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Keeping Good Teachers Pages 25-29

What New Teachers Need to Learn

Sharon Feiman-Nemser

Addressing the learning needs of new teachers can improve both the rate of teacher retention and the quality of the teaching profession.



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A brochure advertising a summer institute on mentoring new teachers features a well-dressed teacher standing at the chalkboard. The text reads,

She has been teaching for three years. Her students really like her. She's dedicated. She's energetic. She's creative. . . . She's quitting. (Michigan Education Association, 2000)

The message inside the brochure is clear: If this third-year teacher had had a well-trained mentor, she would still be teaching.

The brochure illustrates an emerging consensus among U.S. educators and policymakers that the retention of new teachers depends on effective mentors and induction programs. More states are mandating induction programs than ever before, and many urban districts offer some kind of support to beginning teachers, usually in the form of mentoring.

Still, the overall picture is uneven. Most policy mandates lack an understanding of the learning needs of beginning teachers and of the resources required to create effective programs. Too often, induction programs offer only short-term support to help new teachers survive their first year on the job.

These induction programs generally aim to increase retention by providing emotional support to new teachers. Although this goal is important, it stops short of realizing what powerful induction programs can accomplish. Keeping new teachers in teaching is not the same as helping them become good teachers. To accomplish the latter, we must treat the first years of teaching as a phase in learning to teach and surround new teachers with a professional culture that supports teacher learning.

Learning to Teach

The early years of teaching are a special time in a teacher's career, different from what has gone before and what comes after. No longer student teachers in someone else's classroom, beginning teachers are on their own, faced with the same responsibilities as their experienced colleagues.

Beginning teachers get hired, often late, and arrive a week before school starts for the year to set up their classrooms and prepare for students. Everything is new: where to put the

desks, what to do on the first day and every day after that; who the students are; what their families are like; and what interests, resources, and backgrounds students bring to the classroom. For the novice, the questions are unending: What am I supposed to teach? How will my students be tested? What will their test scores say about me as a teacher? What does the principal expect? Am I supposed to keep my students quiet, or do my colleagues understand that engaged learning sometimes means messy classrooms and active students? And after the first weeks of school, how can I find out what my students really know, deal with their diverse learning needs, and ensure that everyone is learning?

These questions represent a major learning agenda. They embrace issues of curriculum, instruction, assessment, management, school culture, and the larger community. They go well beyond maintaining order, which most perceive as the primary concern of beginning teachers.

Before novices begin teaching, they go through an initial phase of learning. In a preservice program, they can acquire subject-matter knowledge, study the learning process and students' cultural backgrounds, and acquire a beginning repertoire of approaches to planning, instruction, and assessment. But we misrepresent the process of learning to teach when we consider new teachers as finished products, when we assume that they mostly need to refine existing skills, or when we treat their learning needs as signs of deficiency in their preparation. Beginning teachers have legitimate learning needs that cannot be grasped in advance or outside the contexts of teaching.

What exactly do new teachers need to learn that they could not have learned before they began teaching? In the New Teacher Induction Study, an examination of three well-regarded induction programs in the United States, we asked mentors, principals, and new teachers to reflect on this question. Their responses reflect the special learning needs of beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Katz, & Schville, 1999; Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993).¹

The Learning Curve

New teachers need to learn situationally relevant approaches to their subject matter. As one teacher remarked,

I need to learn to teach subject matter in a way that students are going to get it, not necessarily the way the teacher's manual says to do it.

Standards documents also offer new challenges. One mentor called the district's curriculum standards "a thick foreign language book" that had to be interpreted before beginning teachers could learn to integrate standards into their teaching and not treat standards and teaching as separate tasks.

Each new teacher's learning agenda is also intimately bound up with the personal struggle to craft a public identity. As Featherstone (1993) points out,

The new teacher is constantly on stage and urgently needs to develop a performing self with whom he or she can live comfortably. (p. 101)

One principal explained that new teachers' understanding of performance needed to include "the nitty-gritty things like transitions and momentum."

New teachers need to learn how to think on their feet, size up situations and decide what to do, study the effects of their practice, and use what they learn to inform their planning and teaching (Ball & Cohen, 1999). New teachers also have to learn to teach in a particular context. For example, one mentor in our study commented,

Most of our teachers come to the district having little or no concept of what it means to live and be in an urban situation.

With such a large learning agenda, is it any wonder that these early years of teaching represent a period of survival and intense discovery, when the learning curve is steep and emotions run high?

By most accounts, new teachers need three or four years to achieve competence and several more to reach proficiency. If we leave beginning teachers to sink or swim on their own, they may become overwhelmed and leave the field. Alternatively, they may stay, clinging to practices and attitudes that help them survive but do not serve the education needs of students. A high-quality induction program should increase the probability that new teachers learn desirable lessons from their early teaching experiences.

To take new teachers seriously as learners, we must not give them the same responsibilities as veteran teachers or assign them the most difficult classes. With new teacher learning as our goal, induction becomes an educational intervention that addresses new teachers' learning needs while helping them develop a principled teaching practice.

A Process of Enculturation

In addition to being novices to the practice of teaching, new teachers are also newcomers to a particular school community. What kind of organization and culture are new teachers being inducted into?

The induction literature reflects a strong emphasis on adjustment (Griffin, 1987). Phrases like "learning the ropes" and "eased entry" suggest that induction is about helping new teachers fit into the existing system. Even if we object to the passivity of the new teacher that such formulations imply, we still need to think about who is "teaching the ropes" and what they are teaching. What implicit and explicit messages do new teachers receive about teaching in this school and district? How do interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and students strengthen or weaken new teachers' disposition toward students' learning and the new teachers' motivation to continue developing as teachers? Whether the early years of teaching are a time of constructive learning or a period of coping, adjustment, and survival depends largely on the working conditions and culture of teaching that new teachers encounter.

The story of beginning teaching usually revolves around several themes: reality shock, the lonely struggle to survive, and a loss of idealism. Eddy (1969) portrays some of these themes in an early study of new teachers in poor urban schools. She describes how new teachers face difficulties and turn to veteran teachers for advice:

The solutions offered by the old-timers stress the importance of keeping pupils quietly occupied and forcing them to respond to the activities of the teacher, even if several days, weeks, or months are required to drill them in routines of acting out their subordinate role in the classroom. (p. 18)

When the situations do not improve, new teachers may find some comfort in ascribing their difficulties to traits in pupils or parents or in blaming the administration. Finding support for those views in older colleagues allows new teachers to "maintain a professional identity even when they fail to teach pupils in ways that enable them to achieve" (p. 118). Thus, Eddy concludes, experienced teachers indoctrinate new teachers with attitudes, behaviors, and values that they have defined as appropriate for teachers working in an education bureaucracy.

Painful to read, this study underscores the influential role of colleagues in shaping new teachers' professional stance and practice. As new teachers try to make sense of what is going on in their classrooms, the explanations and advice they encounter, especially from more experienced colleagues, affect their attitudes. Unfortunately, the models and messages available to the new teachers in Eddy's study only served to perpetuate the systemic

inequities that still plague education.

Imagine this different induction scenario, based on data from the New Teacher Induction Study.² Fern is a beginning teacher in an urban elementary school that faces restructuring because of consistently low performance and administrative troubles. A districtwide initiative has reorganized schools into grade-level teams. Guided by lead teachers, teams are responsible for selecting instructional materials and learning activities, tracking each child's progress, keeping parents informed, and working with students until they meet that level's exit standards.

Although the teacher community is close-knit, the school is not an easy place to begin teaching. First, the redesign process is stressful and uncertain. Second, Fern is anxious about her classroom management skills and believes that her students' behavior is out of control.

Although her official mentor offers material resources for her curriculum and affective support to bolster her confidence, Fern's management difficulties undermine her sense of effectiveness. Fortunately, she receives direct help from a colleague. During an evaluation conference for a special education student, the speech teacher assigned to Fern's grade-level team notices her stress and offers to help. Several times a week, she comes to Fern's classroom, where she works directly with students who are having difficulty and quietly intervenes when student behavior is too disruptive. While Fern focuses on instruction, the speech teacher helps her maintain order by intervening with individual students as needed.

Fern credits the intervention, which continues for about six weeks, with effecting a marked improvement in her students' behavior. Eventually, the speech teacher stops coming on a regular basis, but the assistance has had a positive effect on both Fern and her students. As the year progresses, Fern feels comfortable seeking assistance from other teachers on her team, especially a veteran 3rd grade colleague who shares valuable experience about working with parents. With her team members' ideas about management and instruction, Fern feels less in survival mode and more able to concentrate on instruction.

Historically, schools have not been set up to support the learning of teachers, novice or veteran (Sarason, 1990). The typical organization, which Little (1999) refers to as "individual classrooms connected by a common parking lot" (p. 256), keeps teachers separated from one another, reinforcing their isolation and sense of autonomy. Without easy access to one another, teachers may feel reluctant to share problems or ask for help, believing that good teachers figure things out on their own. Even if teachers do get together, they may not know how to engage in productive talk about teaching and learning. Often concerns for comfort and harmony lead teachers to minimize differences in philosophy or practice and avoid asking for evidence or offering an alternative perspective.

Clearly, schools vary in their openness to innovation and experimentation, their capacity for collaboration around curriculum development and student assessment, and their commitment to shared standards and critical conversation.

We cannot assume that grade-level teams or other school structures automatically provide a forum for addressing new teachers' learning needs. Without the school's explicit endorsement of induction as a shared responsibility and a professional culture that supports collaboration and problem solving, new teachers may still find themselves alone with their questions and problems. Nor can we assume that assigned mentors have the time and the expertise to help novices improve their teaching and their students' learning, or that mentoring can make up for inappropriate teaching assignments. When staffing needs and teacher contracts work against appropriate and responsible placements for beginning teachers, induction support is at best a band-aid.

If, on the other hand, schools make assignments that fit new teachers' backgrounds and

interests, provide easy access to resources and practical expertise, and offer regular opportunities for substantive talk about teaching and learning, then new teachers will feel supported by a professional community where all teachers are learners.

Quality Induction

New teachers long for opportunities to learn from their experienced colleagues and want more than social support and instructions for using the copying machine. New teachers want to discuss curriculum implementation, get ideas about how to address specific students' needs, and gain insight from colleagues with experience in their subject areas (Johnson & Kardos, 2002). Providing emotional support is not as valuable as helping new teachers learn to create safe classroom environments, engage all students in worthwhile learning, work effectively with parents, and base instructional decisions on assessment data.

Mentoring

The goal of new teacher learning should define the mentor's role and practice. Mentors often offer help only if the new teacher asks; they don't think of new teachers as learners and themselves as their teachers. When learning to teach is the goal, however, mentors become teachers of teaching, not buddies or local guides.

In many ways, mentoring is an unnatural activity for teachers. Good classroom teachers are effective because they can pull off a seamless performance, monitor student understanding, and engage students in important ideas. But good classroom teachers may not know how to make their thinking visible, explain the principles behind their practice, or break down complex teaching moves into components understandable to a beginner. Nor do they necessarily know how to design an individualized curriculum for learning to teach that is tailored to the specific strengths and vulnerabilities of a particular novice in a specific context.

Serious mentoring oriented around new teacher learning is a professional practice that can be learned. Strong induction programs offer mentors more than a few days of initial training. They provide ongoing opportunities for study and problem solving as mentors carry out their work with new teachers. To learn to mentor in educative ways, mentor teachers need opportunities to clarify their vision of good teaching, to see and analyze effective models of mentoring, to develop skills in observing and talking about teaching in analytic, nonjudgmental ways, and to learn to assess new teachers' progress and their own effectiveness as mentors.

By taking the professional development of mentor teachers seriously, induction programs increase experienced teachers' capacity for critical conversation and joint work, key elements in the creation of authentic professional learning communities. The investment in mentor teacher development also means that induction programs help renew and retain experienced teachers by casting them in new roles as school-based teacher educators.

Using Standards

Because national and state standards reflect visions of good teaching, they can serve to shape conversations about instruction. When we help new teachers assess their progress toward standards, we induct them into professional habits of inquiry and norms of accountability. In the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project, for example, mentors help new teachers identify areas of strength and areas of needed growth using a self-assessment tool (New Teacher Center, 2002) linked to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession. Early in their first year of teaching, new teachers create an individual learning plan that identifies particular development activities designed to improve the new teacher's knowledge and skills. Across the two years of the induction program, regular formative assessments provide the mentors and new teachers with useful data in determining how new teachers are

doing, what they need to work on, and how much progress they are making.

The Challenges

Understanding induction as an enculturation process means recognizing that working conditions and school culture powerfully influence the character, quality, and outcome of new teachers' early years on the job. Even the best induction programs cannot compensate for an unhealthy school climate, a competitive teacher culture, or an inappropriate teaching assignment.

If we take seriously the influential role of school organization and culture on new teachers' stance toward students and on their teaching ideology and practice, we ensure that beginning teachers have easy access to appropriate resources, on-site guidance and coaching, and regular opportunities to work on problems of teaching and learning with experienced, committed teachers.

And if we take teaching seriously as the learning profession, we will foster new teacher learning in a strong professional culture that promotes teacher learning across all experience levels. When we meet their learning needs, new teachers can reach their full potential—not only by staying in the profession but also by improving learning for all students.

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Endnotes

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² Daniel Katz constructed this scenario.

Sharon Feiman-Nemser is Mandel Professor of Jewish Education at Brandeis University, where she also works in teacher education. She may be reached at Mailstop MS037, 415 South St., Waltham, MA 02454; snemser@brandeis.edu.

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