had yet to find a teaching position and she had not received a single interview. Frustrated that she has worked so hard toward her goal of becoming a teacher, Sophie is looking for answers and admits: “I don’t know what I am doing ‘wrong’ at this point but obviously there is more to the process than I know” (October, 2004).

In the face of her own struggle with teaching Sophie manages to impart advice for future novices entering the profession: “Ask lots of questions during your last practicum...it seems that getting on the ‘Eligible to Hire List’ is only a small part of what it takes to secure a teaching position” (October, 2004). She has no knowledge of any formal support system that can assist her in her quest for a teaching position. Compounding her frustration, Sophie asserts that although she has left numerous voice messages and listened to changing stories, depending on who she speaks with, the end result that she is at a disadvantage due to her lack of knowledge of the “system.” Colleagues and host teachers from previous practicum experiences informed her that in order to be eligible to accept Long-Term Occasional (LTO) positions she had to apply separately to be on another list. Lack of prompt and upfront information, she attests, has proven to be costly for her.

Sophie has found informal supports to be the best avenue for advice in the hiring process. She highlights the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto’s

Teacher Employment Preparation Centre and faculty as advocates for novice teachers entering the profession in search of employment.

Through a recommendation by a principal that Sophie had worked with during a practicum placement, she was able to secure a Long Term Occasional position with her board in January of 2005. Armed with a six month contract and a primary/junior specialist she was temporarily relieved. With her practice teaching experience focused on the primary and junior grades, Sophie's contract was not in sync with her training. Required to teach computers for grades 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 computers, grade 7 math and grade 8 science, Sophie was forced to learn curriculum and expectations for science for which she has no prior academic or professional experience, and to work within the intermediate division of her school.

Having accomplished something she never thought possible (surviving a six month contract) Sophie is happy to be looking for a job as of June 29 when her contract is up. However, her excitement is not without reservation as her struggle for employment during the first half of the school year is fresh in her mind. She remains positive.

Discussion

One of the most common themes that emerged from this study surrounded the hiring practices on the part of school boards. Teachers reported that they were notified as late as one week prior to the beginning of the school year of their hiring. Moreover, some were placed in a different classroom three weeks after inception of the school year. This finding is in line with the *Transition to Teaching Report* on 2004 graduates which found that late assignment confirmations are common with only 41% of teachers reporting being hired before the start of the school year (OCT, Transition to Teaching Report, 2004).

Related to the issue of board hiring practices, participants further reported that the assignment of split grades were problematic for novice teachers in that they had neither adequate pre-service preparation nor board support or training to meet the demands of teaching in the multi level classroom. While pre-service training focused on the organization and management of combined grade classrooms may be able to somewhat mitigate the demands of teaching a split grade, the fact remains that a disproportionate amount of novice teachers, approximately 20%, are teaching split level classes (OCT, *Transition to Teaching Report*, 2004). It follows logically that there is a need on the part of school boards to reflect upon hiring placements and to provide the necessary training to support teachers in this capacity prior to entering the classroom.

In light of the finding in the OCT, *Transition to Teaching Report*, 2004, that first year teachers are most often assigned single grade positions in grades three and six at the elementary level, it is noteworthy to mention that comparatively, of those surveyed in this study, one was placed in a split grade class and none of the participants were placed in grades for which standardized testing was an obligation.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) ensure greater accountability and better quality in Ontario's publicly funded school system. The EQAO is an arm's-length agency of the provincial government that provides parents, teachers and the public with accurate and reliable information about student achievement. EQAO also makes recommendations for improvement that educators, parents, policy-makers and others in the education community can use to improve learning and teaching (<http://www.eqao.com>, 2005). Standardized testing can create a great deal of stress for educators. Such tests are frequently viewed as an evaluation of their abilities in the classroom to prepare students for what the Ministry of Education deems standard grade level achievement. As a novice teacher, the added responsibility of EQAO,

combined with administrative and public scrutiny, can pose a serious challenge at arguably the most crucial stage of a teacher's career.

The research reveals that novice teachers are confronted with a plethora of responsibilities including report card writing and long-range planning. Evidence suggests that teachers have left pre-service training with a very limited knowledge of report card programs and long-range planning. While the participants have made clear that they received some level of training in these areas, in practice, their pre-service learning proved limited and insufficient to meet their needs in their initial years of entering the profession. In concurrence with the observations reported by Meister and Melnick (2003), the sample surveyed reported that behaviour issues, meeting the diverse needs of students, time constraints, immense workload, lack of communication skills when dealing with parents in difficult situations were of primary concern. Nevertheless, the two participants of this study reveal that positive comments and feedback from students make enduring the challenges of a novice teacher worthwhile. More surprising however, is that respondents reported a lack of positive or encouraging comments from administration, namely principals, and in fact attested to holding a negative perception of administration at the school and board levels?

Recommendations

Evidence from this study suggests that pre-service educational institutions may better prepare students for success in the classroom by offering training in areas that reflect that realities of teaching. For example, experience with long-range planning, report card writing, classroom management techniques and split-grade teaching strategies would serve as a foundation from which to work from when entering the profession.

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that teacher preparation programs and school boards need to pay particular attention to the following:

1. Provision of specific and intense training to novice teachers in combined grades and grades in which provincial standardized testing is required.
2. Creating schedules which facilitate team teaching and classroom observation.
3. Mentoring with time to debrief and receive constructive feedback.
4. A committed partnership among schools, boards, and novice teachers to form a professional learning community that facilitates discussion and the formation of a survival document containing resources, points of contact and important information that is specific to easing the transition of novice teachers. The documents produced should be specific to individual schools and reflective of the school resources and community.
5. Creation of a teacher leader role within each division to support novice teachers and new teachers to the school and meet as a group regularly to debrief, share ideas and concerns.
6. Professional leadership development for school administrators specific to creating a professional learning community that is sensitive to the needs of new teachers.

Summary

Many of the challenges reported by the participants in this study are beyond the reach of the pre-service classroom. According to the findings of this study, there are many unforeseen realities in the role of the novice teacher. These include the physical demands of being on a school bell schedule, teaching a split grade while simultaneously meeting the needs of exceptional students, dealing with personal emotions of anxiety, insecurity, frustration, isolation and even depression, and a lack of support from administration. Compounding these demands is the need to deal with a lack of financial recognition, planning, assessing, reporting, classroom

management, meeting expectations, communicating with parents, and emotionally charged situations in the classroom.

Participants found informal supports such as teacher colleagues, friends and family to be vital in easing their transition to teaching. Weekly team meetings, a supportive school board that encourages professional development, and visible leadership on the part of principals were positive factors identified by participants as necessary for them to grow into the profession.

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