

# Growing Your Own: Keys to Successful First-Year Teaching

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This descriptive study examines the unique cases of three middle grades education majors who completed a year-long student teaching experience in the same school where they were hired for their first year of teaching. Surveys of the new teachers, their mentors, and observations of the new teachers were used to examine the preparation received in the year-long student teaching experience as well as their transition into the teaching profession. While all three new teachers recognized their first year of teaching was still a challenging one, their experiences provide insights for easing the transition from pre-service to full-time teacher.

The debate over how to best prepare teachers often centers on the issue of time. In order to alleviate teacher shortages and to make teacher education more financially feasible, undergraduate programs must be completed within the usual four years, while still maintaining the rigor and experiences needed for successful teaching. A balance must be struck between how much time should be spent in the college classroom and how much should be devoted to observing and practicing in classrooms. It is a challenge to prepare new teachers as well as possible within the time constraints of a rigorous undergraduate program since the cost of an extra year of college would preclude some students from pursuing teacher certification. Making the academic coursework fit with a sustained field experience for student teaching is difficult but necessary for the teacher education candidates.

Upon graduation, even the best prepared teachers will struggle during the first year of teaching if not supported in the school environment, making induction critically important to the retention of new teachers. While all teacher preparation programs seek to create an environment that fully prepares teachers for the myriad

of challenges facing them in future classrooms. Facing these challenges can be likened to getting a drink of water from a fire hose. The “gush” of these first year challenges frequently causes new teachers to drop out of the profession before they have a chance to succeed. While those challenges cannot be removed, there are strategies that can help make that first year a little less stressful.

Darling-Hammond (2003) stipulates that: “A number of studies have found that well-designed mentoring programs raise retention rates for new teachers by improving their attitudes, feelings of efficacy, and instructional skills” (p. 11). Mentoring is only one part of induction, and programs with purposeful, ongoing professional development provide much needed support to new hires.

## **Background of Berry College’s Program**

Berry College is a small, private liberal arts and science institution located 65 miles northwest of Atlanta, GA. In 1997, the School of Education was awarded a grant from the Bell South Foundation to “re-invent” its teacher education program, with an end goal of producing better prepared teachers. Changes to the program included the

addition of a senior year experience in student teaching that allows the student teacher to begin the school year with the classroom cooperating teacher and work with that same teacher throughout the year. The NCATE accredited program offers teacher certification in Early Childhood Education, Middle Grades, Secondary, and various P-12 programs. Student teachers complete two weeks of full-time experience at the beginning of the public school year with their teachers. Middle and secondary students then work four hours a week with the classroom teacher during the fall semester, while ECE students work ten hours a week, along with taking other education and content courses. In the spring semester, they complete seven weeks of full-time student teaching, followed by seven weeks of working 17 hours per week in the school. Berry currently graduates about 55 student teachers per year.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine the voices and perceptions of three of our graduates on their confidence in first-year teaching after a year-long student teaching experience in the same school in which they were hired to teach. Two of the teachers had the same mentor for both years. We also examined the perceptions of their mentor teachers on whether a year-long student teaching experience facilitated their transition to first-year teaching and to what extent did obtaining a teaching position in the same school where they student taught ease their transition into the profession. The findings from this study provided feedback to our program and hopefully will provide useful information for others considering a year-long student teaching experience and employment in the same school in which their student teaching experience occurred.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were three first-year teachers (2 females, 1 male) who graduated from Berry College with degrees in Middle Grades Education in spring 2006. They entered Berry College as freshmen education majors.

They will be referred to as Mary, Beth, and Jason. Mary student taught in a 7th grade math class and was hired to teach in that same class. Beth student taught in an 8th grade reading class and was hired to teach in an 8th grade language arts class. Jason student taught in an 8th grade social studies class and was hired to teach in a 7th grade reading class. They were all hired to teach within their certification areas in the same school.

The study was conducted at a middle school with a population of approximately 900 students in grades seven and eight in a city of about 36,000 in northwest Georgia. The demographics of the school for 2007 were about 48% African-American, 32% Caucasian, 16% Latino, and about 4% Asian. It is a Title I school with 68% on free or reduced lunch. It was also identified as a “Needs Improvement School” for five years under the guidelines for NCLB until 2007-08 when it was removed from the list.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We used two surveys as data sources. The first survey, given at the end of September, was based on the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards using a Likert scale. We used these standards because they reflect the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for teachers starting their career and would be more understandable to other programs than using our own program standards. The mission of INTASC states that “an effective teacher must be able to integrate content knowledge with the specific strengths and needs of students to assure that all students learn and perform at high levels.” We asked participants to rate themselves on a scale from 1 to 5 (Not Confident – Somewhat Confident – Moderately Confident – Confident – Very Confident) how confident they believe they are in each of the ten INTASC areas. The second survey consisted of five open-ended questions asking such questions as how the year-long student teaching helped them prepare for the first year of teaching and what helped them

most during their first year of teaching. These surveys were returned by email. We asked them to complete the INTASC survey again in April along with the open-ended questions. We also asked their mentor teachers to complete the INTASC survey on each of the three first-year teachers in the fall and again in the spring. However, because it would be hard for the mentor teachers to assess the first-year teachers' confidence levels, the mentor teachers rated the new teachers' competence on each of the ten standards.

### Results and Discussion

By analyzing the items on a Likert scale, we learned that the mean self-rating for all three first-year teachers in all areas was 4 (Confident) (See Table 1). This result suggests that after their

participants rated themselves as least confident (3.3) on Assessment. It appears to be difficult to understand the use of formal and informal assessment during student teaching. Two other areas that participants were less confident in were using Multiple Instructional Strategies (3.7) and Motivation and Management (3.7). Participants were most confident in Student Development, Diverse Learners, Planning, and Reflective Practice (all 4.3). Finally, participants were also confident in Content Pedagogy (4.0) and School and Community Involvement (4.0).

Mentor teachers had slightly different perspectives on the participants' competence levels at the beginning of the school year. The mean mentor teacher rating for the three first-year teachers in all areas was 3.6 (Between Moderately Compe-

**Table 1**  
**INTASC Survey Results for 1st year of teaching – Mean Scores (Based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating confidence/competence)**

INTASC Standards	Subjects' Mean scores Fall	Subjects' Mean scores Spring	Mentor Teachers' Mean scores Fall	Mentor Teachers' Mean scores Spring
Content Pedagogy	4.0	4.3	3.7	3.7
Student Development	4.3	4.0	3.3	3.7
Diverse Learners	4.3	4.3	3.3	4.0
Multiple Instructional Strategies	3.7	4.0	4.0	4.0
Motivation and Management	3.7	3.4	3.3	4.0
Communication and Technology	4.0	4.0	3.7	4.0
Planning	4.3	4.7	3.7	4.0
Assessment	3.3	3.7	3.7	4.0
Reflective Practice	4.3	4.0	4.0	4.3

year-long student teaching experience, students feel confident in their abilities to be successful first-year teachers. The slightly lower rating of the mentor teachers, while still above average, attests to their experiences in the school where they know what will be asked of these first-year teachers. The

participants rated themselves as least confident (3.3) on Assessment. They rated the participants' competence in Multiple Instructional Strategies and Reflective Practice highest with a mean of 4, while Content Pedagogy, Communication and Technology, Planning, and Assessment were rated a mean of 3.7. The lowest ratings of 3.3 were given

to Student Development, Diverse Learners, Motivation and Management, and School and Community Involvement. Competence in instructional strategies and reflective practice was not surprising given the emphasis on these in the Berry College curriculum. However, since all graduates receive an ESOL endorsement, and these three participants did their student teaching in a diverse school, we would expect competencies in Diverse Learners to be higher. On the other hand, the challenging demographics of a Title I school identified as Needs Improvement according to NCLB prove difficult for even the best-trained new teachers.

In the open-ended survey, the first-year teachers were asked how the year-long student teaching helped them prepare for the first year of teaching. All three were positive about the experience and felt that the most helpful part was being there for pre-planning and the first day of school as well as the continuity leading up to their full time student teaching. Learning from their mistakes during the full year allowed them to be more confident in taking risks and knowing they would be able to handle situations that would come up during the 1st year of teaching.

Jason: The positives from student teaching included getting to know the students and being able to actively participate in the school environment, both inside and outside the classroom.

Beth: Student teaching at this school was challenging and rewarding. I was exhausted at the end of each day, but I still came back for more. I learned volumes about not only the teaching profession but also the real world. I lost a lot of naiveté.

Mary: My student teaching experience was wonderful at this school. My cooperating teacher was superb and taught me a lot about math and overall teaching. She allowed me to teach everyday and do the same 'teacher jobs' that she did. The responsibility and duties were put on me. It was here that I learned classroom management,

differentiation, and being able to do '10 things at once.'

The results of the survey near the end of their first year of teaching showed that the average self-rating of all participants in all areas remained a 4 (Confident). However, they became more or less confident in different areas. They became more confident in Content Pedagogy, Multiple Instructional Strategies, Planning, and Assessment. They became less confident in Student Development, Motivation and Management, Reflective Practice, and School and Community Involvement. The results suggest that after a year of teaching, the participants believe they are more confident in the aspects of teaching that have to do with delivering the content and less confident in the affective side of teaching: knowing the students, motivating and managing them, reflecting on their practice, and becoming involved in the community.

Beth: I feel trapped by testing in a world of concrete applications, and my students have such serious shortages of background knowledge and schema that I spend most of my time teaching concepts rather than thinking skills. I really want to work on this next year because teaching students how to think is my ultimate goal as a teacher. I have struggled this year with both classroom management and student motivation. I need to find better ways to assert my own authority and create an environment more conducive to learning.

It is apparent that the current educational climate may not be conducive for the development of these types of affective dispositions and behaviors. The first-year teachers felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities required of them. Jason was assigned yearbook editor, which took much of his time and energy. As a highly energetic and involved individual throughout college, it was even too much for him. Others expressed concern about the amount of work required of them.

Beth: I felt very overwhelmed by the amount of work being asked of me. I was putting in days from sunup to nearly sunup again.

Jason: I felt that I struggled with management problems – instead of being able to connect to my students, I spent my time writing passes, teaching bathroom and hallway procedures, and trying desperately to get my students to stop talking long enough to hear anything I say.

The first-year teachers were asked what helped them most during their first year of teaching. All three mentioned the fact that they had student taught at that same school and already had a relationship with their mentor teacher.

Mary: What helped me most was having a math coach, who is my mentor, and other cooperating team and math teachers to guide me along and always be there for me. Since I knew what was going on, and I knew who I was working with, my beginning teaching experience has been amazing.

Beth: I believe that the relationships I had already established with other teachers at the school helped me develop because I felt comfortable going to them with questions and problems. Their advice, while sometimes difficult to hear, forced me to think about the choices I made and their effectiveness. In addition, my mentor knows me very well so she's able to tell when I'm nervous, stressed, or concerned about something. She also knows my strengths and weaknesses, so she can focus on helping me grow in the areas we identified last year.

Jason: I was able to anticipate certain behavioral or educational issues and intervene before they became problems. In addition, knowing the building, procedures, and other faculty has helped me feel more 'at home' as a teacher. I feel more confident because I've been here before.

All three teachers agreed that classroom management, lack of administrative support, and the challenging new requirements for implementing standards-based classrooms were all factors that made their experiences more difficult. Two of the three considered quitting the profession after only one month, but the encouragement from their mentors, along with a sense of obligation to fulfill their commitments, prevailed.

The mentor teachers were very positive about the three participants' competence and development as teachers. Their competence ratings on eight of the ten standards increased while two, Content Pedagogy and Multiple Instructional Strategies, remained the same (See Table 1). Clearly, the mentors believe that the first-year teachers grew over the course of the year and are developing into effective teachers. The participants' individual personalities give them strengths and weaknesses that should be addressed in order to reach their potential as teachers. For example, Beth is very strong in content pedagogy but struggles with classroom management. Jason relates very well to the young adolescent learner and manages the classroom but struggles with standards-based teaching practices and fostering high student achievement. New teachers must develop strategies to correct these weaknesses in order to succeed.

### **Implications**

All three teachers have signed contracts to return to the same school next year, an encouraging sign since they will have been associated with the school for almost three years, including their junior internships, their year-long student teaching, and their first year of full-time teaching. Student achievement and teacher retention become more likely to occur after a teacher has been in the profession for three years (Darling-Hammond, 2003). However, Mary is the only one to state that teaching will be her career while Beth and Jason have reservations.



Beth: I plan to consider my options carefully, but I want to stay at least another year to see how much of an impact added experience will have on my effectiveness and happiness in the profession. I would like to pursue my master's degree eventually, but I may decide to pursue it in either English or Spanish as a step toward teaching at the high school or college levels or a step toward another career entirely.

Jason: I plan to continue teaching, but I will be teaching 8th grade literature next year, which will mean another year of learning new content to teach. I would like to earn my master's degree, though I am not exactly certain in what area. I would like to work toward a degree in Outdoor Education, and I would like to move my teaching to the outdoor environment.

Even though the future is unclear for these beginning teachers, it is certain that the year-long student teaching program leading into employment in the same school contributed to their commitment to remain in the profession at least temporarily and to the successes they experienced as first year teachers. Clearly, first year teaching is hard. In this particular school, a challenging student population combined with the usual demands placed on first year teachers created stress for these individuals. If schools want to retain teachers and promote their development, more resources need to be available to ease their transition into teaching and create an environment where they can grow and develop their strengths.

Each of these beginning teachers' strengths and weaknesses are different. While one may struggle with classroom management, another may struggle with content. One may be able to manage a classroom, while another may be able to relate to young adolescents and make school relevant for them. Just as we differentiate for instruction in our classrooms, we must differentiate for different teaching strengths. Teacher preparation programs have the responsibility to guide beginning teachers to find their strengths and to further

support them in growing toward those strengths. Administrators can help by placing teachers on teams who can work together and balance out strengths and weaknesses.

## References

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