Teaching and Teacher Education: Leadership and Professional Development 1 (2022) 100002

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education: Leadership and Professional Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tatelp

Novice teachers and embracing struggle: Dialogue and reflection in professional development

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Novice teachers
Dialogue
Teacher induction
Professional development
Wobble

ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges shared by novice teachers in a year-long series of professional development workshops, which were designed to help novice teachers notice, unpack, and respond to the difficulties they were encountering in the first three years of teaching. The authors analyzed the data generated during the Oral Inquiry Process workshops to identify common challenges shared by the novice teachers who participated in this study and the nuances within them. Findings pointed to two common categories of struggle: reconciling theory and practice in standardized schools and managing relationships with veteran teachers. Nuances within these challenges included tension flowing from standardization, pacing constraints, and navigating complex relationships with veteran teachers. The authors argue that developing a nuanced understanding of the challenges novice teachers encounter is a vital first step in structuring teacher induction programs to respond to the needs of the teachers they serve. Working from the findings of the study, the authors offer recommendations for structuring professional development programs designed to help novice teachers embrace struggle through dialogue about and reflection upon the particular challenges created by their teaching contexts.

Introduction

The first years of teaching are a period of intense transition as novice teachers take on the responsibilities of planning instruction, teaching, assessing students, and managing a classroom while also encountering "incompatible notions of the best means by which to teach" (Smagorinsky et al., 2015, p. 289). The student-centered theories and pedagogical approaches novice teachers have studied in their teacher preparation programs (Smagorinsky et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2020) are often incongruent with the prescriptive and standardized institutional norms (Au, 2011; Goldstein, 2014; Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014; Hill et al., 2020; Ravitch, 2010) in the schools in the United States. Smagorinsky et al. (2015) argued that "this conundrum helps explain why beginning teachers experience such dissonance when moving between universities and schools… when trying to develop for themselves a conception of effective instruction" (p. 289). This article reports findings from a study of a year-long professional development program that we implemented as part of our efforts to provide support for novice teachers that could help them learn to adapt in relation to the affordances and constraints of their instructional and institutional contexts. In particular, the authors draw upon findings from this study to address the pressing need for professional development programs that respond to the challenges novice teachers encounter in their specific teaching contexts.

The professional development program was designed to create opportunities for novice teachers to examine the kinds of challenges they encounter and provide a mechanism that might help them explore and learn from the underlying sources of tension within those struggles. We studied the implementation of this program to generate understandings that can inform efforts to re-imagine and improve the systems of support currently available for novice teachers. Our study of the implementation of this professional development program was guided by the following question: What kinds of challenges do novice teachers encounter and how might exploring those challenges in structured dialogue designed to position struggle as a source of growth inform approaches to professional development? We will discuss what we learned about the challenges novice teachers participating in this study encountered and their responses to them. We use that discussion to articulate the nuances within those challenges the data indexed in relation to the *act of teaching* and occupying the *role of teacher* in order to present recommendations for improving professional development programs.

Peter (all participants' names are pseudonyms), who was in his third year of teaching at the time of this study, gave voice to one significant challenge he encountered related to the disconnect between the beliefs that informed his conceptions of teaching and the reality of his

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tatelp.2022.100002
Received 21 September 2021; Received in revised form 7 April 2022; Accepted 19 April 2022
Available online 22 April 2022

teaching context. He shared his struggle to reconcile his notions of what teaching *would be* with the reality he encountered with the other participants in this study by saying: "So, coming out of college, I had all these grandiose ideas. Like, these big ideas that I wanted to achieve in my students' learning. I had a really hard time transitioning into the actual classroom." Peter's concerns echo those voiced by other novice teachers who have become frustrated by a disconnect between who they want to be as teachers and what is required of them by their teaching contexts (Barnes, 2018; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). A study by Fecho et al. (2021) highlighted the frustration that can occur as novice teachers experience conflict between their pedagogical goals and their teaching contexts. Elise, for example, wanted to be a teacher who could bring "content into dialogue with students' lives" (p. 33). Working from this stance, Elise had created a unit of instruction on *Romeo & Juliet* designed "to lead her students in an exploration of *how* Shakespeare created characters and conflict" (p. 101, emphasis in original). She believed the characters and the conflicts in this play would resonate with the personal experiences of the adolescent readers in her classroom. However, the pacing guide her school required her to follow constrained her ability to leverage those connections because it only allowed seven 90-minute class periods to read this complex play. Elise felt she had to "rush through the text" (p. 101). Without enough time to explore the play in the depth she felt was necessary, Elise became frustrated by what she deemed as her "failure to connect such a connect-able play in a dialogical way" (p. 101). Our previous research in teacher education and teacher induction (Stewart, 2018; Stewart et al., 2019; Stewart & Jansky, 2021) indicates that professional development approaches that explore the specific challenges that novice teachers encounter in their classrooms can help them develop novel ways to respond to those challenges. Findings from each of these studies pointed to the ways in which engaging in collaborative dialogue that explored the participants' specific contextual challenges enabled them to work together to posit productive responses to struggle that increased their senses of agency and confidence.

The landscape of novice teacher support

As schools in the United States become increasingly prescriptive and standardized (Au, 2011; Goldstein, 2014; Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014; Hill et al., 2020; Ravitch, 2010; Stewart & Boggs, 2019) novice teachers encounter challenges that can undermine their confidence and create dissonance because the prevailing instructional norms and policies in schools grind against their pedagogical orientations (e. g. Smagorinsky et al., 2015). As Stewart et al. (2020) reported from their study of the challenges teacher candidates encounter during their student teaching experiences, the dissonance between the theories they studied in their teacher preparation program and the policies and prevailing pedagogical approaches they were expected to carry out in the field can cause them to question their ability to succeed in the profession, which contributes to the alarming problem of teacher attrition (e.g., Ingersoll & Strong, 2012; McCann et al, 2005; Sutcher, et al, 2016). Professional development programs have the potential to provide crucial support that enables novice teachers to critically reflect on their pedagogical orientations and the instructional approaches they believe will be effective and find pathways to success—even in the midst of struggle (Luekens et al., 2005; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). To provide such support, however, professional development programs must be sustained and focused "on the problems that teachers encounter in their daily work" (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017, p. 413).

Research indicates that it is particularly important to provide teachers with effective professional development during their first five years in the profession (Du & Wang, 2017; Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Ingersoll, 2012; McCann et al., 2005; Stewart, 2018; Stewart, et al., 2019). Despite a long history of arguments that sustainable, effective professional development is a significant factor in novice teacher support and reducing teacher attrition rates (Dunn et al., 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2012; Luekens et al., 2005; Yenen & Yöntem, 2020), the kinds and amounts of professional development or induction support that novice teachers receive as they enter the profession can be described—at best—as uneven or unpredictable (Ingersoll, 2012; Izadinia, 2016; Kidd et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2020). Induction programs for new teachers that formally pair novice teachers with experienced mentors are commonplace in U.S. schools (Chu, 2019; Gordon 2017). Providing a novice teacher with a supportive mentor can be, as Izadinia (2015) argued, an invaluable source of "encouragement and emotional backing" (p. 398). However, such pairings alone do not guarantee growth or success because "the personalities, abilities, and persona of teachers vary widely" (Gay, 1995, p. 104).

Differing pedagogical goals and divergent perspectives on effective approaches to instruction can undermine the success of these mentoring partnerships because a "technique that works well for one individual in a particular time and place may not work equally well for someone else, or even the same person when the context changes" (p. 104). For example, a veteran teacher who values an orderly, quiet classroom and has successfully engaged students and supported their learning by leaning heavily on lecture might struggle to provide effective guidance for a novice teacher whose teacher education program focused on student-centered approaches to instruction, such as discussions that can appear chaotic when that veteran teacher is walking by the classroom or dropping in for an ad-hoc observation. Trevor had such an experience with Mr. Thomas, who was the veteran teacher assigned to mentor him during his first year as a high school English teacher. Mr. Thomas was universally respected by the faculty and the students. He was also a committed, supportive mentor. However, Mr. Thomas had spent his career teaching from pedagogical stance that stood in stark contrast to Trevor's student-centered, discussion-heavy approach. The contrast between their pedagogical beliefs and approaches to teaching each day made it difficult for Mr. Thomas to help Trevor respond to the challenges he encountered. While Mr. Thomas could (and often did) offer him useful advice on how to integrate lecture into his lessons, he was not as well equipped to help Trevor learn how improve his ability to manage those moments when a class discussion stayed too far from its intended purpose. It is not always possible to pair novice teachers with mentors who share similar personalities or philosophies of teaching. Nor, we would argue, is such a lack of diversity in thinking productive. There is much to be learned from tension and divergent perspectives (Fecho et al., 2021). Thus, it is important to augment formal one-on-one mentoring programs with larger programmatic teacher induction programs that account for the importance of the developmental and contextual needs of the novice teachers they serve and create conditions in which novice teachers can share their struggles and seek guidance from a range of perspectives, voices, and personalities.

Challenges of supporting novice teachers in standardized U.S. schools

The policies created by the reauthorization of *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 entitled the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2002) both reflected "a long held belief that the public education system [in the United States] alone is responsible for achievement gaps between children living in poverty and children from more affluent families" (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006, p. 144). NCLB was replaced by the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) in 2015, which reduced the role of the federal government in local school policies. These educational reform policies all sought to address socio-economic disparity and improve learner outcomes (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005). However, these policies had a significant negative impact on teacher autonomy as they encouraged standardization and preparation for high-stakes testing (Dunn et al., 2017; Stewart & Boggs, 2016). Smagorinsky et al., (2015) argued that educational policies in the United States are being crafted and implemented from a perspective that "assumes that teachers are not capable of designing their own curricula or assessing students validly, and thus teachers need the Common Core State Standards and Race to the

Top mechanisms" (p. 306) to be effective. Given these constraints under which teachers in the U.S. and those in similar policy contexts are laboring, professional development programs need to include opportunities for novice teachers to work through the challenges presented by policies that restrict their autonomy and grind against their pedagogical orientations.

We are deeply concerned by the ways in which the many *competing centers of gravity* exerting tension on novice teachers may undermine their ability to "develop a coherent approach to instruction that meets any particular standard for effective teaching, however defined" (Smagorinsky et al., 2013, p. 148). The work that novice teachers do in U.S. schools is complicated by a landscape in which "the social concepts that guide educational practice are eternally disputed" (p. 154). The lack of consensus or simple answers to questions about what effective teaching should look like makes the daily logistics—or the *act of teaching* a complex endeavor. In spite of the absence of definite, research-based evidence clarifying what effective teaching practice actually entails, many schools often purchase and implement programs "that outline the structures of daily lessons, often right down to what teachers should say and where they should stand" (Fecho, 2011, p. 3). These standardized, prescriptive programs do not account for the reality that classrooms are populated by human beings who each bring individual instructional needs, personal interests, and cultural contexts with them to the classroom each day. As Fecho argued, "Good teaching is like good cooking, neither of which is about following recipes" (p. 4). A seasoned chef knows that ingredients need to be altered to create a specific flavor. A thoughtful teacher knows that they need to approach a classroom mindful of its context and the contexts of the students in the room each day. Not every meal suits everyone's taste. Not every student learns in the same way or brings the same cultural background into the classroom. No one recipe will satisfy the tastes and nutritional needs of all diners. There is no set time needed to make a perfectly fluffy pancake. The consistency of the batter; the efficiency of the burner; and the altitude of the cook site are all factors that influence the cooking process.

If cooking something as simple as a pancake is so complex, it ought to be evident that teaching children is far more complex, and there is no "perfect" lesson that will engage and support every student the same way. It takes time, experience, and experimentation to know how to negotiate the cooking process and alter a recipe given challenges like an inefficient burner or altitude. It also takes time and reflection to negotiate an ongoing dialogue between what you are doing as a teacher and what your students need. Reflection, as Schön (1987) argued, is a fundamental part of being an effective practitioner in any field. Mulryan-Kyne's (2021) work highlighted the important role reflection plays in teaching and noted that it "facilitates linkages between theory and practice and encourages critical thinking" (p. 502), which can support teachers' abilities to exercise their professional judgment. Smagorinsky et al. (2015) argued that reflective practice is an important feature of navigating the challenges novice teachers encounter. Yet, far too many novice teachers receive inadequate support related to their ability to engage in reflection as they navigate the challenges they encounter in schools where curricula are driven by the idea that there is a recipe that teachers can follow to ensure that every child succeeds (e.g. Fecho et al., 2021; Sutcher, et al, 2016). Thus, it is important to develop approaches to supporting novice teachers that can help them respond to the challenges they encounter as they are developing their abilities to connect with and teach the diverse students in their classrooms while also working within the constraints created by the standardized policies and curricula in their schools.

The challenges novice teachers must respond to in standardized U.S. schools are not just limited to the daily logistical aspects, such as lesson planning, assessment, or classroom management—which we have termed for this study the *act of teaching*—that one must get a handle on. Novice teachers are also becoming members of a new school community with its own culture (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Finding where they fit within this culture and settling into *the role of teacher* is a second, yet no less important, element of finding one's footing as a novice teacher. Joining a school faculty for the first time requires one to develop a range of skills beyond the scope of what they do in their own classrooms, such as learning and enacting that school's policies, developing productive working relationships with their fellow teachers, the students, and parents. Settling into this role is as Feiman-Nemser argued, "a process of enculturation" (p. 27) that takes time and can be a site for conflict and a source of tension (Fecho et al., 2021). Professional development needs to be designed in ways that respond to the unique contextual challenges and underlying tensions that novice teachers encounter.

Embracing wobble in professional development

We position professional development as a key means of supporting teachers as they respond to the challenges they experience in the *act of teaching* and taking on the *role of the teacher*. Our approach to enacting and studying professional development is guided by the principle that a productive response to struggle cannot occur without the ability to notice, interrogate, and bring a challenge into dialogue with experience. Fecho (2011) used the term *wobble* to describe this ability. Wobble, Fecho argued, "marks a liminal state, a state of transition" (p. 53). For example, a tire spinning erratically on a bent rim offers an obvious indicator that something is amiss. It creates an obvious need to respond and "nudges us towards action" (p. 53). A rider must slow down, fix the rim, or risk going over the handlebars and then to the emergency room to patch up the torn skin or broken collarbone. Moments of wobble are not always clear-cut or easy to see and feel. Sometimes, it's not so easy to feel that the bike wheel is out of true. Often, much smaller moments with less obvious consequences than a trip to the hospital can be productive sources of reflection and growth.

The small, non-verbal cues one might pick up from a student can also point to something amiss and offer that nudge towards action. However, teachers need space and time to reflect upon their experiences, look across the range of potential sources of dissonance, and bring them into dialogue to learn and grow. The concept of wobble can help one index the nuance between struggle and success. It can function as an important mechanism for development when one is considering the challenges they encounter and the range of responses to those challenges. Interrogating nuance can help one do more than simply name challenges and see them or the people who created them in negative ways. Positioning challenges as sources of growth and considering the motivations behind individuals whose actions led to those challenges can lead to productive dialogue that eschews division and points towards novel ways of responding to struggle. We are committed to professional development in which engagement of the teachers permeates each phase of a process that enables the teachers to collaborate "to identify and address problems of practice (Dunn et al., 2019).

Methodology and methods

This article reports findings from our examination of the Oral Inquiry Process (OIP) (Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2019) we employed that was designed to help novice teachers bring the challenges they encounter in their first years of teaching into productive dialogue that can help them learn to respond to moments of struggle. The OIP is a process that asks one participant to lead each session by sharing a narrative written prior to the session that outlines a specific challenge they encountered during the year. The session leader begins the session by sharing their narrative ("wobble story") with the group, and then the group can ask any clarifying questions (e.g., Did you create the assignment or was it a standardized assessment created by the teaching team?). The group then writes responses to the following three questions, which were constructed to support inquiry into the challenges presented and their underlying tensions: (1) What stood out in this narrative? (2) What connections did you make to this narrative? (3) What

Table 1
Coding dictionary.

Code	Criteria: Statements that indicate or point to moments that index…
Level 1 Codes	
The act of teaching is complex	The challenges presented by the many aspects of teaching (planning, instructional delivery, and managing a classroom, assessment)
The role of a teacher is complex	The challenges presented by the many aspects of the profession beyond day-to-day instructional activities
Level 2 Codes	
Relationships	Lack of preparation for and/or comfort with navigating relationships with other adult stakeholders (e.g. veteran teachers, administrators, and parents)
Confidence	Feelings of inadequacy, lack of authority/agency, and/or imperfection
Expectations	Standardized curriculum, policies, and departmental norms that grind against personal and professional beliefs about effective teaching

issues did you identify in this narrative? The group discusses their answers to each question in a round-robin fashion while the session leader listens and takes notes without talking. After the group shares responses to each question, the session leader shares the ideas that resonated with them. After the three rounds, the session wraps up with an open discussion.

Data were generated during the OIP sessions as seven novice teachers shared the challenges they encountered in the form of *wobble stories*, which were explored in monthly OIP workshops (Fecho et al., 2021) that functioned as a voluntary professional development program for novice teachers in a single public school in the upper midwestern region of the United States. Three of the participants volunteered to lead a second session, which brought the total number of workshops to ten. The school principal was eager to provide a novel form of professional development for the novice teachers, so Tim was invited to run this year-long professional development program (pro bono) for the teachers with three or fewer years of experience in her school. Seven teachers consented to participate in our study of the program and the sessions led by Tim. The participants taught math, chorus, history, art, and special education at the high school level (grades 9–12).

Tim conducted the workshops online using the OIP framework (Stewart et al., 2019) to support the participants' abilities to identify, explore, and respond to the challenges they encountered. Each session was recorded and transcribed. The session transcripts and the *wobble stories* were initially analyzed by the authors using thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2005) to develop codes (see Table 1 below) that indexed trends in the challenges shared by the participants and the range of responses shared during the OIP workshops. Trevor coded the data independently prior to meeting with Tim to sift the data into the final coding tables. These meetings and the collaborative coding process supported efforts to apply the coding dictionary (see Table 1) with fidelity. Level One codes were developed to sift data into two overarching categories to index the complex nuances within two key aspects of teachers' professional lives that we identified during the initial analysis: the *act* of teaching and *role* of a teacher. Level Two codes were developed to sift data that indexed three key common sources of tension we identified in the challenges and responses to challenges shared by the participants in the workshop sessions.

The Level One codes were employed to tease out nuances related to the day-to-day aspects of teaching and being a teacher. The *act of teaching* code focused on the logistical elements of the job. Here, we examined the more easily recognizable aspects of teaching that are often the focus of methods of teaching courses during university teacher preparation programs, such as lesson planning, enacting instruction, and managing a classroom. We used this Level One code to sift data that pointed to sources of tension that flowed from learning to master these logistical aspects of the job. However, teachers do more than just plan lessons, manage a classroom while enacting those lessons, and assess students. They take on larger roles in the school community. Thus, we created the second Level One code (*role of the teacher)* to index sources of tension to better understand the nuances of challenges beyond those that mapped onto the *act of teaching*.

We used the second Level One code (*role of the teacher)* to sift the data and support our examination of the nuances within the roles teachers play as they interact with fellow teachers, administrators, and parents. It should be noted that we did not employ this code for data that indexed interactions with students. When it was clear that a participant was referring to a moment that related to a relationship with a student in the context of teaching, we coded those data points using the first Level One code as we see that as being related to the *act of teaching* because of the importance of the student-teacher relationship, which is well-covered ground in teacher education. After initially sifting the data using these codes related to the *act* and the *role*, we shifted our attention to the sources of tension using our second layer of analysis: the Level Two codes (see Table 1 above).

The second layer of analysis was used to index the sources of tension within the wobble narratives and kinds of advice being proffered during the OIP workshops and to ascertain how the participants responded to the challenges they encountered. Sifting the data via the Level Two codes (Relationships, Confidence, Expectations) enabled us to attend to the key sources of tension and nuances within them that were creating challenges for the participants in the contexts of the *act of teaching* and the *role of the teacher*.

Results

Our analysis of the OIP data indexed nuances within the participants' common struggles related to reconciling theory and practice in standardized schools and managing relationships with veteran teachers. Below, we unpack the nuances within the larger challenges encountered by the participants in both the *act of teaching* and the *role of teacher* to articulate the complexities within them that can inform professional development for novice teachers. We present data related to the participants' struggle to reconcile their beliefs about what teaching ought to look like with the reality of teaching in the context of a highly standardized U.S. school, which was a significant source of tension for the participants in this study and represents a common challenge for novice teachers in the United States (e.g. Smagorinsky et al., 2013). Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) dubbed the struggle to bring theory into productive dialogue with practice as the *two-world pitfall*, which points to "contradiction and contention" (Smagorinsky et al., 2013, p. 148). These contradictions flow from standardized curricula and instructional practices (e.g. Au, 2012; Goldstein, 2014) that essentially sideline "students' unique interest and privilege rote learning and higher order thinking over creativity" (Stewart et al., 2020, p. 49).

Unpacking the theory/practice challenge in the act of teaching

Our analysis of the participant's wobble stories and the discussion in the OIP sessions indexed the tensions within the larger struggle to reconcile theory and practice in the *act of teaching*. The student-centered theoretical approaches to teaching that Peter, for example, brought with him to his first year in the classroom were getting left behind because he was being required to match the fast pace of his school's standardized

curriculum. Peter, who was an art teacher, described his approach to teaching as wanting to "guide students in interacting with and observing the world through their own lens using their own experiences." Peter opened the session he led by articulating his struggle with the disconnect between his larger, theory-driven goals for teaching that he developed prior to taking over his own classroom with the reality of his current teaching context where he felt compelled to "make these really intricate lessons with essential questions and every standard hit" that all have to tie to worksheets.

Peter told the other participants that he "had a really hard time transitioning into the actual classroom" because his teacher education program taught him to focus on getting "kids to think beyond material and beyond basic concepts [to] get life lessons" out of his instruction. We applied the Level Two code of *confidence* because the disconnect between theory and practice, two key *competing centers of gravity*, was causing him to lose confidence in his ability to teach. Peter described the "overwhelming" feeling of shifting "from being a lifetime student to being now an educator of the youth.". Peter shared his concerns with the OIP group about not really understanding "where to begin, what are the fundamentals. Like, I know these things but I don't know where my students' base knowledge is." His confidence was waning, and Peter shared his frustration with not receiving any guidelines from a teacher who taught this class in the past about how he might proceed. The other participants in the study shared similar experiences in the discussion during Peter's session and other sessions as they responded to issues raised related to pacing and the standardized curricula they were charged with enacting in their own classrooms.

Standardization and pacing as nuances within the theory/practice challenge

The school's curriculum mandates and Peter's "grandiose ideas" of what teaching would be contributed to a lack of confidence in his ability to fulfill what was required in the *act of teaching*. Peter was finding it difficult to reckon who he *wanted* to be as a teacher with what he felt the standardized, prescriptive school policies were *requiring* him to do. Thus, we also applied the *expectations* Level Two code when Peter shared his struggle to craft lessons that addressed so many state standards and included essential questions. He allowed that "in a perfect world, that's the way it should be, but I quickly realized that the pacing of the classroom is much quicker and it's too hard to do." The curricular expectations and pacing requirements were undermining his efforts to develop and deliver instruction that allowed students to make progress towards the learning goals set by the state standards.

Responding to Peter's concerns, Jeff expressed the kinship he felt with Peter. He noted that what "stood out to me was the difference between student teaching [because] what we're taught about teaching in college is way, way, way different than actually teaching." Having to strike out on your own without a cooperating teacher makes the *act of teaching* far more complex than one might think. Hannah echoed this sentiment when she shared that she "can't even imagine creating a curriculum on your own… You can have the standards, but what do you even do with that." Hannah commiserated with the confidence-rocking scenario that arises when students are judged based on performance standards and tests as she said, "The student performance and equating that to your skill as a teacher absolutely makes you feel inadequate." While Peter was feeling alone in terms of getting concrete guidance from someone who'd taught his classes before, he was not alone in his struggles with these two sources of tension (curricular *expectations* and *confidence*).

The participants each expressed frustration with the pressure to keep pace—even when that pace was actively undermining their efforts to help students reach the learning goals set by the curricula in their school. During the session he led, Jeff described how his PLC (Professional Learning Community) met daily to coordinate their lessons. He noted that there were no hard and fast rules about pacing in his department. However, he explained that he still felt significant tension because everyone in his PLC tends to "move at the same pace" and "teach at the same speed." Jeff expressed this frustration as he described his experiences with an essay he assigned that required many more days than planned, which caused him to fall behind his colleagues. Again, Jeff's goals were not matching his reality. Feeling pressure to keep pace with the other members of his PLC was exerting an unhealthy tension upon Jeff, which was something his peers in the OIP session were also experiencing. Hannah, for example, was also feeling pressure to keep moving through the curriculum. She made a connection to Jeff's narrative, mentioning that she had "a finite amount of time" to get through particular lessons, so slowing down to motivate students to complete work was not something she thought she could prioritize because she felt compelled to meet the shared expectations created by the culture within the school faculty. Monica also voiced a similar struggle as she noted that "trying to keep that pace is so hard" when she was describing her frustration with other teachers telling her that her class was falling behind as the participants discussed their struggles to follow the pacing of the curriculum during a different OIP session led by Hannah.

Discussion across the OIP sessions pointed to the complexity of bridging the gap from pre-service to novice teacher in contemporary schools that are hyper-focused on standardized curricula, pacing, and student outcomes on assessments. Peter, Monica, and the other participants in this study were finding it difficult to reconcile the ways pacing and standardization were inhibiting their beliefs about how to be an effective teacher. However, participants shared concerns that went beyond the theory/practice gap brought into focus by the collaborative dialogue in the OIP sessions about their work in a highly-standardized school with strict pacing expectations.

Assessment and student readiness as nuances within the theory/practice challenge

Jeff's struggles related to the disconnect between what he wanted to do with his students and what he was able to do point to another significant nuance within the theory/practice challenge: assessment and student readiness. As he shared his wobble story, Jeff described how "tense" he was one Monday after giving his students extra days to complete an essay and then seeing "how little progress" the majority of the class made. Jeff was "confused and uncertain about what to do" when his students did not complete the assignment in the timeframe he provided. Furthering his confusion was the fact that he held "their hand through the essay writing process," going so far as to provide them a "clean outline" where students just had to fill in blanks with information from their textbook. He recognized that the instructional approaches he employed failed to engage his students and help them reach the learning goals he set. This situation caused Jeff to ask the OIP group how he can get students to take ownership of their learning so it is less "me holding their hands throughout."

We applied the Level One code of *the act* because Jeff's wobble narrative pointed to the challenges inherent in the day-to-day logistics of teaching. Jeff was experiencing, first-hand, how complicated it is to prepare and enact lessons for students who are all in different stages of readiness. This work is further complicated by the challenge of engaging students who each bring different personal interests and cultural contexts with them into the classroom each day. Jeff noted that some students were learning as he hoped and completing assignments easily; however, the vast majority were not meeting the learning goals he'd set or even turning in the assignments that would help him assess their progress. The struggles Jeff presented to his fellow participants in the OIP session pointed to the ways that these challenges were exposing the disconnect between his goals for teaching and what he was actually accomplishing with his students. Like so many of the wobble stories shared by the participants and other novice teachers Trevor has worked with (Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2019), Jeff's story highlights how the first years of teaching can undermine one's belief in their ability to do the job.

The Level Two code *confidence* indexed nuances in the sources of tension that can cause novice teachers to question their professional knowl-

edge and their ability to fulfill the duties in the *act* and the *role* of teaching. In particular, the *confidence* code helped us focus on Jeff's struggle to know what to do in these situations. It indexed moments when the other participants were experiencing similar tension as they made connections with Jeff's experience. Monica empathized with Jeff, mentioning how "tiring" it is to "constantly get nothing back" from students. Amy mentioned how "infuriating" it must be to provide opportunities to complete work in class and to not receive completed essays. While we may wish that teachers did not feel such strong, negative emotions towards their students, it would be disingenuous to act like we have never felt them ourselves. Teachers who put their heart and soul into the job can't help but feel deep emotions when things go poorly. This confidence-draining frustration that occurs is only made worse when, as Amy noted in another session, students' faults are "usually blamed mostly on the teacher." Teachers are, after all, responsible for carrying out the mandate that all students have access to a quality education. Thus, it's easy to understand how anger can arise when students do not turn in an assignment that a teacher is counting on in order to evaluate student progress and provide feedback. The understandable frustration Jeff, Amy, and Monica expressed in the session led by Jeff is not surprising since teachers are working in the pressure-filled environment of contemporary schools that appear to privilege product and assessment over process and learning (Au, 2011; Goldstein, 2014; Hill et al., 2020). Here, the participants helped us see the importance of creating space in professional development workshops for novice teachers to voice these frustrations and view them from a stance that can see this difficulty as a site for growth.

Unpacking challenges in the role of teacher

Our analysis of the data also indexed the ways the day-to-day demands of teaching complicated the participants' transition into the *role of teacher*. Natalie, a special education teacher, led an OIP session highlighting how the complexities of the *act of teaching* can cause novice teachers to struggle as they take on this new professional identity. As she introduced her wobble narrative, Natalie said, "I have been learning as I go with a lot of paperwork that I was kind of oblivious to before…." She said she felt like she'd been "turning into a bookkeeper" who felt like she has "three jobs in one." Natalie shared that she "accommodates for classes," does "paperwork like IEPs and progress reports," and she is a case manager overseeing several students. The transition from preservice to novice teacher put aspects of the job on display for Natalie that showed her that there were gaps to be filled. She said her teacher education program gave her "a good taste of a career, but it was never like the full platter." Natalie was struggling to manage the day-to-day demands of being a novice teacher because her student teaching experience did not give her an opportunity to be responsible for all aspects of the job. However, these struggles were exacerbated by the absence of productive professional relationships with the veteran teachers in her school. In her wobble story, Natalie stated that "the mentor I currently have is not currently mentoring me."

During the OIP discussion of the things that stood out to the group in Natalie's session, Amy noted that "transition from the college environment to the work environment is really hard." Amy expanded on the difficulty of this transition as she pointed out that when you take what you learned in college to the work environment, "it changes a lot. When you add different opinions and work experience into the mix, it's not always that same." Amy's contribution to the discussion serves as a powerful reminder that novice teachers have much to learn. Amy and Natalie were, like Jeff, Hannah, and Monica, experiencing tensions related to *expectations* and *confidence* in carrying out the *act* of teaching. But these tensions are also tightly linked with their *roles* as teachers who must develop productive relationships with veteran teachers. Across the data set, unproductive relationships between participants and experienced teachers were a consistent source of tension as elements related to the *act* of teaching complicated participants' efforts to take up the *role* of teacher. Like the participants in McCann et al.'s (2005) study and research Trevor has done with other novice teachers (e.g., Stewart et al., 2019), Natalie and her peers were experiencing other difficulties such as managing relationships with the veteran teachers in their school who could provide them with guidance.

The importance of supportive colleagues

Jeff, Monica, Hannah, and others shared challenges related to supporting students and keeping them on pace with curricular expectations. Like anyone else who is seeking to soften the blows that come from not living up to one's own expectations, "new teachers may find some comfort in ascribing their difficulties to traits in pupils or parents or blaming the administration (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 27). Dialogue with an experienced colleague can help someone turn away from playing the blame game and towards more productive responses that seek new approaches to a challenge. However, finding a colleague outside the structure of a professional development program with whom one might have such dialogue is easier said than done. Across the data set, the participants pointed to the ways in which the challenges they encountered were exacerbated by struggles associated with working productively with their fellow teachers, particularly veteran teachers.

Natalie's session focusing on her frustration with the veteran teacher who had been assigned to support her indexed just how problematic it can be when a mentoring relationship appears far more toxic than productive. Here, the *role of teacher* code called attention to the complicated interpersonal dynamics of relationships among teachers within a school. She'd told the OIP group she heard "rumors" that "she was not doing my job correctly." But, her assigned mentor was not checking on her or working with her to address the areas in which she might improve. Natalie was at a loss in terms of how to address this troubled relationship, which caused her to feel like she had to "walk on eggshells" and "can't really reach out" without "any negative responses or causing any more tension that can kind of bite me in the ass." As the group discussed what stood out to them in Natalie's story, Amy pointed out that teachers are "just like our students. We don't know what we don't know. And it's unhelpful to just have people tell you that you aren't doing something right when you were never really given instruction on how to do it." Amy raised an important point that has significant implications for professional development: detailed and supportive feedback is as essential in developing as a teacher as it is in supporting students' development. Simply putting a red X by an item on a student's test will not help a student learn. Feedback that shows why an item is incorrect or models how to do something correctly is a fundamental element of teaching, assessment, and mentoring. Providing novice teachers with detailed, productive support ought to be a basic element of any professional development practice. However, it was an element that was missing from the support many of the participants in this study were receiving.

As the group continued to discuss Natalie's wobble moment, Amy shared that she thought this "toxic work environment must make coming to work every day really rough." She pointed out that "it's hard to focus on being a good teacher and feel confident in front of students when you have people around that are hypercritical of your every move." Amy went on to offer a concrete suggestion for responding to the interpersonal conflict between Natalie and her mentor. She noted that she likes "to approach conflict like this by asking questions like 'I know I'm new to this… what can I do better next time?" This concrete suggestion about how to respond to an uncomfortable situation fraught with power dynamics was precisely the kind of dialogue that we think professional development ought to make space for and nurture. However, as was typical across the data set, the discussion quickly turned away from productive dialogue about how to respond to struggle in concrete ways and back towards venting and commiserating. Michael, the very next person to speak in the session, sought to assuage Natalie's hurt feelings by lamenting the "scrutiny" and "pressure" special education teachers are under while also pointing out that it feels like they're "sup-

posed to fix everything, fix it, fix it, fix it." We value Michael's attempt to validate Natalie's feelings of frustration because discussions like these can help novice teachers feel less alone. However, we also believe that professional development needs do more than just be a site for lifting teachers' spirits in times of struggle. Natalie and novice teachers in her position need more concrete support like the advice Amy offered if they are going to be able to navigate fraught relationships with the veteran teachers in their schools.

Natalie's experience may seem extreme—even look like an outlier. In the first OIP session of the study, Michael noted that he was "blown away by the teamwork" he'd experienced in his school. Peter also found supportive veteran teachers in his school. They each had experiences that were much closer to what one would hope to see in the support offered to novice teachers. But, Natalie was not alone in feeling unsupported. Hannah led an OIP session in which she focused on her frustration with pacing and policies related to a class she was teaching "for the 'at-risk kid'." Hannah noted that she was feeling "more restricted and monitored than last year." She was frustrated because some of her colleagues said she ought "to be working at the same pace they are even though [she] has different constraints on her and a different population."

Hannah described one meeting in particular with a mentor teacher that had her "really in a funk and feeling incompetent" because the take-home message was that she needed to speed up her teaching. She tried to speed things up. She tried to take the advice. But, her students were not understanding the material and getting frustrated. Hannah noted that one of the instructional leaders who should have been supporting her "walked by her classroom no less than four times [while she was planning], made eye contact with [her] and never once came in" to talk with her. As the group discussed the connections they'd made with Hannah's experience, Natalie shared that she gets "told what [she's] doing wrong with the students." She expressed her frustration with being told her pedagogical approach is "not right" and she needs to "do it this way." She noted that being corrected in front of her students "hinders my students and I can sense it." An effective professional development structure needs to include a mechanism for dialogue with an experienced peer about the things a novice teacher like Natalie believes will work for her particular students. Michael pointed out the irony in the situation by saying, "I think about what a PLC is probably supposed to be… and what it's often like… there's no peer learning whatsoever. It's not like, how are we making each other better teachers of this subject?" Curricular expectations can easily be seen as one important driving force leading to this problematic mentoring system. However, mentoring is a relational construct (Gay, 1995). It is a process in which individuals must make meaning from and respond to policies, curriculum, and prescribed practices in a way that is dependent upon both individual and collaborative sense-making. Both the mentor and mentee will view all of these things through the personal lenses of their lived experiences and the complex transactions that occur as two people seek to understand each other. Professional development for novice teachers, we argue, needs to be designed in ways that honor this complexity of the process of becoming a teacher.

Implications & recommendations

Discussion within the OIP sessions pointed to the ways noticing and embracing, and interrogating struggle can help one learn from the challenges they encounter. The frustration and anger that Peter, Jeff, Amy, Hannah, and Monica voiced related to the challenge of reconciling theory and practice brought the nuanced challenges of teaching and engaging students in the context of highly standardized schools into view, and the struggles to manage relationships with veteran and novice teachers that Natalie and other participants shared highlighted areas in which novice teachers need support. In this section, we discuss ways these struggles might be positioned as sites for growth in professional development programs.

Discussion of these struggles in the OIP sessions where the participants' emotions were on display remained largely limited to commiserating with one another, lamenting the struggles that arose when students did not turn in work, and bristling at the blame-game that results in teachers feeling maligned by parents, administrators, and the general public. The sessions during which Natalie and the other participants shared struggles with feeling isolated and unsupported by those who were tasked with mentoring them also resulted in a discussion of these challenges that made scant progress in terms of how to productively respond to them. We see this as an indication that there is much work to be done in terms of preparing novice teachers to respond to the constraints of their teaching contexts and navigating the complex power relationships with veteran and mentor teachers. While the OIP process creates opportunities for novice teachers to notice and begin to respond to the challenges they encounter, we see room for improvement even within an approach to professional development that is grounded in an intentional focus on bringing frustrating topics into dialogue for exploration. The OIP process as currently constructed does not have a mechanism in place that nudges the group towards a pause that might push deeper into these tensions to unpack the nuances within them through intentional reflection that positions these frustrations as sites for growth.

Recommendations for professional development

Working from our analysis of the OIP data, we offer suggestions for altering the OIP so that it might better nurture novice teachers' abilities to learn from the challenges they encounter, such as but not limited to, related to working in highly standardized school contexts and managing the complexity of their relationships with their fellow teachers. The OIP's current flow of discussing things that stood out, connections made, and issues noted did not result in a deeper, intentional exploration of the less obvious *why* behind these tensions and emotions and *what* someone might do about them. Therefore, we suggest altering the OIP so that it includes an additional step in the process (See Appendix A) that aligns with Schön's (1987) notion of *reflection-on-action,* which "relates to thinking about a problem or issue while not directly involved in action" (Mulryan-Kyne, 2021, p 503). In particular, this step provides a framework and context for collaborative, reflexive activity, which Genor (2005) found supported preservice teachers' abilities to analyze their experiences in the field. Thus, we argue that the altered OIP has the potential to cultivate discussion that explores the nuances in the sources of tension and takes an introspective turn towards productive emotion and action. Reflection, supported by an experienced mentor, is a critical factor in developing the ability to learn to adapt in relation to the affordances and constraints of any instructional context in order to have the greatest instructional impact (Smagorinsky et al., 2015). Reflecting upon the challenges novice teachers encounter in this way would support efforts to make teacher induction a cycle of inquiry that explores and responds to the nuances in the tensions that cause frustration and undermine confidence.

The additional steps we suggest adding to the OIP would include reflective writing about the challenge raised during the session and, when appropriate, the emotions that challenge brought to the surface. The second part of this step would include discussion of the participants' reflections. The professional development facilitator would implement this step by taking notes during the initial seven steps of the OIP to generate reflective questions that could push the dialogue to explore the nuances within the challenge or the emotions raised. The facilitator would support *reflection-on-action* (Schön (1987) by fulfilling the role of an experienced mentor (Smagorinsky et al., 2015) who can raise questions for consideration such as: Where am I now and where do I want to go in relation to this issue? Are my emotions causing me to discount another perspective? The question posed would provide a mechanism for focused reflection on the experiences novice teachers are having that call attention to challenges they are encountering such as meeting the expectations set for them in relation to their instructional practice; their

confidence in their ability to manage a classroom; and/or their on-going dialogue with the disconnects they see between their own professional judgments about what effective teaching looks like and the constraints of the prevailing policies and practices in their schools. A question posed related to the emotional and interpersonal aspects of taking on the role of teacher, in particular, could support *reflection-on-action* as related to challenges associated with building and maintaining relationships with other teachers and administrators. After the teachers have time to reflect and write, the facilitator would re-open the discussion by inviting the teachers to share what they wrote. We believe this additional OIP step would create opportunities for the teachers to engage in a concrete exploration of things like why students might not be engaged or why an administrator, a veteran teacher, or a parent might voice concerns about the instruction a teacher is providing. A goal for the discussion created by this step would be to develop an understanding of the concerns other parties might have, instead of allowing the discussion of the challenge raised by the teacher's wobble story to stall out at the venting, blame-shifting, or affirming stages. The addition of a cycle of reflection would create time and space for participants to pause, write, and reflect before picking up the discussion again in a way that pushes deeper into the issues at hand.

Reflection, however, is not so easy to do in the "busy environment in which teachers work" (Mulryan-Kyne, 2021, p. 502) or in the middle of a discussion of issues that are difficult or that threaten one's sense of self as a competent professional. For example, in a case like Natalie's session which raised the challenge of relating to her mentor teacher in productive ways, the cycle of pausing to reflect on a series of guiding questions before further discussion could be a mechanism that would move the discussion to a level that spurs growth and insight through an exploration of what one might *do* with these emotions so they do not remain negative. Pausing to reflect on struggle and the emotions it brings to the surface with the guidance provided by a professional development facilitator would lead the participants away from the understandable venting that occurs when a teacher feels unsupported and towards a discussion of possible responses to those feelings that could help novice teachers develop the courage and ability to ask for constructive feedback, which teachers need to manage issues as they occur (Kidd et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The challenges brought into focus by this study and the nuances within them point to the importance of implementing approaches to professional development that help novice teachers and the instructional leaders who support them work together to embrace and respond productively to moments of struggle. While we recognize the limitations presented by a study with a small sample size that was not designed to produce generalizable results, the data from this study can help scholars generate "conceptual inferences" (Reissman, 2008, p. 133) that can inform efforts to create professional development structures that support novice teachers' abilities to learn from the challenges they encounter and grow as teachers. We view this study and the changes we are recommending to the OIP process as an incubator for further research into the creation of more effective professional development structures. In particular, we are motivated to study the altered OIP structure with a larger sample size and outside facilitators to examine its utility in supporting the *reflection-on-action* we think it has the potential to engender.

The altered OIP that we suggest implementing is just one approach to supporting novice teachers by implementing professional development protocols that examine the challenges novice teachers face with the goal of closing the gap between where they are and where they want to go. Just as we would not argue that any single teaching practice will work in all contexts, we do not see the OIP (See Appendix A) as a recipe that will guarantee the success of all new teachers. Instead, see it as one professional development process that could be altered to meet the needs of a particular context or be embedded within other teacher induction programs that are designed to support novice teachers. We encourage those who care about teachers, students, communities, and learning to consider ways they might use processes like the altered OIP to create mechanisms that support a cycle of noticing, embracing, unpacking, and reflecting upon experience so novice teachers can find novel, productive ways to respond to challenges they encounter on their journeys to becoming the teachers they want to be.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.tatelp.2022.100002.

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