Middle School Journal

A Tale of Two First-Year Teachers: One Likely to Continue, One Likely to Drop Out

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*This We Believe **Characteristics**

- Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper,*This We Believe*, for this article.

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Setting the stage

On a windswept prairie in America's heartland, a young man mounts his faithful steed and begins his day's journey. Thoughts of what lies ahead consume him and make the half-hour ride to town seem like little more than a blink. What would he discuss with his mentor today? Was a parent coming to meet with the team? How could he best pitch his idea for an interdisciplinary unit to the principal? As he eases his lumbering beast into the faculty parking lot, these concerns are swiftly replaced by anxious excitement and a broad, genuine smile.

A thousand miles a way, another young man dodges morning commuters, deftly guiding his vessel through an urban maze of interstate clutter. Images and words also occupy his mind. However, instead of floating softly for casual mental perusal, they cluster together like a dark and brooding storm cloud. Was his so-called "mentor" going to simply hand him another pamphlet today? Would he have time to discuss students with his peers during the 20-minute lunch period? How could he appease the principal concerning bulletin boards and classroom noise? Who could he turn to for help? As he quells the urge to drive past the school and never return, he mouths a silent prayer, musters all his courage, and begins his daily mantra, "I can do this. I can do this. I can ... "

Although living and working in decidedly different geographical regions, these young men have something in common. They are both first-year teachers in American middle schools, one in a rural northern plains school and the other in an urban Midwest school. In addition, they are brothers. Despite these similarities, their experiences as novice teachers provide a rather striking contrast. Regretfully, one could argue this glaring disparity between an overwhelmingly positive first-year experience and a horrifically negative one seems to typify our nation's public school system. Why is that? Is one teacher more qualified than another, or perhaps better prepared? Or, could it be that some schools do a much better job of meeting the needs of first-year teachers?

Educators know teaching can be a consistently demanding, frequently exhilarating, and sometimes heartbreaking profession. In fact, many veterans of the classroom would contend that instructing young adolescents in a middle school environment is perhaps the greatest challenge of all, especially for a brand new teacher (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1990). Despite this belief, many school districts actively recruit the nation's best and brightest young prospects, only to cast them headfirst into the boiling rapids of American middle schools with little mentoring or peer support. While a few of these novice middle school teachers somehow manage to thrive, others seem to merely survive, and many exhausted souls consider walking away from the profession entirely. It is most disheartening to find that teachers have one of the highest attrition rates of any profession. Various researchers (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Morey, 1990; Viadero, 2002) estimate that the percentage of new teachers leaving the profession within the first five years ranges between 30% and 50%.

In addition, harrowing first-year teaching experiences are often downplayed by veteran teachers or seen merely as rites of passage. This mentality is not encouraging or supportive but lends well to Halford's (1998) claim that education is "the profession that eats its young" (p. 1). Likewise, Jackson and Davis (2000) contended, "new teachers are left to sink or swim, often given the heaviest teaching loads and the worst-prepared students" (p. 106).

This comparative study explores the experience of two first-year teachers in starkly different school systems, one in a small city on the northern plains and the other in a Midwest urban community. Using this comparative method, we looked at the similarities and differences of two different educational settings to collect data regarding the practices that best support first-year teachers. The individuals in this study are brothers, and both were employed as first-year teachers in middle school settings. Josh is an eighth grade social studies teacher in a small midwestern city with a population under 80,000, and Dan is a seventh grade English teacher employed in a large district in a Midwest metropolitan area of approximately 3 million. Josh observed the different experiences, strategies, and attitudes that existed over a three-day site visit at his brother's urban middle school. During this visit, he interviewed his brother regarding

specific elements of support as well as structural and conceptual approaches of the Midwest middle school. He also conducted several situational (informal) interviews with Dan's peers.

Administrative support—"Helping hand from a *real* mentor"

You may remember learning how to spell "principal" from the story that the principal is your "pal." From a realistic point of view, for a teacher to have "a successful first year you will need to establish an open, honest, and professional relationship with your principal" (Kronowitz, 1999, p. 135). Obviously, the actions (or inactions) of school administrators directly affect the day-to-day operations of a school and strongly influence the well-being and development of its teachers, especially new ones. In some instances, the support provided by administrators to novice teachers in the form of comprehensive mentoring and support programs can make or break their first-year experience and influence their thinking about whether or not to continue teaching (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Darin and Bacon (1999) confirmed the importance of principals: "New teachers perceive building principals to be a vital link in their success" (p. 206).

Josh's experience began as he first met his school's principal when he was informally inquiring about his possible involvement with the Resident Teacher Program. The principal affirmed that the program is designed after the professional development model (Holmes Group, 1986) that uses a year-long fellowship specifically designed to help new teachers hone their professional skills while simultaneously completing a master's degree through a nearby university. Josh tells how he felt about his first experience with the school's administrator, "I was delighted he found time in his impossible schedule to meet with me, even though I had only just begun the application process for the program itself. I was thoroughly impressed by his attitude, poise, and candor." On first impression, Josh indicated that "he appeared to love what he did for a living, took great pride in his school, and had no hidden agenda (or propaganda) tucked up his sleeve."

When Josh actually began teaching eighth grade U.S. History as a resident teacher, the principal's open, approachable, and supportive demeanor further impressed him. Josh scheduled a meeting with him in late September to discuss possibly launching a school-wide interdisciplinary unit. Prepared to defend against potential allegations of detracting from the already strained time demands of the school's curriculum, he was astounded when the principal responded, "Awesome!" and then quickly added, "Tell me what you need." Subsequent interactions with the principal were all flavored by his personable and empowering leadership style.

While Josh was visiting his brother's school, he witnessed a slightly different leadership style exhibited by its chief administrator. Although he had heard similar approaches officiously described as "top-down," "directive," or "centralized," he believed most people would candidly label her style "autocratic." Whether it was the whistle she brazenly wielded in the hallway to direct the students or the faux sympathy she poignantly displayed to the staff when announcing the impending school reorganization, the school governance clearly rode on her shoulders.

Throughout the school year, Josh's brother, Dan, reported that the principal's direct interactions with him were few in number and rather one-sided in content. Seemingly preoccupied with classroom appearance, especially with regard to the bulletin boards, she gave little or no real assistance to Dan in the realms of proven instructional methods or helpful classroom management techniques. Basically, the principal did not provide much informal administrative support to Dan in the form of personal mentoring.

This is not to say, however, that Dan's school had no formal provisions for the mentoring of novice teachers. In fact, an official mentor (a retired teacher who had previously taught in the school district) was assigned to him. Unfortunately, this pairing did not take place until April, well after the school year had begun in September. This untimely assignment adversely adheres to Jackson and Davis's (2000) recommendation of joining mentors and new teachers "before the school year starts so that the new teachers have help as they prepare for the very important first days and weeks of school" (p. 107).

The mentor observed Dan in action four times, meeting with him immediately following each observation. During one debriefing session, the mentor pointed out the students were too noisy. When Dan asked what he might try next time to reduce the noise level and better keep the students on-task, the mentor simply replied it was too late for such corrective measures. Rubbing salt in the open wound, the mentor then wistfully added that he should have managed his classroom better at the beginning of the school year. Feeling damned beyond any hope of salvation, anger and frustration reached their respective boiling points each time the mentor passed Dan an innocuous pamphlet while heading out the door. The approach this mentor chose to use certainly does not fit well with Rowley's (1999) statement that "the good mentor communicates hope and optimism" (p. 22).

Another element that eluded Dan, and is seen as critical for first-year teachers, is suitability. If new teachers find that the school complements their own style and beliefs, then those teachers are likely to be comfortable and productive. These individuals are more apt to remain in the profession and in a particular school more often than those who do not fit in with the school's system and feel disillusioned or frustrated (Heller, 2004).

"In no profession other than teaching are inexperienced and untried beginners left to their own devices and allowed to have autonomous responsibility to make substantive professional decisions" (Evans, 1999, p. 35). So once again, by comparison, Josh felt that he had it easier at his school. Formal administrative support in the form of mentoring came from a seasoned middle school teacher whose primary duty was to shepherd the school's new resident teachers. In this capacity, his mentor consistently went above and beyond the call to help him and his cohorts tackle the challenges first-year teachers typically face.

The Resident Teacher Program that Josh was involved with is devised so that first-year teachers (as a cohort group) meet numerous times with their mentor before the school year even begins

and then one-on-one with the mentor at least once each week during the school year itself. The mentor assisted the resident teachers in various and numerous ways, from offering classroom management tips to challenging the teachers to teach for understanding. The mentor was a frequent observer of their teaching and pretty much at their beck and call. Epitomizing Rowley's (1999) "model of a continuous learner" (p. 22), this first-year teacher mentor was exceptionally well read and had amassed a veritable treasure in her bag of professional tools and tricks. Under her expert tutelage, Josh honestly felt capable of making sense of various educational theories and actually putting them into practice in his classroom. This affirms Halford's (1998) comment that "mentors can be a professional lifeline for their new colleagues" (p. 3).

Clearly, a blinding inequity with regard to support provisions for first-year teachers existed between Dan and Josh's schools. The bottom line is that "all new teachers need mentoring from expert veteran teachers to translate the lessons of university classrooms into the practical artistry of excellent teaching" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 105). Josh's school wisely invested its resources in putting together a first-class mentoring program to help new teachers, while Dan's school merely paid lip service to the concept. Josh reported "a phenomenal and rewarding first-year teaching experience," while Dan endured an ordeal that he facetiously labeled "cruel and unusual punishment."

Support for first-year teachers should not stop with a mentor or the principal; peer support is also essential for building a sense of community. According to Heller (2004), "The best people to teach teachers are other teachers" (p. 17). A daily, embedded support system in which teachers share professional knowledge, collaborate regarding pressing issues, and address curriculum and pedagogy creates a learning community. Jackson and Davis (2000) affirmed this challenge by stating, "The first teaching assignment, particularly classroom management and curriculum planning, too frequently lead unsupported beginning teachers to adopt practices contrary both to their educational philosophy and to the instructional strategies they learned in pre-service education. New teachers often struggle just to get through the day" (p. 105).

Peer support—"Behold, the power of collaboration!"

With the possible exception of the rustic American one-room schoolhouse, the instruction of our nation's young men and women in the public school system is typically a group effort involving a grand cast of teachers. Although their fields of study and areas of specialization may differ considerably, teachers essentially possess a common concern for the well-being and proper development of their students. In this respect, you can almost think of teachers as comrades-in-arms. They all wade into the classroom trenches daily, waging a non-stop struggle to educate their young charges and prepare them to succeed in the outside world.

Given that they share the same basic mission, it makes perfect sense to organize teachers in groups that might foster teamwork, unity of purpose, and some collaboration. Whether schools group their teachers by department, team, or cluster, they all attempt to exploit the potential

instructional and administrative advantages of the principle of "strength in numbers." "Increased professional contact and dialogue fosters joint learning and problem solving and enables teachers on teams to develop "high teaching efficacy"—the belief that they can have a positive effect on student performance regardless of the students' abilities, family background, or academic history" (Erb & Stevenson, 1999, pp. 65–66). Additionally, research has shown that grouping teachers and students together can help create smaller learning environments and better meet the developmental needs of our nation's youth, particularly young adolescents. Incorporating these findings into the middle school philosophy, it recommends schools "form teams of teachers and students" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1990, p. 12).

Despite structural efforts made to promote teachers working together and the existence of an overall common cause, the process of teaching itself can become a somewhat territorial and isolated business. Teachers usually have their own classrooms where the students come and go at various points throughout the school day. Due to the preparatory demands of instructing students and assessing whether or not they are learning, teachers often have little opportunity to truly interface with their peers beyond exchanging passing pleasantries in the hallway or trading small talk while hastily consuming their lunches in the faculty lounge.

Some teachers are autonomous by nature and perfectly comfortable assuming sole ownership of their pedagogy, curriculum, and student learning experience by simply closing the classroom door. On the other hand, many less experienced teachers are not so willing to fly solo and desperately need the adult interaction and its related exchange of ideas. When one considers that a main reason why new teachers leave the profession is due to feelings of isolation (Heller, 2004), providing appropriate support takes on new relevance.

Similar to the influence exerted by administrators, the support provided by fellow teachers, or peers, to new teachers can have a profound impact on their first-year experience. Thus, whether the novice teacher is openly welcomed into the fold or eyed with outsider suspicion, perceived peer support (or a lack thereof) could factor into his or her decision to continue in the profession beyond the first year.

In Josh's case, possessing firsthand knowledge from his student teaching experience of only a departmentalized secondary school structure, the notion of dedicated teams of teachers sharing the same students in a middle school environment was foreign to him. When he accepted the position as a resident teacher, he became the social studies representative on an interdisciplinary team of teachers. The other three full-time members of the team taught math, English, and earth science.

Being the new kid on the block, Josh was a little apprehensive about the arrangement as the year began. When they first gathered during their daily team meeting time, the fear and anxiety he felt fled, as they wholeheartedly welcomed him to the team. Even though community building and shared responsibilities took time to develop, he acknowledged an immediate sense of group

identity. This sense of community can be the redeeming virtue of the interdisciplinary team organization (Knowles & Brown, 2000). These strong learning communities provide a family-like environment "where students and teachers know one another well, feel safe and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks" (National Middle School Association, 2003, p. 29). George and Alexander (2003) affirmed the value of a team arrangement from a veteran teacher's point of view, "[It is often] the factor that enabled them to continue teaching with a sense of joy and commitment that had long been absent from their lives in school" (p. 309).

The teachers on Josh's team all shared the same students. Although hardly an earth-shattering revelation on the surface, the concept was entirely new to both of the brothers, initially. For Josh, this luxury enabled him to address student issues and concerns with his team as a collective entity, because each team member knew every one of the students. Middle school pioneers George and Alexander (1993) best characterized the potential benefits of establishing such relationships when they asserted "increased knowledge of students leads directly to more positive feelings, among the teachers on a team, toward the students they share" (p. 282).

Josh's experiences seem to support George and Alexander's (1993) theory of interdisciplinary teaming as a vehicle allowing for teacher-student relationships to evolve from hit-or-miss individual familiarity to unconditional collective "advocacy" (p. 282). For example, Josh stated,

> When I personally witnessed a certain student acting out in my class, I brought the matter before the team. Not surprisingly, this young man was behaving similarly in his other classes. As a team, we developed a plan, contacted the student's parents, and all met together as a group. Without making ourselves susceptible to allegations of a possible personality conflict with a particular teacher, we jointly reached an understanding, established behavioral guidelines, and implemented corrective measures. Mere words cannot adequately capture the expression I saw on this young man's face when he accepted a team award for "improvement" at the end of the school year.

Interdisciplinary teams that are forming "focus on coordinating class work, texts, student behaviors, parental contacts, and special team activities. Experienced teams progressively take on tasks that integrate and connect curriculum" (Kasak & Uskali, 2005, p. 143).

In addition, Josh's fortune allowed him to experience many of these teaming opportunities, but certainly some of his most positive experiences were with curriculum integration. Josh expressed it this way:

> I can personally attest the time we spent together as a team each day provided us a wonderful opportunity to begin integrating our curriculum across different content areas. I took part in three distinct collaborative efforts. The first involved a joint

project with the English teacher, where our students individually researched famous European explorers and prepared detailed papers, drawings, and maps. The second entailed a full-blown, school-wide interdisciplinary unit on the presidential election spearheaded by the math teacher and myself. Representing actual states, student and staff groups decorated doors and bulletin boards, created ballot boxes, conducted a mock election, orchestrated the Electoral College process, and determined the next leader of our country. The third effort concerned a thematic unit built around the Iditarod Sled Dog Race. After students were assigned mushers, they tracked their musher's progress throughout the race and participated in various Iditarod related activities in all their core classes.

Josh concluded that he often found himself "treading water to keep my head above the surface as a new teacher. I sincerely doubt this level of collaboration would have been possible if our team was not allotted a joint planning period each day." Not surprisingly, National Middle School Association's (2003) *This We Believe* calls for just such an arrangement. The association specifically states:

> Daily or regular common planning time is essential so that teams can plan ways to integrate the curriculum, analyze test data, review student work, discuss current research, and reflect on the effectiveness of instructional approaches. Addressing the concerns of individual students and day-to-day management details are important topics on a team's agenda but should not consume the bulk of common planning time. (NMSA, 2003, p. 29)

Most important, if teams operate under these conditions, "the likelihood of the team's improving instruction and achievement is greatly enhanced" (Kasak & Uskali, 2005, p. 144).

When Josh visited Dan's school, he realized its system of grouping teachers was, in theory, quite different than his own experience. The teachers were grouped in clusters instead of dedicated teams, where each cluster might possess more than one teacher for each core content area (i.e., English, math, science and social studies). Consequently, each teacher did not necessarily share all of the same students as other teachers in the cluster.

Dan's school also implemented a system of looping, where teachers would follow the students who advanced each year from sixth grade through eighth grade, restarting the loop upon completion. Proponents of looping allege it "enables students and teachers to deepen their knowledge of and trust in each other" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 134). Given it was both brothers' first year teaching, they had no real experience with looping but liked the "bonding" concept behind it.

When Josh briefly met some of the teachers in his brother's cluster, they seemed friendly, and he

looked forward to getting to know them better during their meeting time. Unfortunately, as he became more familiar with the day's upcoming events, he realized there was no joint planning period scheduled. His brother then informed him the only chance he had to meet with other teachers in his cluster was before or after school, in between classes, during the 20-minute lunch period, or on his preparatory period (provided the teacher he wanted to meet with could arrange for class coverage). In other words, they had no regularly planned joint meeting time. Merenbloom (1991) decried such practices in *The Team Process* when warning, "Without common planning periods, it is virtually impossible for clusters of teachers to be effective" (p. 69). Research conducted by Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2000) showed,

> High quality team interactions among members is associated with higher levels of positive team practices. In other words, teams that meet together more frequently are more positive in the assessment of their own group interactions than teams with low levels of common planning time. (p. 55)

Dan's regretful shrugs spoke volumes when responding to Josh's subsequent questions concerning when the teachers in his cluster made time to discuss student issues, plan activities, or provide each other help. He concluded the sad diatribe by lamenting how the principal gunned down his proposal to make better use of the weekly after-school staff meeting by allowing clusters to gather during this time. His need and desire for peer support was voided.

Once again, a giant discrepancy existed between the two brothers' schools and experiences. This time it concerned the establishment and functioning of peer support structures for first-year teachers. Although both schools technically grouped teachers in an effort to aid the educational process, Dan's school hamstringed its own attempts by not providing a planned forum for teachers in the same cluster to meet. In Dan's opinion, "Expecting teachers to magically create time to meet with each other outside the confines of the normal school day is a recipe for disaster." Further, he asserted, "The inexperienced novice teachers, who could most certainly benefit from additional exposure to their peers, are the ones who will pay the price."

If you accept the earlier contention that first-year teachers need help, then it only stands to reason they can use additional support from peers as well as from administrators. Josh's school weathered the costs and unleashed the true power of a team, while Dan's school only went half the distance before stopping. Josh was an integral part of something magical, while his brother desperately fought to stay afloat.

Parting shot—"Call to arms"

If a 30–50% attrition rate of teachers in their first five years is an unacceptable waste (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Grissmer and Kirby, 1987; Morey, 1990; & Viadero, 2002), then teachers and teacher educators take heart—administrators, take heed. Any serious effort to improve our public

education system in the United States must begin with the single most important and influential component affecting the day-to-day development of our nation's young men and women—the classroom teacher. Bottom line, if we want to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers, we must give them what they need to thrive. Establishing good mentoring programs and building quality peer support structures are both great places to start.

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