

Characteristics and Experiences that Contribute to Novice Elementary Teachers' Success and Efficacy

By Sara Winstead Fry

This article reports the results of a case study about elementary school teachers' induction experiences. Four teachers began the three-year study, but only two remained in the profession after their second year. This development was consistent with estimates that 40-50% of novices leave the profession within five years (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Bandura's (1977) construct of self-efficacy beliefs was used as a lens to examine how personal characteristics and professional experiences either contributed to new elementary teachers' success, increased sense of self-efficacy, and desire to remain in the profession, or contributed to their desire to leave teaching.

Related Research

Induction

Educators have long recognized that the beginning years of teachers' careers are extremely challenging. Isolation from colleagues and bridging the gap between theory and practice are paramount among the challenges novice teachers face (Lortie, 1975). In response, school districts and outreach programs have endeavored to provide support during the induction

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period—the first three years of teaching. Support during this time is referred to as induction support; it can help beginning teachers systematically expand their repertoire of teaching strategies instead of relying on trial and error (Freiberg, 2002). For clarity, in this article *induction* is used to refer to the time period and the actual support provided to novice teachers.

Reports of the potential benefits of support during induction go back more than two decades (Huling-Austin, 1986). More recently Smith and Ingersoll (2004) indicated that during the 1999-2000 school year, nearly 80% of first-year teachers in the United States received some form of induction support. This was an increase of approximately 40% from a decade earlier. Widespread implementation of induction programs and data about teacher attrition and retention have allowed researchers to identify factors that help novices remain in the profession. These include administrative support, continued support from teacher preparation institutions, colleagues with similar beliefs about teaching, and a supportive school community (Long, 2004). Mentoring from skilled veteran teachers with “strong interpersonal skills, respect for multiple perspectives, and outstanding classroom practice” (Moir & Gless, 2001, p. 112) also supports retention.

Increasing retention of promising new teachers has numerous benefits. Among these are the reduction of two costly problems: Nationwide, the estimated annual cost of replacing teachers who leave the profession is \$2.2 billion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005), and high attrition contributes to the shortage of quality teachers in the United States (Harrell, Leavell, van Tassell, & McKee, 2004). Additionally, long-term teacher retention has been correlated with increased student achievement (Wong, 2004). Induction support contributes to increased teacher confidence and skill (Turley, Powers, & Nakai, 2006) as well as retention (Kelley, 2004). Teacher retention has clear benefits and is supported through induction; however, the mere presence of induction programs is not enough to ensure competence (Fry, 2007). Programs need to be implemented effectively and be responsive to novices' needs in order to achieve the high levels of new teacher retention—upwards of 90%—that successful programs report (Kelley).

Self- Efficacy

In addition to retention, induction may enhance beginning teachers' self-efficacy, which, as Bandura (1977) explained, “is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce outcomes” (p. 193). Self-efficacy influences people's expectations of success, how much effort they expend, and the extent to which they persist in activities. It can be enhanced through success and reflection about thinking and behavior, or reduced through repeated failures.

Self-efficacy has been meaningfully used in educational research as a means of examining teacher success. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) identified teacher efficacy as a variable that influences teachers' persistence and instructional behavior, student achievement, and teachers' beliefs that they can help the most unmotivated

student learn. They indicated that teacher efficacy consists of three measurable factors: efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Yost (2006) explained that “resilient teachers can think deeply, problem-solve, and feel confident in their ability to meet the needs of their students. This leads to high levels of self-efficacy, which in turn leads to greater persistence and risk-taking” (p. 74). Yost’s investigation of how 17 novice teachers overcame obstacles indicated that teacher preparation programs play an important role in fostering the resiliency and persistence that help novices succeed during their initial years of teaching.

Methods

This study utilized qualitative methods to answer the question: What makes novice teachers feel successful and want to remain in the profession?

The Participants

Four beginning teachers participated in this study. They completed bachelor’s degrees in elementary education at the same public university. As members of the same cohort, the participants took their science, mathematics, language arts, and social studies methods courses together. In addition to being the researcher for this study, I was the participants’ student teaching supervisor and instructor during their last semester of methods coursework. The participants were between 22- and 26-years old during the study, and they are referred to by the pseudonyms Becca, Shari, Laura and Stella. They were asked to participate in this study based on their involvement in an earlier, related investigation about the impact of an induction network they used during student teaching (Fry, 2006).

Becca taught kindergarten for the first three years of her career; she had student taught at the same grade. She described the transition from preservice to inservice teaching as “a breeze” and credited her cooperating teacher and the long hours she devoted to student teaching for this easy adjustment. Becca was so impressive that she won a statewide award for exemplary achievement as a first-year teacher. Shari spent the first year of her career teaching third grade and the second two years teaching first grade. Since Shari student taught in a sixth-grade classroom, she had to adjust to the curriculum and needs of younger children. During her second and third years of teaching, Shari participated in an intensive mathematics professional development program and provided veteran teachers with training about effective mathematics interventions. She thrived in this leadership position.

Stella spent the two years of her career teaching fifth grade. She found the transition from student teaching in second grade to teaching upper-elementary children difficult. Laura obtained a first-grade position in the same school district where she had student taught in a kindergarten classroom. She found the transition to inservice teaching difficult because she realized she should have done more as a student teacher. Both Stella and Laura resigned from their teaching positions at

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the end of their second year. Laura predicted that her departure was temporary, but Stella had no plans to return to teaching and began a new career.

Data: Sources, Collection, and Analysis

Monthly phone interviews, exit interviews, emails, teacher journals, classroom observations, and face-to-face interviews were used to answer the research question. Phone interviews were conducted monthly and ranged from 20 to 55 minutes long. Lengthier exit interviews were held with the participants at the end of each school year, in person when possible. The participants and I exchanged e-mails informally, typically when they had a question or something they were excited to share, or when I wanted to follow up on topics from a recent interview. In the third year of the study, I conducted two face-to-face interviews with Shari and Becca and observed in each of their classrooms for two days. The amount of contact increased during the third year because only two participants continued teaching, thus eliminating logistical, temporal, and financial barriers posed by having four participants in three states and two time zones and a researcher who lived in a fourth state and third time zone.

During the final months of the study, I collected data from an additional source. I gave Becca and Shari disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures that captured why they wanted to remain teachers. The photos served as memory aids during follow-up interviews in which participants were asked to “construct narratives of their professional worlds” (Ernst-Slavit & Wenger, 2006, p. 67). Becca and Shari developed a caption for each photo, explained what was happening, and described how it captured why they planned to remain teachers.

Member checking was used to promote reliability of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During the study the participants' first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation facilitated a two-way dialogue about the meaning of the emerging data (Toma, 2000). They read drafts, offered clarification, and verified that their experiences were accurately represented in the writing. They read and approved of the findings presented in this article.

Data from the first year of the study were initially analyzed with a focus on the induction support all four participants received (see Fry, 2007). At the conclusion of the study, I analyzed the data from all three years in their entirety to uncover the supportive elements that helped Becca and Shari be successful and remain in the profession. I also included data from the earlier study about student teaching. The overall approach to analysis was based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendations. I read and reread data to identify categories and major themes. After I had summarized all of the data, I identified larger categories into which some summaries appeared to fit. These larger categories helped me describe themes in the data. Afterwards, I analyzed the data further by identifying the themes that repeated across data sources and participants. I also analyzed data that helped to illustrate why the outcomes of Stella and Laura's teaching careers were so different from Shari and Becca's. At the end of this process, there were four major themes: *successful*

classroom communities, a student-centered approach, overcoming obstacles, and lifelong learners value effective teacher education.

Findings

Three of the four participants received minimal formal induction, and the fourth's support was implemented ineffectively (Fry, 2007). Shari was assigned a mentor in her first year of teaching, but had none when she moved to a new school district at the start of her second year. Becca's school district did not provide a mentor, and her principal excused her from the workshops required for new teachers because she demonstrated proficiency with the topics they addressed. Laura's induction support was limited to a mentor teacher during her first year. Stella's district provided an induction program with supportive elements associated with novice teacher retention (Long, 2004), but the program had a uniform approach to supporting all new teachers regardless of their existing skills. The program did not meet her needs.

The findings are organized by the four major themes identified in the analysis. Because Stella and Laura's data revealed little or no evidence of a student-centered approach or focus on classroom communities, their experiences are discussed more succinctly in *Overcoming Obstacles* and *Lifelong Learners Value Effective Teacher Education*.

Successful Classroom Communities

Becca and Shari were both committed to developing strong classroom communities. Near the end of her first year of teaching, Shari's knowledge, skill, and confidence were enhanced through training in a group-learning and community-building process called Tribes (Gibbs, 2000). Shari had initially learned about Tribes from her cooperating teacher, but "the training made ALL the difference! Using something that you've not been trained in, then getting the training, you just look back and think 'I did not fully get that!'" (year 3; 10/4/06). Shari used the Tribes process to establish an environment where children treated one another with mutual respect and solved problems together. The process was consistent with her commitment to student-centered learning (discussed further in the next section). Before her training:

It was so easy as the teacher to just solve the problem for them. But that doesn't teach your kids to solve problems or get past their conflicts. I'm really proud of my kids now. Last year I always had to mediate. This year it is rare. Even with my troublemakers, there have only been two or three times all year when I've had to mediate. (year 2; 5/16/06)

With time she became increasingly confident about how much easier classroom management, and, in turn, instruction became as a result of her successful classroom community.

Shari's appreciation of a strong class community grew during her third year of teaching when she had a student with severe academic and emotional needs. This

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student required a great deal of time and patience. Shari explained, "If I had him my first year, there is no way I would still be teaching" (year 3; 10/4/06). After sharing the challenges he posed, she described how she used Tribes to include him as a positive member of the classroom community. Shari had learned from past experiences with students with severe needs; instead of blaming herself for his difficulties as she would have done as a first-year teacher, she set out to help him be successful academically and socially. Her efficacy in classroom management was high as a result of Tribes professional development training and earlier successful management experiences. Her confidence also contributed to increased efficacy in instructional strategies because students were more engaged in her well-managed classroom.

Becca also used community-building activities to foster a positive classroom environment, and she extended these efforts to her students' families. Unlike Shari, Becca received no inservice professional development training to support her in this process. Instead she built on experiences she had as a student teacher; her cooperating teacher had modeled methods for family involvement in a primary-grades classroom. Starting in her first year of teaching, Becca hosted family nights where she welcomed her students' parents and siblings into the classroom for dessert, activities, and the chance to make an academic review game. This approach solidified her strong relationships with families and made communication easier when she needed to tell parents about their son's or daughter's struggles. Relationships with families were one reason Becca wanted to continue teaching:

You've become a part of that family in some aspect. You made a connection and a relationship. You always work to improve those ones that aren't as positive. And you really grow and feed off of the family experiences that are positive. Those are the ones that really drive you to do even better next year. (year 3; 6/11/07)

By extending the classroom community to include families, Becca created a positive school-home relationship that fostered student achievement. As a result, her sense of teacher efficacy was enhanced because of the successful experiences that ensued.

A Student-Centered Approach

Becca and Shari shared a student-centered approach to teaching that emphasized independent thinking and community responsibility. Their classroom layouts and procedures were designed to promote these goals. Despite teaching in different schools in communities with different levels of affluence, their classrooms were similar in many ways. Both went out of their way to obtain circular tables instead of desks for their students, set up science inquiry centers around the room, and created cozy niches where children could read or write independently. Each used a student-of-the-week approach to help children get to know one another and to build a caring and supportive class community. These and other similarities in approach to teaching and classroom design reflected the major tenets of their teacher preparation program, which emphasized student-centered learning, inquiry, and community.

The classroom layout supported their approach to teaching and effective implementation of instructional strategies. Becca had a talent for helping her students become self-directed learners by using instructional practices that reflected her preservice literacy methods course and student teaching experiences. When I observed her classroom in late March, the students had just returned to school after a 13-day vacation. There was none of the unfocused or confused behavior that often marks young children's return to school. Instead, they fell into the rhythm of the school day and took responsibility for their learning. For example, after recess the children had a snack and then immediately began their writing workshop. Four or five children sat at each circular table and worked on a different phase of a four-day writing process. No one needed a reminder about where to begin despite not having worked on their writing for 13 days.

The children were independently motivated throughout the entire writing workshop, an accomplishment that can be attributed to the emphasis Becca placed on students taking ownership of their writing from the beginning of the school year. She did not use writing prompts and explained why:

I want them to enjoy the process; that it is their original thoughts, their original ideas, that they have ownership over that writing. It is important in kindergarten that they start to develop their own voice, their own topics. At the beginning [of the year] they are not writing for what I want; they are writing for what they want. When I used to give a prompt early on, they were so concerned about what I want that they forget the enjoyment in [writing]. They would forget to express them. (year 3; 9/13/07)

Becca's student-centered approach had impressive results; the children's stories were so detailed that it was hard to believe one-third of these kindergarteners started the school year only knowing the letters in their names. This example of students' self-motivation, learning, and progress is one of many successful experiences that increased Becca's sense of teaching efficacy.

Becca's photographs that depicted why she wanted to remain a teacher also captured her commitment to foster student responsibility for learning. Several photographs featured the science learning centers in her classroom. The centers contained materials that the children explored independently. Becca questioned, encouraged, and prompted the students to ask their own questions and develop hypotheses about the materials. Thus, she helped them use the scientific method to enrich their self-directed exploration. The centers' content also reflected student choice because the children selected the topics through a monthly voting process. These instructional decisions reflected major tenets of Becca's preservice preparation program that were reinforced by student teaching under the guidance of a cooperating teacher who shared a student-centered approach to teaching.

Shari's photographs also made it clear that she valued children being independent learners who discovered things for themselves. She took 21 pictures; 18 captured children being self-directed learners, and 3 showed elements of her caring

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classroom community. Seven of the self-directed learning pictures were from the final mathematics unit of the year. It was about weights and measurements, which she did not teach the previous year because it seemed too difficult. But her ongoing mathematics professional development made Shari confident that the children could be successful. The pictures captured students investigating different objects, recording data in a computer, and teaching one another concepts they had learned. The children were so excited that they brought in extra materials to investigate and took their learning beyond the state standards the unit was designed to address. Shari's proud words regarding the unit—"I like for them to be keepers of the knowledge, too" (year 3; 7/4/07)—reflected her commitment to the kind of student-centered learning facilitated by the weights and measurements unit.

Shari took eight of the self-directed learning photographs on kindergarten transition day, when, near the end of the school year, her students spent half a day introducing kindergarteners to first grade. The first graders had an agenda that ranged from completing an interest inventory about each kindergartener to helping each student select a book from the class library. Shari said the day was amazing because her students led the entire event; she felt as if her only job was to smile as she watched the result of her yearlong efforts to help them become independent thinkers. The pictures captured this independence and documented student learning, two factors that contributed to Shari's increased efficacy and desire to remain a teacher.

Overcoming Obstacles

Although Shari and Becca were highly successful in their beginning years of teaching, they still faced obstacles. However, because they possessed the resiliency and persistence that Yost (2006) indicated can help beginning teachers succeed, they overcame the obstacles. For example, neither Becca nor Shari's school district offered an induction program, and they had to make the transition from teacher preparation to practice with minimal support. They did not rely on trial and error, the "haphazard process of strategy development [that] may take several years" (Freiberg, 2002, p. 56) that many beginning teachers utilize when unsupported. Instead, they effectively implemented strategies they learned during their teacher preparation program and student teaching, and they actively sought advice from veteran teachers in their schools.

Shari and Becca each possessed a high sense of efficacy in terms of instructional strategies, something that Stella seemed to lack. She had little autonomy while student teaching and only assumed responsibility for the full teaching load for one week while Shari and Becca did so for more than six weeks. Stella lacked the efficacy Yost (2006) indicated can be derived from successful experiences during student teaching. This lack of efficacy might have been responsible for her extensive use of trial and error as a basis for teaching decisions—even though she participated in an induction program that offered many support mechanisms recommended in

the literature. Stella found that the content of professional development sessions designed for new teachers was repetitious of her college courses and ultimately dismissed them as a poor use of her time (Fry, 2007). She found topics in classroom management and special education particularly redundant despite acknowledging that she faced difficulties in both areas. She considered her biggest challenge to be “trying to come up with enough curriculum. It’s hard because I don’t know if it is going to work or not” (year 1; 11/30/04). She focused her energy on curriculum development, and trial and error became her mantra. For example, when I asked how she was making her decisions about teaching literacy, she responded:

I keep changing what we do. [Long silence, then I prompted “Are you able to draw from (teacher preparation program) training?”] In terms of novels, I go back to a lot of the things that I learned in my children’s lit and young adult lit class. In terms of writing, it’s a lot of trial and error. (year 2; 11/29/05)

Stella’s struggles contributed to her departure from teaching and were typical of those new teachers described in the literature face (Freiberg, 2002; Long, 2004). They were a marked contrast to Becca’s successful teaching of writing described in the preceding section. Becca and Shari also faced and overcame challenges that were unique to their individual circumstances.

***Becca’s Obstacle:
Lack of Collaboration***

The greatest challenge that affected Becca was a strained relationship with her grade-level colleagues. Collaboration with grade-level teammates was a school-wide expectation, but tensions and different approaches to teaching made this difficult. It was a major issue during her first year of teaching. Eventually Becca accepted that she and her grade-level colleagues would not be a close team. This was disappointing for Becca because she valued the supportive collegial relationships she had established with peers, her cooperating teacher, and other veteran educators during student teaching. The tense team relationship exacerbated the lack of induction support Becca received because ideally her teammates could have provided unofficial mentoring and guidance that would have compensated for the lack of a formal induction program. Instead, Becca overcame the challenge by furthering her ability to research instructional and assessment techniques and by developing strong relationships with colleagues at other grade levels. She still missed having a close collaborative team; as she explained: “I’ve always been someone to go and find things for myself. But it would be nice to have someone share what they’ve already found or created” (year 2; 2/13/06). Indeed, when, at the end of her third year of teaching, Becca took pictures that captured why she wanted to remain a teacher, she included ones of the staff members she was close to, who were teachers at other grade levels. She explained, “If you’re in an environment that isn’t supportive, it’s not going to be fun [teaching]” (year 3; 9/3/07).

Shari's Obstacles:

Time Away from the Classroom and 7,000 Miles

Involvement in mathematics professional development opportunities required that Shari miss many days of school to attend trainings. She lamented, "Since school started I have only been in the classroom for two complete weeks without an absence" (year 2; 10/19/05). Her regular absences made it more difficult to develop a classroom community. However, she felt the extra time and effort was worth the benefits her students received from her mathematics training. She was immediately able to apply what she learned, and her students' mathematical understandings improved as a result. Ironically, an opportunity that increased her efficacy in instructional strategies made it more difficult to increase efficacy in classroom management. Shari overcame the challenge through perseverance and was successful in both areas.

The absences for professional development continued during her third year of teaching, but Shari also missed school because of an issue in her personal life: Her husband's National Guard unit was called to active duty. After two months of training in the United States, he had one week of leave followed by a 15-month tour of duty in Iraq. She took that week off from school to be with him before he went to an active war zone 7,000 miles away. This decision to prioritize family over teaching marked the beginning of Shari learning to limit the amount of time she spent working each week. Later in the year she reflected, "I'm not my job. I finally figured that out. My first year teaching I ate, slept, breathed school. My second year it was a little better. But this year, I just can't do it" (year 3; 2/22/07). Finding a balance between work and personal life was an important step for Shari, who worked 12-hour days during the week and at least 10 hours on the weekends during her first year of teaching.

The strain and stress of her husband's absence inevitably affected Shari professionally because, "It's hard not to let your personal life affect your work life unless you're a super hero" (year 3; 2/22/07). She ultimately withdrew from her colleagues to avoid their "inappropriate empathizing. The support people for Iraq families warned me I might get to be like this. People say things like 'Oh, he's only been gone for 9 months. That's not that long'" (year 3; 2/22/07). Such comments were hard to hear since her husband regularly went on military missions that brought him under hostile gun fire. She felt her colleagues "acted like he's just somewhere else in the States, chilling out, and having a good time on a business trip" (year 3; 3/27/07).

The withdrawal from her colleagues meant she spent less time collaboratively planning with her grade-level team. She was criticized for this during her summative evaluation for the school year. Although the reprimand was verbal and not documented in writing, it frustrated her to feel unsupported by her colleagues and principal during such a difficult time. She looked forward to her fourth year of teaching since her husband was scheduled to return from active duty early in the academic year. Time and her husband's return were the only means of overcoming this challenge. Although

the personal strain had a negative impact on her collegial relationships, evidence of her students' learning and their affection for her during this difficult time increased her confidence, efficacy, and eagerness to remain in the profession.

Lifelong Learners Value Effective Teacher Education

Shari and Becca both felt confident about the way their preservice education had prepared them for inservice teaching. They attributed their initial ability to make good instructional decisions to positive student teaching experiences. Both had strong relationships with their cooperating teachers that turned into lasting friendships. They were comfortable calling their former cooperating teachers to discuss challenging situations once they were inservice teachers.

Laura and Stella were not as confident at the end of student teaching. Laura's relationship with her cooperating teacher was strained, and she spent less than four weeks teaching the full school day. During student teaching she was nearly in tears when she explained, "I'm teaching the whole month of November and my [cooperating teacher] just now gave me everything... I haven't had that much planning practice, and suddenly I'm just thrown with it all" (Fry, 2006, p. 6). During her first year of teaching, Laura regularly described responsibilities she wished she had had while student teaching (e.g., facilitating guided-reading groups and preparing report cards). As she explained, "Looking back I honestly don't know where or how [my cooperating teacher] got her grades" (year 1; 10/26/04). She did not feel successful at first and lamented that it took her more than half of the year to "figure out a routine and be able to focus on [my students'] academic needs" (year 3; 8/2/07). Unlike Laura, Stella's inability to establish an effective routine persisted in her second year, a problem that might have been the result of having full classroom responsibility for only one week of student teaching. In contrast, Becca and Shari regularly described how student teaching and their relationships with their cooperating teachers helped them feel well-prepared for their inservice responsibilities. This difference between the way Becca and Shari viewed their preservice preparation supports Yost's (2006) suggestion that novices who had few successful experiences during student teaching often struggle because they make judgments based on a low sense of teacher efficacy.

In addition to beginning their careers with a comparatively high sense of teacher efficacy and confidence about their teacher preparation, Becca and Shari considered themselves lifelong learners and believed teacher education should be ongoing. Because of their desire to continue learning, both were frustrated by the absence of meaningful administrative feedback during their first year. Both received "blanket praise" that lacked substance. Shari lamented:

I want some feedback—I want to be told what I need to improve in. All of the comments are just "She's doing great," but I know I'm not perfect. I really want to know where I can grow and what I can do. (year 1; 11/29/04)

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Becca expressed similar frustrations and felt as if the only goals she had to work on were ones she identified herself. She finally obtained the feedback she craved when she was a third-year teacher; her school hired a new principal whose approach to evaluation felt meaningful because:

He does a formal walk through every other week. He'll leave a little slip of paper that has positive or constructive feedback of what I could improve on. That's helped out a lot. It's nothing really big—once, like, "I noticed that one of the kiddos was off-task. You might want to check that out." Then we'll talk about it later. I like the instantaneous feedback. I'm not sitting there wondering. (year 3; 12/12/06)

Even though Becca's successful experiences with students had enhanced her teacher efficacy, she valued the regular feedback from her new principal. It helped her identify small ways to improve on a daily basis, which was a good match with the big-picture improvement goals she skillfully established through reflective practice. Thus, meaningful feedback contributed to her growing sense of teacher efficacy.

Shari received regular supportive and constructive administrative feedback during her second year of teaching when she began working at a different school. Her new principal provided warranted praise, constructive criticism, and specific suggestions. Shari appreciated how, during evaluation meetings, her principal asked "things that really make me think about what I do and why I do it" (year 2; 1/24/06). She also valued encouragement:

She says thanks when it is genuine. It creates a really positive climate. It's one of the things that makes me FEEL successful. Last year I was probably successful, but I didn't always feel that way because of the lack of feedback. (year 2; 2/13/06)

The combination of being supported, feeling successful, and having specific improvement goals appeared to increase Shari's teacher efficacy. As noted in the literature review, administrative support promotes new teacher retention. Shari and Becca's desire for the support to include critical feedback is particularly noteworthy because the existing literature highlights the value of "regular supportive communication" (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, p. 33) and novice teachers' desire for more support (Long, 2004). However, discussion of the need for critical feedback appears undeveloped in the literature.

Conceptions of themselves as lifelong learners contributed to Becca's and Shari's goals for ongoing professional development. Becca believed that continuing to learn how to be a more successful teacher was essential, and that was one of the reasons she intended to remain in the profession. She explained that teaching "lets me grow personally and professionally. It's a very reflective practice. You're constantly evaluating what you do in your job. And that reflection always helps you to become a better person and teacher" (year 3; 6/11/07). This love of learning and reflection facilitated Becca's successful implementation of new instructional techniques because she was willing to conduct research about best practice.

Shari began taking classes for a master's degree with an emphasis on literacy

during her third year of teaching. She explained that sharing her goals as a lifelong learner inspired her first-grade students, and they “thought it was so cool that I was taking a grad class” (year 3; 7/4/07). The coursework also helped her transform her teaching practices. For example, she learned a more effective way to implement a phonics activity after she discovered:

We’re doing it all wrong! The problem is the majority of my kids are unable to be independent at what I’m asking. Consequently, their work isn’t up to my expectations, and they aren’t learning what I want them to learn. (year 3; 10/16/06)

Shari’s willingness to change literacy instruction in response to new learning reflected her awareness of how student performance could be enhanced through her continued scholarship, something she had already seen as a result of her extensive professional development in mathematics. Her professional learning enhanced her efficacy in instructional strategies, which in turn led to heightened student engagement and contributed to better classroom management. Thus, Shari’s commitment to lifelong learning increased her overall teacher efficacy.

The four themes of successful classroom communities, a student-centered approach, overcoming obstacles, and lifelong learners value effective teacher education provide answers to the research question: What makes novice teachers feel successful and want to remain in the profession? The ability to overcome challenges was a personal characteristic that helped Shari and Becca succeed. An effective preservice preparation program was the first and formative professional experience that, combined with meaningful professional development early in their careers, solidified their commitment to lifelong learning. Additionally, when Shari and Becca entered their teacher preparation program, they already envisioned themselves becoming caring, student-centered teachers. They learned *how* to achieve this vision because their teacher education program and cooperating teachers emphasized student-centered learning, inquiry, and community. Their initial beliefs became personal characteristics that were honed through their preparation program and successful experiences as beginning teachers. Thus, the answer to the research question is personal characteristics and professional experiences enhanced Shari and Becca’s teacher efficacy, supported their success as they survived and thrived during their induction years, and enhanced their desire to remain in the profession.

Discussion

Becca and Shari made effective decisions that reflected their preservice preparation, student teaching, and ongoing professional development despite a lack of formal induction support. They seemed to differ from Stella and Laura in two ways: their professional attitude and their focus as reflective practitioners. For example, Shari’s enthusiasm about (re)learning how to implement the Tribes approach to group learning and community building was described in *Successful Classroom Communities*. Despite being familiar with Tribes because her cooperating teacher introduced

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her to the program, Shari valued the training because it provided a chance to revisit and expand her knowledge in the context of inservice teaching. In comparison, Stella was unable to find value in the professional development sessions her district offered novice teachers because the topics replicated content from her preparation program (see *Overcoming Obstacles*). Stella's rejection of ongoing learning opportunities that might have allowed her to (re)consider special education and classroom management in the context of inservice teaching suggested that her attitude towards professional development was different and more negative than Shari's. Stella acknowledged her struggles with classroom management and consulted with her administrator about how to improve her approach (Fry, 2007). This suggested a willingness to continue learning, but only through one-on-one consultation.

Shari and Becca's reflective practice focused on how their actions impacted student success. For example, Becca once reflected on student discipline:

I've learned how to better handle myself when a student is not performing the way that they should. I've learned there are some things that I would not do. I have seen how when a kid is yelled at in front of the class, humiliated, how it throws them completely off track. But when you read about it [in college] you don't really get it. I did it once. And it took me a good month to get him back on track, wanting to participate willingly, happy. I just couldn't imagine [yelling] every day. (year 1; 5/15/05)

This thoughtful reflection by a teacher with a high sense of efficacy initially focused on how her behavior impacted one child. Without prompting, Becca continued to explain how she began to effectively facilitate student achievement through one-on-one consultations instead of publicly redirecting, and possibly humiliating, a child.

Stella and Laura were less efficacious teachers, and their reflective practice tended to be more critical of students, lacked a thoughtful critique of how their actions impacted student success, and focused on their struggles as teachers. For example, in response to the open-ended question "How has teaching been going?" Laura said

It's all good. School's hard. Just, it's just hard. Um, I don't know. I'm having a hard time getting my kids motivated to do anything. It's just frustrating right now. I don't really know what's going on. Every time we go to do something the kids whine. I've asked the kids what they want to do, and I'm doing something with their likes, but they still need to do some writing about it. Then they moan and groan. (year 1; 10/26/04)

Laura struggled to identify her role in correcting the motivation problem, even when I asked follow-up questions to help deepen her reflection and help her problem solve. Shari and Becca's focus on their impact on student success was substantially different from Stella and Laura's reflective practice. The differences in reflective practice and professional attitudes between the two sets of participants have practical implications for teacher education and induction programs.

Implications

Comparing Becca and Shari to Laura and Stella demonstrated how teachers with the same preparatory coursework, but problematic student teaching placements, can face greater challenges as novices. This finding adds to the literature indicating the important role teacher education programs play in fostering efficacy (e.g., Yost, 2006) and underscores the importance of effective student teaching placements with cooperating teachers who mentor in addition to just providing a place to hone teaching skills.

It is important to note that Becca and Shari may have had inherent dispositions that helped them to be more efficacious and resilient teachers than Laura and Stella. This possibility means Becca and Shari might have become successful teachers regardless of their preparatory experiences. Although teacher educators cannot control the inherent personality traits of prospective teachers, we can design instructional experiences to help foster the professional attitudes and approaches to reflective practice that set Shari and Becca apart from Laura and Stella. For example, I have applied the findings of this study to my own practice and modified my approach to student teacher supervision. When I supervised the four participants during their student teaching, I did not have explicit conversations about the professional attitudes they needed to be successful. Now, on the first day of the semester, my student teachers and I discuss how their first three years of college were all about them, but when they enter the classroom the focus has to be unequivocally on their students. We revisit this issue throughout the semester. Our post-observation conferences focus on how their teaching supported student success, or lack thereof, in order to help them develop a student-centered focus for their reflective practice. Additional research about the impact of practices such as these will allow teacher educators to determine how preparatory experiences can help novices develop appropriate professional attitudes and reduce attrition, since induction begins with student teaching.

In closing, the importance of retaining effective novice teachers cannot be overstated. Although support during the induction years can reduce attrition (Kelley, 2006) and 80% of teachers in America receive some form of induction support, attrition rates remain high (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). This suggests that some teachers receive induction support in name only because of variability in program quality (Fry, 2007) or an insufficient combination of supportive measures (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Becca and Shari were able to enhance their sense of efficacy by essentially creating their own induction support despite teaching in schools that did not provide formal induction programs. They began their careers with confidence and developed their instructional repertoire systematically rather than through trial and error. High national attrition rates, which were reflected in the attrition of the other two participants in this study, suggest that Becca and Shari were exceptional in their ability to find the support they needed in order to skillfully teach the children in their care. Teacher educators and K-12 personnel responsible for induction need to consistently and effectively provide research-based support rather than leaving

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novices to find it on their own lest we leave the success of new teachers—and their students—to trial and error.

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