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'Am I Doing What I am Supposed to be Doing?': mentoring novice teachers through the uncertainties and challenges of their first year of teaching

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ABSTRACT *Three teacher educators formed a new teacher support group for three novices whom we had prepared, in order to help them deal with challenges and uncertainties of the first year of teaching. Using narrative inquiry, we collected the novice teachers' stories by composing field texts, using audiotaped interview data, classroom observations, bi-monthly journal entries, and participant personal narratives as data sources. Common patterns across the data stories included induction into the isolation of teaching, interest in NOT abandoning university teacher preparation, and the need to learn from mentoring. The implications provide discussion of the educative role of teacher support groups in learning to teach, and university involvement in learning to teach during the induction years.*

In the United States, teacher attrition rates in the first five years range from 30–50% (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996) due to lack of support and structured induction that listens to the needs of teachers. Many novices feel unprepared to address the cultural, personal, and academic needs of their pupils (Byrnes & Kiger, 1996). They need help with classroom management, understanding school procedures, learning content and child development of a specific grade, communicating effectively with parents, and learning to work in isolating conditions (Boreen *et al.*, 2000; Burton & Povey, 1996; Gold & Roth, 1993).

Failure to meet these needs results in high teacher attrition rates that contribute to instability in today's classrooms (Stanulis *et al.*, 2001). Conversely, research suggests that the presence of a strong induction program can make a significant difference in the retention and quality of teachers in our nation's schools (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999). Therefore, induction support must become a central concern to both university and school-based educators.

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As university-based teacher educators, we recognized this problem when graduates of our program suggested they were not adequately prepared to manage diverse classrooms (Stanulis & Thornton, 2000). We wanted to respond to their needs and help them make the transition to teacher. Therefore, we formed a support group for novice teachers we had prepared. Within the context of the group, we examined the ways we, as teacher educators, could help novices make the transition to teacher. Our primary research question was: What challenges do novice teachers face in sustaining a classroom environment congruent with their beliefs about teaching, and how do they work through these challenges within the context of a support group?

Theoretical Framework

Dealing with challenges during the first year of teaching and developing an identity as a teacher are complicated processes involving the negotiation of meanings among participants in the teaching context (Bullough & Stakes, 1994). As novices work through daily challenges, the research-based teaching they learned at the university (Holt-Reynolds, 1995) is often overshadowed by feelings of isolation. They tend to sacrifice ideals for more traditional practices.

Research on expert and novice teachers' cognition suggests that this dichotomous conception of teaching may be due to the lack of complexity in novice teachers' knowledge structures. Developing an elaborated cognitive structure is part of the learning process for novice teachers. Such learning occurs through participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice provide novice teachers with opportunities to talk 'and interpret their experiences and how they come to see themselves as teachers' (Maynard, 2000, p. 18). Within such a community, teachers have an opportunity to collaboratively and relentlessly examine, question, study, experiment and implement, evaluate, reflect and change (Calderón, 1999; Clark *et al.*, 1996).

Our Narrative Inquiry

As teacher educators interested in following our former students, we decided to form a novice teacher support group which met monthly between September 1999 and April 2000. We intentionally selected three teacher education students who had been highly successful in their teacher education program at a large public university in the Southeastern United States.

Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we collected the novice teachers' stories by composing field texts. The field texts were the data collected as 'records of the experience under study' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 87). The primary field text for this study was audiotaped interview data from monthly support group meetings. Additional field texts included fieldnotes recorded during four classroom observations and bi-monthly journal entries recorded by the participants. Participants also wrote three drafts of a personal narrative summarizing their analysis of the field texts.

Collection and analysis of these field texts were continually interwoven. Following support group meetings, the researchers reviewed the transcripts and determined two to three guiding questions for the next meeting, and participants reviewed and responded to them. During this process, we applied Bogdon and Biklen's (1992) approach of discovery and coding. We read the transcripts several times and recorded emerging themes, categories, and theoretical connections.

At the conclusion of the 1999–2000 school year, participants engaged in data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). They read the transcripts of the support group meetings several times and identified themes in their practice. Then they cut out excerpts that corresponded to the themes and constructed a poster that represented those themes. Each participant's poster allowed us to determine the important issues for each participant and compare the themes across participants.

Based on their posters, journals, and reflections, participants constructed personal narratives. The personal narratives summarized each teacher's experiences as well as her strengths and weaknesses as a teacher.

In the last stage of data analysis, we developed a chart of quotes organized linearly by time for each participant. Using the themes the teachers represented on their posters and wrote about in their personal narrative, plus additional ones, we were able to think about the field texts in new ways, examining how these aspects affected the identities of these teachers. We found the data revealed the ways the novices were constructing their identities as teachers.

Participant Personal Narratives

Daphne

Daphne, a White second grade teacher, worked in an upper middle class suburb of a capital city in the southeast. Of the 21 students in her class, ten were White, nine were African-American, and two were multi-racial. Due to high parent involvement, policies were adopted to protect instructional time and regulate parent participation in the classrooms.

Factors that contributed to feelings of insecurity. Daphne described herself as 'lucky' compared to the other teachers in the support group because she had parental support and few extreme management problems. However, she did experience challenges common to the entire support group. Daphne felt pressures of accountability that led to self-doubt. She identified ways the school administrators, her mentor, the school jargon, ambiguous expectations, and the fear of being judged unfavorably by others contributed to feelings of insecurity.

Daphne described an example of ambiguous expectations: 'I was in a meeting one day and they said, "And make sure you're not taking the folders out of the vault" … I'm like, "where is the vault?" ' Each of the participants related similar situations where they felt 'taken off guard' because they were surprised with information others felt they 'should have known'. Such instances add additional stress to novice teachers and further defined them as the 'outsiders'.

Like many beginning teachers in the United States, Daphne was assigned a mentor during her first year of teaching. However, her mentor was not positioned or prepared to provide her with needed support. For Daphne, her placement with a mentor created more anxiety for her:

> My mentor teacher, she is in Special Education … She doesn't know what is going on in second grade. … She keeps coming by and saying, 'We need to schedule a meeting.' And I'm like, 'Listen, I am here. Everyday. Come on in.' And then three weeks later she'll say, 'Okay, we need to do some stuff.' And I'm like, 'Come on, bring it on!' And then I won't see her.

One area of support the novices needed was in developing a sense of what it meant to teach children of a certain age in a particular school context. Daphne, like all of the first-year teachers, was concerned about how she compared to other teachers and how her students compared to other students in that grade level in the school:

> I remember the first two weeks of school … I was in the classroom and would ask my teacher's assistant, 'Does this resemble any other second grade classroom that you've ever seen?' Because honestly, I have no idea, it's like are your expectations way too high or are they way too low?

Left to figure things out, Daphne often felt threatened and insecure.

> That's one of my constants. … we were standing outside in the hallway and I saw what I thought was a first-grade teacher's bulletin board, and I was like [hyperventilating] and thank goodness, it was a third grade board. I literally felt sick.

Inner struggles and contradictions. Daphne constantly questioned the way things *were* versus the way she thought things *should be* based on her university preparation.

> I really get mad at myself and it works, but it's like, 'No that's not me.' Maybe it's a combination of seeing other teachers do it constantly and seeing that their kids are being quiet in the bathroom for a Skittle [candy treat]. It's just a general classroom management [concern], I am not what I'd like to be. Will I grow into that? Or will I just end up like the other teachers, throwing Skittles at everybody and that's the end of it?

Daphne experienced similar conflicts with her ideas about what defined effective instruction.

> I have this file cabinet with these amazing, creative, awesome ideas, but at school, you depend on your teacher's book so much because it's like the pressure is on … I follow the little straight line, and I sit there with my lesson book and my teacher's textbook and the times I go into my amazing, creative activities are few and far between.

Factors that contributed to a more secure feeling about self-as-teacher. Daphne faced many challenges during her first year of teaching, but many of these challenges were softened by a support system. She said that our support group helped her reinforce

the kind of teaching she had been prepared for at the university. Without such support, she may have abandoned such practices. By the end of the year she reflected, ' I'm more back to my reflective teaching. … How did I get more reflective? I don't know. Things just slowed down, that's the only thing I can think of.'

Terrika

Terrika, an African-American teacher, taught in the elementary school she attended. The year-round school situated in a working-class suburb of a capital city in the southeast, serviced working-class families whose participation and attendance at school functions were low.

Terrika began the school year with 35 African-American first-grade students. After the first nine weeks, Terrika's class size was reduced. However, the other first-grade teachers were given priority to select the children they wanted to take out of her classroom.

Factors that Contribute to Feelings of Insecurity. Terrika began the year feeling unable to control classroom behavior:

> … This particular student—he'll do anything. I mean, like one day we were walking in line and he was down on his knees kicking his legs up and barking like a dog and you could tell him to stop and he was just like totally ignoring you. And other teachers—they would walk by and they were just bursting out laughing, and it was embarrassing, and they were looking at me like, 'You're not going to do anything about him?'

Terrika was not sure how to react. She sought support from the group. For example, in one meeting early in the year, Terrika said: 'During student teaching, I conducted writing workshops, and it went fine. But it has never worked in my classroom. I don't know what I'm doing wrong.' Terrika tried to implement the group's instructional and management suggestions. However, she was quick to abandon ideas and grab onto new ones before she or the students had enough time to become well acquainted with any one. She was so overwhelmed with issues of control; she was not ready to evaluate methods.

Coupled with her own feelings of insecurity, Terrika, like the other participants, experienced situations that added to her insecurities. She talked about how the administrators contributed to her insecurities as a novice teacher by not clearly communicating expectations:

> I had a bad experience with permanent record [PR] folders. I kind of got in trouble and … I got a call over the break, and they were like, 'Where is so-and-so's PR?' And I was like, 'What's a PR?' … I didn't know they couldn't leave the vault, and I had a pile of permanent folders in the back of my room.

She explained, you don't know how to anticipate what you don't know: 'Other

times, people will say come to me if you need help, but sometimes you need help but you don't know what you need help with … Sometimes you don't know what questions to ask.'

Terrika was also concerned with how she compared to other teachers:

> I'm just wondering how am I doing? When I hear other people's stories, I think that sounds good, but I think, how am I doing? Am I doing what is expected? Am I doing what I am supposed to be doing? My principal rarely says anything to me. I'm like, 'Am I doing a good job, or are you just not saying something?'

Inner struggles and contradictions. As Terrika struggled to create a classroom learning community, she talked about what she thought she should do versus what other teachers told her to do.

> Basically at the beginning of the year I said how I wasn't going to raise my voice or yell, and I wasn't going to [be] just throwing treats out to the students. But it wasn't working. And also, raising your voice. One teacher was telling me that they get yelled at at home and if you come to them and say 'Stop it' or 'don't do that', then they don't respond to that but if you raise your voice then they will respond to you because that's how they are talked to at home. So it's kind of hard to be the way I want to be and to teach the way that I want to teach because that's not what they are used to, because the students don't respond to that. I had to resort to the kinds of things that I don't really like doing in order to have a better managed classroom, I should say.

Factors that contributed to a more secure feeling about self-as-teacher. During the course of the year, Terrika relied on affirmation from colleagues, administrators and the support group to feel she was teaching effectively. By the end of the year, she reflected on her achievement and decisions. For example, Terrika talked about her developing management system in a way that balanced strong expectations with positive outcomes.

> One thing I'm really proud of is the fact that I found out you can't have just one management strategy. Like I was using the lights … I see an improvement in behavior. I feel much better about it. I try to focus more on the positive. So, it's working much better.

Terrika did not have a formal mentor in her building, so she relied on the support group for ideas, techniques, and confirmation:

> A lot of time at school you don't get to talk to the other teachers. So when I come in here and hear everyone else's stories, it makes me feel a little bit better knowing someone else is going through the same thing, and it also gives me a chance to ask questions.

Madeline

Madeline was a White teacher who began her first year as a fourth-grade teacher in a rural, somewhat economically depressed county. When shifting enrollment and a teacher departure occurred after the first two weeks of school, Madeline was moved to first grade. She stepped into the classroom of an award-winning, experienced teacher, after only one weekend of preparation. She tried, both for the children's and parents' sake, to maintain the norms already established.

During our first support group meeting, Madeline discussed the difficult transition from fourth to first grade.

> I had those expectations set for fourth graders, and I felt like, 'Oh, man, I'm so organized and I'm so ready to go, my room's ready' and then I changed to someone else's classroom and even though she was willing to leave everything, she does have some different beliefs about things—and then I had to get in this first-grade mindset.

Factors that contributed to feelings of insecurity. In addition to the grade change at the beginning of the school year, Madeline also faced challenges with the administration over differences in philosophies. For example, Madeline received a negative evaluation for a writer's workshop lesson. Furthermore, when Madeline discussed the evaluation with her mentor, she was offered little support.

> I talked to my mentor teacher about it, because I was upset … And she said, 'Well, usually they really don't like to see novice teachers experimenting. They want to see more structure because they are afraid you can't handle something that is not structured …'.

Madeline felt isolated in this teaching context. Her assigned mentor was a fourth-grade teacher, and though her teaching assignment changed, her mentor did not. The atmosphere did not support collaboration. She lamented, 'I'm in my little classroom. There is no time to go and collaborate with other people …'.

Madeline felt the relationship with her mentor was largely more hurtful than helpful. She felt a lack of support in making the transition to a different grade level and questioned the motives of her mentor's intervention:

> … I feel like I'm hounded by her. She has come to observe me twice and the girl that's next to me—her mentor has never come in to observe her. She wants me to observe in every single grade level. I've already observed in third grade, and I feel overwhelmed. It makes me feel like, 'Why are you watching me?'

Madeline distrusted her mentor and did not understand the boundaries of their relationship.

> You wonder if you say something, are they going to go and tell someone else what you said? Are they going to go to the principal and tell what you said, or whatever? You are so worried that first year if you are going to get

> your contract renewed, and you are so worried that you will say the wrong thing or slip up and not do the right thing.

Finally, Madeline pointed to her classroom management as negatively impacting her developing identity as a teacher.

> … Lately it's just like mass chaos. I think I've tried to stay positive for the whole year, but I just feel like lately I just have this negative concept of myself. I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, have I chosen the right profession?'

Inner struggles and contradictions. Similar to the other participants, Madeline worried about how her students compared to other students of the same grade level in the same school.

> … are they where they need to be for first grade? … I try to ask a lot of other teachers that have taught first grade for a while. … I think it's just something that is going to challenge me, especially with the reading … I'm just worried—what if they can't read by the end of the year?

Though Madeline was most concerned with surviving each day, by the end of the year she began to feel like she was able to reflect about the match between her philosophies and instruction, and she hoped to begin next year with a fresh outlook.

> I know we were talking about reaching our philosophy, but I really don't feel like that person anymore. And it's strange—when I first got my job I was really excited about being a teacher and real excited about 'I'm going to go in and teach this way or that way!' and I totally feel—I think it goes back to the whole thing that I feel real discouraged. I just don't feel like my excited teacher-self and my creative juices flowing …

Factors that contributed to a more secure identity. As with all the participants, Madeline identified the administration, the support group, and parent and student affirmations as contributing in positive ways to her self-identity. She moved from feeling she had to 'prove' what she knew to administrators to where her administrators stood behind her and said, 'She knows what she's doing'.

Madeline also pointed to our support group as a source of ideas and a safe place to bounce ideas off of people. She welcomed the collaborative and non-judgmental environment. As co-workers pointed out the benefits of participation in the group, Madeline guessed it was because 'nobody took an interest in them when they were a first-year teacher'.

Madeline came to realize that she made great strides and finished the year having overcome many challenges.

> I think I was really at the mercy of the parents and the kids and the administration and the other teachers, and I felt like this lone person, everybody had to tell me what to do. But now I am more confident, and I can go and do this.

Common Patterns Across Data Stories

Three first-year teachers who were very successful during their university teacher preparation each struggled with three predominant issues during their first year of teaching.

1. *Induction into the isolation of teaching*. The isolating nature of teaching and the lack of collaboration contributed to the novices' feelings of being left on their own to figure things out. As these novices began their career in teaching, they 'adopt[ed] ways of thinking and acting that placed them in harmony with the existing occupational culture' (Schempp *et al.*, 1993, p. 448).
2. *Interest in* not *abandoning university teacher preparation*. The novices were concerned that *because* they were left on their own to learn how to manage their classrooms, they were sacrificing philosophies and practices that had learned about during university preparation (Holt-Reynolds, 1995).
3. *Need to learn from mentoring*. Each of the novices wanted to learn about issues of curriculum and student learning pertinent to their success. Yet, the novices were placed in situations where they had mentors in different grade levels, who were not in close proximity, and whose roles were not clearly defined. The role of mentor as one who asked to observe (but never followed through), or asked to observe too much (without explaining her motivation), created more anxiety for the novices than did it support their development. Confidentiality was a critical issue that needed to be addressed, as well as the role of assessment in the mentoring relationship (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Roberts, 2000).

Implications for Teacher Education

During teacher preparation novices are situated within a culture of support and collaboration. How ironic for the culture to shift so dramatically, then, during the first year of teaching. If the difficult nature of the first year of teaching is to change, beginning teachers must be provided with greater levels of mentoring support from peers in schools and from university teacher educators.

Educative Role of Teacher Support Group in Learning to Teach

Our new teacher support group provided a constant source of support for the novices as they worked through the challenges of their first year of teaching. The sources of support combined with the array of experiences that the teachers had over the course of the year helped them begin to develop their identities as teachers. An integral part of the support group process was to take action as a result of participating in this group. Parallel to implications of Alice McIntyre's (1997) White teacher support group, participation in such a group was not always easy. Through our discussions, we did not always find answers, but worked together and found 'some very important insights as to how we can continue the journey of finding out who we are, what we are, and what we are supposed to do' (p. 116). Throughout the year, the integration of writing, reflection on transcripts, and confidential sharing

helped the novices uncover their developing concepts of teaching (Bullough, 1997) and provided professional growth for the teachers.

University Involvement in Learning to Teach During the Induction Years

In the United States and abroad, mentors are looked at as playing critical roles in support of new teacher learning. We believe that university educators must become more involved to support new teacher learning. Teacher educators are in a unique position to support beginning teachers to connect university coursework, learn about ways former students develop as teachers, and understand the needs of beginning teachers. Through studies such as this, educators can learn about ways in which novices develop during their first year and elucidate their specific needs and challenges (Furlong & Maynard, 1995). Such findings have implications for systematically designing the kinds of school and university-based support that is needed. For, 'if students are to develop appropriate forms of practical professional knowledge, they are unlikely to be able to do that unless they have carefully structured support' (Furlong & Maynard, 1995, p. ix).

Certainly tensions exist that must be addressed in order for productive mentoring to be possible. The lack of time for collaborative conversation, lack of release support for observations, philosophical differences between novice and mentor, and unclear boundaries between support and evaluation are just some of the tensions that must be anticipated (Boreen *et al.*, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Stanulis & Weaver, 1998).

Mentoring structures vary greatly across schools, yet it is clear that strong mentoring from both the university and school is vital to retention of strong novice teachers. Most of all, we believe that effective induction support can benefit student learning, as competent, collaborative teachers who are energized, feel professionally supported, and feel competent are best positioned to meet the needs of children.

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