Extending the Learning Community: The Birth of a New Teacher Support Group

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Abstract

This article shares the results of a study that explored the need, and consequential birth, of a new teacher support group for newly graduated elementary education majors. Constructed of a university supervisor and five newly graduated novice teacher's, this study examines their first semester as classroom teachers. Research related to the induction stage of teacher's careers and their identity provides a lens through which to explore socialization experiences of the novice teachers during their transition from pre-service to professional practice. Additionally, ways in which first year teachers navigate the organizational environment are highlighted. The analysis finds that many of the group members struggled with issues of classroom management and discipline and experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness. Additionally, these beginning teachers discuss fitting into a school culture that has already been established and the pressures to meet each student's individual needs. These data suggest that while beginning teachers are often afforded other avenues of support, such as a veteran mentor teacher and a new faculty induction program, an informal support group made up of all beginning teachers can be beneficial in providing "a bridge to the real world of teaching outside of the university walls."

As an assistant professor new to the supervision of student teachers in elementary education, I am astounded and appalled at the research identifying the high attrition rates among teachers in the induction stage of their career. Sadly it has been reported that the most talented new educators are often the most likely to leave the profession (Gonzales & Sosa, 1993). As many as forty percent resign during their first two years of teaching (Haselkorn, 1994, Gunderson & Karge, 1992) and a higher resignation rate exists for new teachers in comparison to veterans who have been teaching for ten years or more. Intrigued by this research and searching for a way to assist newly graduated student teachers, I developed a New Teacher Support Group to provide a supportive learning community for novice teachers and assist them throughout their first year of teaching.

Idea Construction and Rationale

During the 2001–2002 school year I supervised thirty elementary education student teachers at West Chester University, outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Many of these thirty talented students were hired by local school districts after graduation. During the summer of 2002 I corresponded with a handful of my former students by electronically emailing with them as they began to prepare for their first teaching assignment. As anxiety mounted and the summer shortened, and as I read many articles centering on the difficulties novice teachers face, I decided to ask my former student teachers if they would be interested in extending their learning community by conversing with other novice teachers about to embark into the unknown—their first year of teaching. I sent into cyber space an invitation to join a new teacher support group in an attempt to ease the challenges of the first year of teaching. For me it was an attempt to continue assisting my former students from the world of student teaching right into the real world of the classroom. The response was overwhelmingly positive and five novice teachers signed on for the journey.

At our first meeting in late August, I shared my rationale as to why I thought a support group for novice teachers was a worthy idea. Based on the fact that as the summer progressed, and more former student teachers were securing teaching positions for the approaching school year, I was being emailed

by former student teachers at an alarming rate. Many of these calm and confident student teachers were now riddled with anxiety about the approaching school year. Many asked very focused organizational questions, especially questions centering on classroom management and discipline. Other questions that surfaced were if it was appropriate to call their new grade partners, or how to effectively set up a seating chart, and what is the best way to welcome parents into the classroom? I realized that these students were simply asking me, but what they needed was the opportunity to widen their learning community and ask each other these intriguing questions as well.

Before our first group meeting I read an article centering on novice teachers and the organizational environment by Walsdorf & Lynn (2002) and shared part of it with the group, for it talked about how the induction stage of a teacher's career is exceptionally difficult and riddled with challenges (Gold, 1996; Huling-Austin, 1990). Yet, more specifically, it stated that:

> Beginning teachers' transitions from pre-service to professional practice are often unsettling, because there is not a gradual induction into job responsibilities as is characteristic in other professions. Customarily assigned teaching loads from their fist day of employment, beginning teachers soon realize the challenges they will face with students' lack of enthusiasm, management and discipline issues, and the exhausting nature of their work (Stroot, Faucette, & Schwager, 1993; Veenman, 1984; Walsdorf & Lynn, 2002).

I quickly realized that while these students were still pre-service teachers, they had a support system already in place to help them succeed. This was especially true during their last semester of student teaching with both a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor available everyday for questions and answers and to offer guidance. I was worried that some of these very talented student teachers would find themselves in an unsupported and therefore, stressful teaching situation. Even with a new teacher mentor and a new teacher induction program mandated by their new employers, I feared that these novice teachers might stumble and wanted to create a support system to help keep their feet firmly on the ground.

Main Goals and Objectives

The development of a teacher's identity is a continuing and dynamic process that is ever changing. Cooper and Olson (1996) suggest teacher identity is continually being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interactions with others. Scholars identify multiple influences that shape teacher identity, ranging from personal experiences to media images to pedagogical beliefs supported by pre-service instruction. This newly designed New Teacher Support Group was formed to support novice teachers in a multitude of ways during their first year of teaching. The groups objectives included: (1) providing a forum for scholarly dialogue pertaining to new challenges that may be faced; (2) collaboratively brainstorming suggestions for questions that arise throughout the school year; and (3) promoting and supporting on another's professional growth as these novice teachers form their "teacher identity."

Participants and Their Goals

As mentioned, five newly graduated elementary education majors quickly signed on to take part in this new venture. All had recently secured a contract with a school district as a full-year long-term substitute or a temporary professional (non-tenured) first year teacher. Four of the participants were teaching in Pennsylvania in three different suburban school districts and one in a suburban school environment in southern New Jersey. Grade level assignments ranged from two teachers in kindergarten, one teacher in third grade, one teacher in fourth grade, and one teacher in sixth grade.

The five beginning teachers were invited to participate in this endeavor based on the fact each would be a classroom leader for the first time during the upcoming school year. It must be added that two additional novice teachers were asked to join but declined because of time constraints and geographic proximity.

Of the five participants, four had previously

completed their student teaching semester with me as their university supervisor, and was a student of mine for two elementary education specialized preparation classes which were completed before her student teaching semester.

As the leader of this support group I quickly wanted to know why these former students wanted to be part of this initiative. Since no grades would be issued and each of these participants were already college graduates, I was curious to know why they would dedicate time and energy to this "new learning community." What was their motivation? What did they think was in it for them? What did they want to learn?

At our first meeting in August 2002 they were asked to share their thoughts and goals for the support group. Although the group did not have any professional teaching experience their answers were mature and well developed. The youthful teachers each shared a vision that they would like to:

- Get new ideas for different situations, and to hear what works and doesn't work in other classrooms.
- Have an outlet to discuss issues that others can't really relate to, or don't want to hear about.
- Possibly get current information that West Chester University is presenting to their current student teachers (if it was different from what has been learned).
- Have other first year teachers grow and learn by sharing ideas and experiences.
- Relate/vent to first year teachers who are going through the same things and exchange workable ideas.
- Have support from other first year teachers minimizing the notion of isolation.

After reading these responses I was very optimistic about the support group. Their answers showed a desire to better themselves as educators and to work collaboratively to attain their goals. They wanted to communicate with each other by discussing, listening and sharing. They used words such as grow, learn, adapt, and support. I was confident that our goals harmonized and that this group had the ability to truly support one another throughout their first year of teaching.

Organizing the Support Group

Many education scholars agree that the first year of teaching is exceptionally challenging (Huling-Austin, Odell, Ishler, Kay & Edelfelt, 1989; Veenman, 1984). First year teaching experiences are powerful influences on teachers' practice and attitude throughout the remainder of their careers (Kuzmic, 1994). Because of the importance and complexity of beginning teachers' experiences, their socialization has received increased attention in educational research and reform during the past two decades (Huling-Austin, 1990; Kuzmic, 1994).

For over a decade, reformers have called for induction programs with mentors to ease the transition of beginning teachers into full-time teaching (Huling-Austin, 1990). Many (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Koerner, 1992; Staton & Hunt, 1992) believe that working with an experienced teacher will help shape a beginning teacher's beliefs and practices. Most induction programs attempt to increase teacher retention and improve the instruction of new teachers.

This support group was designed to offer students a "bridge to the real world of teaching outside of the university walls." These five newly graduated elementary education students along with a university student teaching supervisor were about to explore the challenges of beginning teaching through the vehicle of an informal "self-help/group-help" support system. Different than a formalized school district induction program, the strength of this new teacher support group, came from putting new teachers in contact with each other to generate professional dialogue and provide a feeling of togetherness as they realize they are not alone in their newly found professional struggles.

When organizing the support group two words were used to sum up the tone of the support: "informal" and "doable." As their leader, I strove for a format that would let each of the participant's feel comfortable and at ease so they could trust the group and become true learning partners with each other. Realizing that all of the new teachers were anxious about what challenges waited in the near

future, we quickly tried to bond as one group without having individuals try to outshine one another. We tried to create a safety zone where we could ask questions, make mistakes, and stumble without feeling embarrassed or alone. Since many of the teachers already knew each other from taking classes together we gelled quite easily and quickly.

The support group also had to be "doable," meaning as the group leader I was quickly reminded how time consuming the first year of teaching can be. Just a few weeks into September I remembered my first year of teaching and how you can eat, sleep and breath your first teaching position. We needed to be supportive of one another and available to give and receive help, but not to be overbearing and demand too much of each other's precious and limited time.

With the challenge of being both "informal" and "doable" we decided to meet monthly as a group and to be available by electronic mail at all times. As a united front we agreed that even in our busy lives we could all commit to one meeting a month to destress, unwind, and bring fresh, real-life educational issues to the group that were problematic. In addition, having each other only a click away gave us the security that help was not far if an emergency were to arise.

As a group we decided that the meetings would be semi-structured with topics born from the real world and real issues/problems/situations that groups members were facing. Weekly emails would be sent from me posing questions related to research centering on novice teachers, plus emails at any time could be sent from group members looking for help/advice/answers/feedback. We decided to always use the "reply to all" button to keep all the members electronically "in the conversation." Overall, we viewed our correspondences as an ongoing electronic conversation that would support us as we journeyed into uncharted waters from pre-service to professional practice relying on other group members as a life preserver.

Data Collection

To create an awareness centering on the participant's teaching identity and socialization, and their new role as "teacher," a number of ethnographic methods and resources were used. These methods included participant's daily jottings, electronic emails in both structured question format and unstructured conversations, and notes from monthly meetings. Multiple sources of data and different methods of collecting these data lend credibility to our conclusions.

Daily Jottings

Born from Walsdorf and Lynn's 2002 article entitled, "The Early Years: Mediating the Organizational Environment," and our discussion during our initial meeting, a guide was created to help organize the teachers' thoughts into categories. These categories, centering on different organizational areas, were to be commented on at a later time when these teachers could reflect and write about their day's experiences; preferable at the end of the day when time was available and the issues were still fresh in their minds.

The categories focused on what research states as areas for concern for first year teaching professionals. Fessler (1992) contends that teachers move through their careers in response to the organizational factors in their environment. He also contends that the induction stage is a crucial period of transition and that there is a need to provide support from the organizational environment.

Participants were asked to make daily jottings during the fall semester in the appropriate categories, plus they were given the freedom to create new categories if they saw the need. They were told that "jottings will consist of something that happened during the day that stands out, makes you question something, frustrates you, etc." The categories chosen for the daily jottings were: (1) isolation and loneliness, (2) classroom management and discipline, (3) conflicts with colleagues, (4) understanding students' individual needs, (5) difficult teaching assignments (content), 6) formal mentor program, (7) lack of spare time, (8) parent communication, (9) motivating students, and (10) pacing of the curriculum.

Electronic Emails

Since communicating electronically is both fast and efficient, this was the primary mode of communication we shared as a group. During the first

semester, structured open-ended questions covering a multitude of areas were emailed to the participants. The questions forced the group members to critically evaluate their own teaching performance, compare their first year of teaching to their student teaching experience, and explore their rationale for why they are using certain procedures in their classrooms. The aim of these questions was to force the members to critically review and reflect on why they are utilizing certain practices in the classrooms. The questions invited students to engage in discussion with other group members and to analyze what is and isn't working in regard to their chosen teaching methods. These questions were intended to be used as a springboard for self-reflection and gentle prodding for improvement as each group member saw fit. Likewise, informal conversations took place through email in which participants quickly responded to one another. Each group member was encouraged to ask questions or provide encouragement as the school year progressed.

Additionally, informal notes were taken during our unstructured conversations each time we met as a group. These meetings always produced many avenues for collaboration as members shared a meal, laughed, and talked about life as a new teacher. Throughout the first semester four meetings were held and the new teachers informally talked about their experiences in a supportive environment. During each of our meetings we heard from all of the group members and further examined how each was coping with their new professional challenges.

Data Analysis

> Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data, it builds grounded theory. (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 111)

The analysis of data did not occur in a linear manner, but rather recursively. As data were collected, they were continually reviewed, organized, and categorized. This was accomplished so the data could be recorded efficiently and managed in ways that allowed for easy retrieval. "The experienced qualitative researcher begins data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview or observation and continues to analyze that data as long as he or she is working on the research" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 77).

The initial step in qualitative analysis is reading the documents that are to be analyzed (Dey, 1993). I found that reading and rereading the electronic emails afforded me the opportunity to live through the electronic discussions a second time and allowed me to become familiar with the data. During this reading time I wrote notes (analytic memos) in order to develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships. Referred to as "an essential technique for qualitative analysis" these memos not only assisted in my reflection of the data collected, but captured my analytical thinking about the data by facilitating such thinking and stimulating analytical insights (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 78). Overall, data were collected and used in a number of ways. The data generated from the electronic emails were coded, indexed and synthesized, as well as the data gathered from the daily jottings and meetings.

Results and Discussion

Daily Jottings

Over a five-week period during the fall semester the teachers took the needed time to complete their daily jottings at the end of the teaching day. Analysis of the data suggested that the most popular categorical areas that novice teachers had to comment on were classroom management and discipline, conflict with colleagues, isolation and loneliness, and meeting students' individual needs.

Comments expressing frustration during non-academic times during the school day were frequent. Teachers talked about transition times during the school day, the end of the day routines, reminding students to work quietly, and general disrespect among the students. One teacher wrote about a behavioral incident that happened on the playground and wondered whose responsibility it is to handle the problem when the classroom teacher

isn't present at the time of the incident. Overall, these new teachers, with teaching assignments ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade, commented on similar classroom experiences and the struggles they endured during their first semester as the classroom leader. In regards to management and discipline these feelings are all too frequent for beginning teachers. Brock and Grady (1998) believe that new teachers have been left to discover for themselves the answers to effective classroom management and discipline. Walsdorf and Lynn (2002) concur that these two teaching demands are interdependent, and a teacher needs to succeed on both areas.

These new professionals also wrote about feelings of competition, jealousy, and a general uncomfortableness as they described personal incidents happening in their schools. One teacher, who was hired as a long term substitute like all of the other first year teachers in her district, told of the unspoken competition for teaching contracts in her building between the four new teachers. In October, when it was decided which two new teachers would be made permanent and which two would lose their positions at the end of the school year, there was obvious hurt and jealousy. Similarly, complaints were made centering on teachers who talk negatively about students and other teachers and when teaching assistants, who you count on to be there, are consistently absent.

In addition, many of these new teachers wrote openly about the isolation and loneliness they feel as they are trying to assimilate into an already cohesive school culture. Lunchtime and faculty meetings were times that newcomers felt isolated. One teacher wrote she felt like a burden constantly asking her grade partners for assistance. She also felt left out when all her grade partners were invited to a party for another co-worker and she was not. Breeding and Whitworth (1999) believe that these feelings of psychological loneliness, even in a setting with many children and adults, can be quite common. New teachers join faculties wherein friendships and social groups are already established, and the cultural norms of the school are unknown to them (Brock & Grady, 1995).

The teachers had many comments under the heading understanding students' individual needs. Some found assistance from talking with parents about what has worked with youngsters in the past, while others felt they were just beginning to "sort" the students according to their academic levels which would help with grouping, seating and the teacher workload as well. Comments were made praising the special teachers (such as the Title I, English as a Second Language, and Seminar teachers) for knowing much about their students since they had tracked them over a few years. One novice teacher in particular felt she had trouble meeting her students' social and emotional needs in the classroom; in fourth grade, tears over lost homework and the inability to make friendships plagued her.

Walsdorf and Lynn (2002) believe that understanding students' needs and interests is an essential factor in recognizing strategies to motivate students to learn. Ganser (1999) and Veenman (1984) agree that the ability to motivate students has consistently been one of the top ten concerns of beginning teachers.

Electronic emails

While some of the earlier questions, which were send out during the first weeks of the school year, were used to acquaint the group with each other, they gradually became more centered and focused. In October, when asked the question, "What has been the most challenging part of your job thus far?" a variety of responses were given. One teacher spoke of her struggle with "motivating the students' who are not motivated," and another teacher wrestled with interpreting the teachers' manuals and getting acquainted with the curriculum.

Two kindergarten teachers concentrated solely on management and discipline, since for many of their students this is their first real school experience. One kindergarten teacher grappled with not being able to "save" every student and was disappointed that a pupil needed to leave her room to attend another school that could specialize in giving the student the specific behavioral help he desperately needs. The other kindergarten teacher wrote of exerting much effort in keeping order in her classroom and "finding a management system that works for more than just a couple of days."

Still another first year teacher felt her biggest problem is pleasing herself. While she continually acclimates herself with the teacher's guides, she wrote of how she wants every lesson to shine and be dynamic. She wrote about wanting to do these "really cool lessons like some of her grade partners," but struggles with the issue of time and the feeling of being overloaded. While she has realized that "although the fluff lessons look and sound great, they are extremely difficult to incorporate day in and day out. There is so much to do that I find myself limited to sticking to the curriculum and then moving on."

These comments correlate with the research tracking other novice teacher's struggles. Feeling of self doubt, insecurity, and failure are common to beginning teacher's during the induction phase. Furthermore, induction research indicates that organizational factors, like the ones that have been spoken of in this study, frequently affect beginning teachers' feeling of success and ultimately their desire to remain in the profession (Brock & Grady, 1995; Ganser, 1999; Valli, 1992). During the informal email conversations, which took place throughout the semester and were initiated by all group members, I noticed a pattern of responses centering on classroom management and discipline. It was mid-November and I decided to ask a formal question focusing strictly upon that topic. I was curious to see what was and wasn't working in their classrooms now that the students had "settled-in" for the year.

When asked "What rules, routines or procedures did you establish early on in the school year that you are starting to see the benefits of now? What would you change next year in regards to management?", many similar answers were received. All of the teachers explained how they had been consistent with the rules from day one, a trait they had been taught in undergraduate classes. From walking in the hallway to sharpening pencils and lining up, consistency was a common theme they highlighted. Similar to the research of Brock and Grady (1998), these beginning teachers were left to discover on their own what worked and didn't work in their classrooms. Perhaps the most positive benefit from this email exchange was that it encouraged and promoted each of the teachers to dialogue between themselves. I noticed a surge of emails being shared that gave suggestions on what to do during certain incidents, and group members provided helpful management hints to each other, regardless of the differences in the grade levels being taught.

I realized this "internal dialogue" was part of our original goals and it was beginning to take form. This was especially noticeable between the two teachers who taught kindergarten. Although they are in the same district, but in different schools, their emailing seemed to take on a life of it's own as it centered on the distinct needs of five-year-olds. As the semester wore on and the formal emails continued I realized that a definite connection was being formed between the support group members. Yet, after closely analyzing our correspondences, I noticed it wasn't my formal email questions that were bringing us closer, but instead the informal email conversations and the times when we met for our meetings.

Even though these beginning teachers were teaching different grades in different districts they began to realize that many similarities still existed between them. Analysis of our informal discussions suggests that each teacher wanted to succeed in the classroom and felt extremely overloaded. These teachers felt so pressed for time and that they "should always be doing something for school" they confessed that emailing their responses to the formal questions was becoming exceedingly difficult. Because of their lack of time, and at their request, it was decided we would do away with the formal questions and keep our email conversations on a "need be" basis.

From reading current literature the concept of time has consistently been an issue for educators, and this support group has been no exception. Outside of the classroom teachers must spend many hours with clerical work, lesson planning, and evaluation of student work. In fact, beginning teachers rank these added demands as some of the most difficult burdens they face (Ganser, 1999; Brock & Grady, 1998). Through our discussions we realized that many of our group members were getting only 5–6 hours of sleep a night because of planning late into the night.

At our informal meetings we realized how very

much all the new teachers have in common. It was enjoyable to hear them laughing at things that would happen in their classroom and sharing ideas to help one another. Advice was freely given from where to shop for the best classroom furniture, what to look for at yard sales, and how to set up classroom centers. The teachers thrived in the unstructured conversations and seemed most at ease with letting the conversations flow from one school related issue to another. Topics discussed in length centered on how to seat students for optimum learning, how to conduct yourself on back-to-school night, and how student teaching cannot possibly prepare you for the realities of having your own classroom.

Overall, I realized this group gave the teachers a forum for freely discussing their feelings without being intimidated or looked down upon. It created a safe haven. A comfort zone where they could talk freely and honestly and not be judged by others. I started to wonder what would happen if these novice teachers revealed some of their private thoughts, like they were doing in our support group, to their formal mentors or in their new faculty induction classes. Would they have taken the risk? Would they have felt as comfortable? Research states that beginning teachers face many harsh realities during their first year of teaching and are often forced into situations where they are required to masquerade as experts (Walsdorf & Lynn, 2002). Plus, Shepston and Jensen (1997) believe that novice teachers can begin to question their own ability when colleagues continually question their decisions. Having five beginning teachers "all in the same boat" reassured and calmed these novices and let them share information and details that might otherwise have gone unspoken.

By developing a new teacher support group and extending their learning community by informally overlapping their "university world" with their "real world classroom realities," these five beginning teachers assisted in creating a safe space in which to share their professional experiences. This collaboratively inspired safe space was formed to cushion these young professionals through their first semester of their induction stage as they began their transition into their new teaching careers.

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