

A Sense of Belonging

Sustaining and Retaining New Teachers

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Introduction

We can copy others, we can live to please others, or we can discover that which is unique and precious to us, and paint that, become that.

CARL ROGERS, 1983



I still remember picking up the phone in my kitchen and hearing the words, “We would like to offer you a third-grade position.” Eighteen years have passed, yet the call and emotions that filled the moment are still vivid and bring me right back to my start as a classroom teacher, the beginning of my journey as an educator.

As I hung up the phone that day many years ago, I began to dream of my very own classroom. I was ecstatic, ready to take off and face the challenges of classroom teaching. What I lacked in experience, I made up for with enthusiasm and my idealistic vision for creating a community of learners.

I spent the summer gathering resources, prepping materials, and creating the inviting classroom environment that I had envisioned during my days as an undergraduate. I shopped all summer, picking up materials that would stimulate learning. I designed and redesigned the physical layout of my classroom, making sure that I maximized my classroom space. I set out to design a “quality” classroom based on William Glasser’s *The Quality School: Managing Students Without Coercion* (1990)—a classroom where

students could work together, collaborate, and express themselves freely. I dreamed of a classroom where students would have an opportunity to pursue topics of interest and have a voice in their learning.

I lacked materials—even my flag holder was empty. There were barely enough desks for my students. My classroom library was sparse, but I jazzed it up with a few new titles and borrowed books from the public library. Still, I was not discouraged. Together, the students and I would create a rich learning environment.

September came, the school year was set to start, and I was suddenly panic-stricken. My classroom was set, but I didn't have a clue as to what I should be teaching the first week of school, never mind how I would cover the curriculum over the year. I wasn't even sure how to set up the infrastructure needed for reading and writing workshop.

Then there were the students, all twenty-three of them, including Matthew, a student with autism who had been mainstreamed into my classroom without support. My behavior-management plan based on Glasser's control theory in the classroom (1990) did not prepare me for Matthew and his daily desk-flipping tantrums. To be honest, I wasn't even skilled at controlling the normal chatter level of the classroom. My small repertoire of behavior-management strategies failed me!

I had a mentor assigned to me. She was someone I could turn to with logistical questions about the hot-lunch program, recess, and field trips. She listened to me, but the reality was she was busy teaching all day herself. As a new teacher, I also had to create a teacher action plan, which was a state mandate for acquiring a professional teaching certificate—so unconnected to my immediate needs that I was facing in the classroom.

By October, I was in over my head. It was like I had all the pieces of a puzzle and couldn't put them together. I worked day to day. Every night I planned for the next day, and every Sunday I tried to get ready for Monday. I had no life outside of school.

Days turned to weeks, and the weeks blurred into months. I became disillusioned about my chosen profession, the one I had spent years dreaming about and planning for. I remember walking into the teacher's room one day, so detached. My mentor was there and asked how things were going. I simply responded, "I give myself three years, and then I am out of teaching. I'll start a bakery. I just can't do this."

As I edged toward the end of my first year as a teacher, I felt alone and ineffective. Matthew was becoming more and more disruptive. I was unable to meet his instructional needs, and his behavior was interfering with instructional experiences that I was trying to provide for the rest of

the class. Somewhere near the end of the school year, Matthew stood up, flipped his desk, marched toward the exit door of my classroom, and in front of the entire class, pointed his finger at me and declared, “You’re fired!” I thought to myself, I wish—someone take me out of my misery!



Now fast-forward eighteen years. I am no longer a novice classroom teacher, but rather a literacy specialist/coach who has forgotten at times over the years her own story of her first years of teaching.

It took losing several new teachers for me to take a hard look at how we were supporting new teachers within our school. Even though I was supporting them in their classrooms, I knew that they faced many other challenges that we hadn’t even begun to touch upon. Struggles in classroom management probably ranked top on this list. In addition, many of our new teachers were scrambling with their day-to-day planning and didn’t really have a year-long vision for meeting curricular expectations. There was also no time built into our schedules to meet. I often found myself making quick superficial exchanges with them in the hallway. All their energy went into survival. All my energy went into helping them with the bare essentials of reading and writing workshops. It was clear that these new teachers were not getting the depth and richness of purposeful support that they needed to survive in the classroom.

Katherine, one of the teachers who resigned at the end of her first year, approached me to go over her literacy data. She sat down in frustration and said, “I just don’t know if I can do this again.” Her response hit me hard. It reminded me of my own first year of teaching—the feelings of despair and disillusionment.

After talking with Katherine and watching other new teachers struggle through their first year, I knew that we were somehow failing them. It was also becoming quite clear to me that beginning teachers enter the profession with a fresh vision and new thinking but often don’t get the support they need to put their ideas into practice, as we often overload them with *our* ideas. As a result, we were losing good beginning teachers. Research shows an alarming statistic: “17 percent of educators leave teaching after one year, 30 percent after two years, 40 percent after three years, nearly half after five years, and up to 80 percent after ten years” (Boreen et al. 2000, 6). We were losing good teachers to other professions!

In addition to our inability to retain new teachers in our school, we were losing teachers to retirement. I work in a system with many veteran teachers. Over the next five years, we will lose 27 percent of staff within

our district to retirement. With those retirements, we will lose the instructional foundation that we have worked to build as a system unless we find a way to better support beginning teachers. Diane Sweeney, author of *Learning Along the Way*, points out that “constantly integrating new teachers into the school community takes time and energy” (2003, 98). And the reality is that if we fail to provide beginning teachers with the support they need, we will find ourselves in this predicament year after year. Our approach to new-teacher induction had to change. We needed to make sure that our support for new teachers was relevant to their needs. We needed to be more purposeful in how we supported new teachers.

Talking with Lucy

To gain insight into what needed to change, I went to Lucy, a second-year teacher at the time, to get her perspective on new-teacher support. I asked her to talk to me about her needs as a new teacher. Lucy shared with me that she didn’t need more information and procedures, but rather craved time to process her thinking with others, solidify classroom structures, and plot out curriculum. She wanted to be able to talk about the obstacles that she faced in the classroom throughout the year without feeling that she was burdening another teacher with her problems. Lucy shared that her mentor and her in-class literacy support were invaluable but that she still could use guidance with implementing curriculum and putting all the pieces together. She told me that she loved the “one” time that she got to observe a colleague’s literacy block and went on to say that she was learning so much from the teacher next to her and would love more opportunities to watch other teachers in action with students. For Lucy, one of the highlights of being a new teacher was her participation in literacy study groups. She talked about how she loved participating in the groups and the sense of belonging that was generated through them.

After listening to Lucy share her struggles of being a new teacher, I shared a reflection I’d written about my first year of teaching (what is now the beginning of this book), describing my feelings of isolation and struggles with classroom management. When she finished reading it, Lucy said that she could identify with all of my emotions and went on to say, “It’s still really hard for me to reflect and think about my first year of teaching.” I replied, “It took me fifteen years to put my beginning teaching experience on paper.” Writing about my experience as a new teacher made the issue regarding lack of teacher support all too real to ignore.

Rethinking New-Teacher Support

Harry Wong writes that effective induction programs for new teachers have three basic components. They are comprehensive, coherent, and sustained (Wong 2005). Although we had support systems in place I am not sure that they were comprehensive, coherent, or sustained. It was as if our supports were offered in isolation of one another.

We had been offering support to new teachers but were not providing repeated opportunities over time with scaffolds in place to help them integrate their new learning. Coaching new teachers in their classrooms once a week was just not enough. I also knew that the support for new teachers needed to extend beyond their first year of teaching and that somehow we needed to provide the same elements of gradual release that we provide our students to help them sustain new practices. I thought about my conversation with Lucy and the elements of support that she craved in addition to the existing support and generated a list of wonderings.

New Wonderings

- How could we provide new teachers from the start with a sense of belonging?
- How do we build in time within the school day for new teachers to collaborate and learn from one another?
- How do we provide ongoing opportunities for new teachers to observe other teachers in action?
- How could we help new teachers see how student assessments are part of what we do rather than an add-on?
- How could we support new teachers in using student work on a day-to-day basis to inform their instruction?
- How could we support new teachers with curriculum planning so that they embrace the planning process as a continuous cycle?
- How do we support new teachers so that they can become the teacher they want to be and at the same time maintain consistency in the delivery of district curriculum?
- How do we retain new, smart, innovative teachers in this challenging field of education?
- How do we figure out what makes a difference?

Our Comprehensive New-Teacher Induction

The list of wonderings that I generated from my conversation with Lucy guided my thinking as we reorganized new-teacher induction.