

Building Supportive and Friendly School Environments

Voices From Beginning Teachers

What factors can we
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Within the next three years, at least 25% of beginning teachers in the United States will leave the profession (The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004), contributing to a costly cycle. States expend an estimated \$12,000 for each teacher who leaves the profession, with an additional 35% of a teacher's salary lost to recruitment (Texas State Board of Educator Certification, 2000). Add expenditures for induction, mentoring, and professional development, and the district has a substantial investment in each new teacher it hires. District administrators obviously are concerned with the lack of return on their investments. The profession is suffering a much greater loss, however. Teaching is a process of development. Students need teachers with experience in accommodating various needs, navigating standards-based environments, and communicating with caregivers. The high rate of teacher attrition means fewer teachers have the time to develop such skills, and so students have fewer opportunities to learn from an experienced educator. This disservice to students is of more concern than numbers and statistics. Thus, we wonder not only why teachers leave, but also what we can do to make them want to stay.

Research suggests that several factors, such as personal or family reasons, job satisfaction, salary, and stress, influence teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001; Vail, 2005; Zhou & Wen, 2007). The absence of high-quality induction and mentoring programs confounds these issues; teachers left without proper support and assistance are twice as likely to leave the classroom (*Education Week*, 2000; Levine, 2006). Pressures related to student discipline problems, high-stakes testing, and lack of parental support have led even the most dedicated idealist to leave the profession after just one to three years of teaching. Through this article, however, we would like to shift attention to why teachers stay. We will focus on variables that we, as teacher educators, mentors, and researchers, can control. Salaries, especially in these economic times, are stagnant. Standardized testing is here to stay. So, what can we change? What factors can we manipulate that will impact the internal motivation of beginning teachers and persuade them to continue preparing our future citizens? We turn to the idea of building supportive and friendly environments.

Christine J. Ferguson and
Lisa Johnson

Christine J. Ferguson is
Associate Professor and
Early Childhood Education
Program Coordinator,
Department of Curriculum &
Instruction, and Lisa Johnson is
Senior Associate to the Dean
and NetSCOPE Project Director,
Richard W. Riley College of
Education, Winthrop University,
Rock Hill, South Carolina.



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As new teachers begin their careers, they experience excitement, elation, uncertainty, self-doubt, isolation, and, at times, an overwhelming sense of frustration. To deal with these often conflicting emotions, new teachers may seek opportunities to share their experiences with other beginners as well as with veteran teachers at their school. Schools function best when a culture of trust exists and the work environment conveys a sense of security and collaboration, whereby innovation is encouraged and cultivated and beginning teachers are valued and supported (van der Linde, 2000). To foster this professional learning community, effective school leaders strive to create supportive, respectful, and friendly school environments that develop beginning teachers as successful educators (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2008/2009). With strong principal leadership, effective mentoring programs, and positive school environments, beginning teachers flourish and feel a sense of belonging. These characteristics are important factors associated with teacher retention.

Novice teachers need to be considered valuable investments. In recognition of this need, schools across the United States are mandating teacher induction programs for beginning teachers. These programs

introduce new teachers to the school's culture, expectations, and vision. Teacher induction programs that pair a novice teacher with a highly qualified mentor teacher provide both instructional and psychological support (Gold, 1996). For example, beginning teachers seek opportunities to learn from their mentor teachers about enculturation, effective classroom management strategies, grade-level curriculum standards, instructional resources, curriculum implementation, and differentiated instruction based on individual student needs and assessment data. Effective mentor teachers provide this support and reflect on their vision of good teaching and on their own practices as mentors. Strong induction programs offer intensive training to mentors, helping them analyze effective mentoring models, develop observation skills, and assess new teacher progress (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Hence, the mentoring relationship is viewed as a joint inquiry into teaching and learning.

Beginning teachers also use self-reflection practices to improve their teaching and learning. As they reflect on and share stories of the daily successes, challenges, and dilemmas they face, mentor teachers listen intently and offer suggestions to support their personal and professional growth (Moir, 2003). In a supportive and

friendly environment, beginning teachers are more apt to freely express their ideas, share their concerns, and ask for guidance when needed. This article is a window into the personal reflections of novice teachers about their development within a professional learning community.

Methodology

Our goal in conducting this research was to give teachers a voice to let their thoughts be heard and recognized as foundational in the development of supportive environments. For that reason, we limited our sample to eight beginning teachers—four from early childhood and elementary settings, and four from middle and secondary settings. All participants were in their first three years of teaching and were contacted from a list provided by a local university of teachers willing to participate in such studies.

By e-mail, we asked the participants to respond to the following four general questions:

1. Describe your school environment as a workplace.
2. What support systems were in place when you started your professional career?
 - a. Which of the support systems were the most helpful?
 - b. Which of the support systems were the least helpful?
3. In what areas do you feel your school environment as a workplace could be more friendly or supportive?
4. If you were to establish a support system for new teachers, what components would you recommend?

The responses generated were collected in a database absent of any participant identifiers, such as name, grade, school, or district. Once all of the responses were received, the researchers independently coded the data according to emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Researchers' themes were then compared, modified, and applied to the units of data presented by the participants. The process of developing and refining themes resulted in a succinct list of four fixed codes for discussion.

The first code was *equality*. The participants all agreed that even though they were beginning teachers, they wanted to be treated as members of the professional "team," and not as inexperienced newcomers. Next, the school environment needed to allow and encourage *differentiated support*. Participants acknowledged that their needs, like those of their students, varied, and that such variation must be reflected in the what, where, and when of assistance. The last two themes stressed the *whole school* and the *whole person* approach to support. During our conversations, beginning

teachers stressed the need for the whole school to reflect a friendly, encouraging, and positive environment. In addition, they needed to be recognized as people, as well as teachers. They had lives outside of the school building and appreciated recognition of their engagement in simultaneous personal, social, and professional growth.

Results

The following is a discussion of each theme highlighting the beginning teacher voices. Their phrases and descriptions provide a transparent picture of how to build a friendly and supportive school environment.

Equality. Regarding the practice of equality, one participant stated, "The principal's secretary chooses a 'staff member of the week.' The problem is there are not as many weeks as there are staff. Many people are never selected and recognized that should be." In a friendly and supportive environment, everyone's accomplishments should be celebrated. In a program such as the one described above, the accomplishments of one person may be recognized, while the hard work of others may be overlooked. School leaders must create programs that develop confidence, especially for beginning teachers trying to establish a professional and social foundation. This same participant continued to describe how some teachers were "in the know" regarding "school drama" (e.g., why a certain teacher was dismissed), while most new teachers often found out only through their students. This type of rumor-mill climate will not support beginning teacher development, as those new to the staff will feel isolated and withdrawn.

On a more positive note, one teacher discussed equality in terms of how the school and district could acknowledge her expertise. Because the beginning teachers were "leaps and bounds more advanced" in terms of using standards-based mapping and unit plans, they could be invited to share their expertise and assistance in rewriting curriculum. Recognizing the expertise of a less-experienced teacher can be difficult for veteran teachers, but as one participant shared, "A teacher [who] sees the value of a new teacher's ideas and knowledge while sharing their own skills and knowledge is the best situation." Going beyond exhibiting interest in a beginning teacher's ideas to actually accepting those ideas and implementing them into classroom practice can have a significant impact on the school environment. New teachers will develop a sense of equality, professionalism, and worth—critical aspects for retaining beginning teachers.

Differentiated Support. Just as no two students are alike in their learning needs, beginning teachers

require an environment built upon differentiation. This means multiple and varied opportunities for support. One example could be "setting up a meeting three or four times a year with all new staff and the administration, lead teacher, and others to allow new staff to ask questions and share what's going on with them. This would also allow the administration to provide feedback for the group as a whole." Some beginning teachers, however, may not feel comfortable asking questions in such a group. Another participant suggested that providing a handbook of critical information (such as required duties, attendance policies, grading practices, etc.) might be more effective: "If I were to establish a support system for new teachers, I would suggest a 'New Teacher's Handbook' that contained information and directions about the little things."

Beyond handbooks and meetings, the assistance provided a beginning teacher must meet the needs of the teacher as a professional and as a person. This can be accomplished by having "separate evaluators and mentors." Creating an environment of growth means that everyone should feel "safe to ask questions." New teachers often feel uncomfortable asking questions of the evaluators who observe and complete reports on how the beginning teachers are performing in the classroom. Providing mentors who are not evaluators, but instead are there to support the beginning teacher by "answering questions, giving advice, and providing encouragement," will change the school environment. More than half of the participants suggested having a team of mentors and administrators.

Whole School. The "whole school" refers to not only the physical environment, but also environmental supports that encourage communication, collaboration, and relationship building among administrators, teachers, and staff. This environment is essential to providing beginning teachers with a sense of belonging, contentment, emotional security, and physical safety. When novice teachers were asked to describe their school environment, several of them commented that their schools were "warm, welcoming, friendly, clean, and safe." One teacher identified her school as "an exciting and wonderful place to work." These characteristics are fundamental to maintaining teachers' job satisfaction, promoting creativity, and fostering productivity.

These beginning teachers also stressed the importance of support from administrators, teachers, and staff. They highly valued administrative support, and they believed their "administrators were there to back them 100%." Overall, the new teachers were encouraged to engage in professional development both within and outside their schools. They also enjoyed both formal and informal meetings with their principals and felt supported by their constructive

feedback. The school office staff also was identified as a valuable source of support. As one teacher noted, "The staff is one of the most loving, caring, supportive, friendly, and sharing groups of people I have ever met." Some commented that when they experienced stressful situations, they felt comfortable "talking with any one of the ladies in the front office." Another teacher commented that "in the mornings, signing in in the school office gets me off on the right foot." Developing and maintaining trusting relationships with administrators, fellow teachers, and staff are instrumental in building new teachers' self-confidence and sense of security within a friendly and supportive environment.

New teachers noted grade-level team communication and planning as extremely important. They valued the veteran teachers who would "answer questions, provide resources, conduct observations and make suggestions." One teacher commented, "Thankfully, my grade level as a whole was supportive and encouraging." Overall, beginning teachers felt secure in seeking information from their team members. Thus, open communication among novice teachers and team members helped build trust, camaraderie, and team spirit.

School size may impede or facilitate such relationship building among new teachers, administrators, and staff. When schools are excessively large, new teachers may have difficulty "getting to know everyone," establishing trusting relationships with others, and building meaningful support systems. For example, one teacher explained that the size of her team grew from four members when she began teaching 1st grade to seven members currently. She noted that "the size of the school has impacted the friendliness and ability to support each other." In this situation, deliberate organization of faculty events must occur, such as "planned weekly team meetings, whole-group activities, district-wide orientation sessions, and professional development opportunities."

Whole Person. For new teachers to truly value and benefit from professional support opportunities, these supports also must be convenient. Novice teachers strive hard to establish themselves within their school environment and develop into autonomous learners. However, they may be overwhelmed by the many pressures and demands that are placed upon them after school. For example, one teacher explained that "after a full day of teaching," she was required to "drive 45 minutes" to attend monthly meetings at the district office, a process she described as time wasted. She pointed out that teachers complained that they "loathed going there." While the meeting itself may not have been wasteful time, the lack of respect for the psychological and physiological toll that teaching can take proved

detrimental to the professional environment.

Establishing strong bonds between mentor teachers and novice teachers is necessary to ensure optimal development and growth. Beginning teachers emphasized the importance of bonding with other new teachers and commented that "support systems need to extend beyond the school day." Several teachers at one school planned weekly events, such as going out to trivia night at a local restaurant or meeting once a week for dinner. Not only were they collaborating with colleagues, they also were building friendships. They felt comfortable knowing that after a stressful day at school, they had "a close group of friends that they could call to share their concerns, meet up with, or go bowling with." Thus, for a new teacher to develop into "a whole person," support systems need to be conveniently planned, and bonding opportunities with other new teachers need to be purposefully initiated.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, beginning teachers continue to leave the profession for various reasons. Teaching is a process of development, whereby new teachers explore innovative methods and materials, build relationships, and hone their teaching skills under the careful supervision of dedicated and trained educators, administrators, and staff within supportive and friendly school environments. Without these supports in place, teachers may choose to vacate their positions and turn to alternate careers to seek solace and job satisfaction. Many school districts employ beginning teachers to fill these vacancies. If these new teachers do not feel adequately supported, the cycle continues. The end result is that students have fewer opportunities to learn from skilled educators.

The purpose of this article is not to focus on the negatives of why teachers leave their vocation. Rather, through the personal reflections of eight novice teachers, it is our intent to raise the awareness among education leaders about the need to re-examine existing strategies within their schools and offer four effective and successful practices that support beginning teachers' journeys of professional development.

A supportive and professional learning community is vital to truly cultivate and retain educational leaders and positively impact student achievement. Teachers should be respected and treated equally as professionals, and have their successes and accomplishments celebrated. Differentiated support is essential and provides teachers with abundant resources to help them advance their professional growth. Teachers relish warm, welcoming, and safe school environments where they feel supported by administrators, other teachers, and staff. These friendly and supportive environments promote trusting relationships, which,

in turn, help boost self-confidence. Finally, teachers need to be acknowledged not only as teachers, but also as people. Bonding with other new teachers—both inside and outside school—is fundamental to personal, psychological, and professional growth. Hence, when we attend to these effective practices wholeheartedly by creating and maintaining supportive and friendly school environments, all stakeholders benefit—students, administrators, teachers, and staff!

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