

WHY ARE BEGINNING TEACHERS FRUSTRATED WITH THE TEACHING PROFESSION?

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ABSTRACT. In this article we report some of the findings of a study of the perceptions of secondary teachers about their experiences as full-time second-year teachers in urban public schools. The frustrations felt by this group of teachers emerged as a strong theme; it is the nature of these frustrations that we explore in this article.

**POURQUOI LES ENSEIGNANTS DÉBUTANTS ÉPROUVENT-ILS
DE LA FRUSTRATION FACE À LEUR PROFESSION?**

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, les auteures présentent quelques résultats d'une étude portant sur les perceptions d'enseignants du secondaire à la suite de leur deuxième année à plein temps dans une école publique urbaine. Beaucoup d'enseignants de ce groupe ont exprimé leurs frustrations et ce sont ces dernières qu'explorent les auteures dans cet article.

The objective of our study was, through inductive analysis, to establish themes, concepts, and propositions related to perceptions of second-year classroom teachers. Participants were chosen on a random basis as a result of an email sent to all eighteen full-time second-year teachers in one school division; those who volunteered became the participants. The mix of participants was balanced in terms of gender and level (both middle and high school). In total, five teachers, three women and two men, became part of the research group. All were teaching in the same secondary public school in which they began their careers.

A phenomenological approach, where perception and experience form the primary sources of knowledge, was used. Data collection relied on an initial one-on-one interview of 1 to 2 hours duration, a focus group discussion of approximately 2 hours, three months later, and after another three month interval, a final individual interview session of 1/2 to 1 hour. All of the individual interviews were audio-taped. When data from all of the sessions were coded, synthesized, and analyzed, recurring themes were noted. The teachers' level of frustration was one such recurring theme in the initial individual

interviews, and became prominent during the focus group discussion. For the teachers in this study, frustration involved feelings of discouragement as well as feelings of being thwarted from accomplishing certain tasks. They spoke of frustration in their daily work with students, parents, and administrators. They felt frustrated by the politics and policies of the school system, and by the impact of all of these frustrations on their personal lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature confirms what the teachers in this study experienced; namely, that teaching holds many frustrations for the beginning professional. Ness' (2001) example is representative of these frustrations and their eventual possible consequences: a new teacher leaves the profession after two years due to lack of support, impossible teaching loads, financial issues, and outrage about the children who "are the victims of a floundering public school system" (p.10). Taylor, Leitman and Barnett (1992), in their survey of 1000 second-year teachers, noted that fewer than half of the respondents felt that their experiences with their principals were very satisfying. Additionally, they cited frustrations with parents and a lack of parental support as a reason for leaving teaching.

Barnes (1993), Loughran (1994), Britt (1997), and Smeltzer Erb (2002) write explicitly about the level and feeling of frustration that beginning second-year teachers face. In Barnes' (1993) study, second-year elementary school teachers revealed that their frustrations related to time and classroom management, curriculum emphasis, the challenges of teaching diverse populations, pressures to conform, lack of tolerance from veteran teachers, problems in dealing effectively with parents, peers and administration, and the disparity between their teacher education programs and the "real" teaching world.

Loughran (1994) concludes from his longitudinal three-year study of beginning science teachers that "the major issues of time, self-confidence, and collegial support all appear to affect their pedagogical development" (p. 374). Further, he notes that for many second-year teachers, "there is a struggle ... to come to grips with the difference between what they think they should be doing, and what they can do for the students" (p. 380).

Britt's (1997) results "indicated that the perceptions of beginning teachers fell into four main categories, which included time management, discipline, parental involvement, and preparation [for teaching as provided by the university]" (p. 3). She notes that, for the teachers, these areas were the source of both a sense of accomplishment and frustration.

Smeltzer Erb (2002) collected data from six second-year teachers on the emotional aspects of teaching and concluded that teachers at the beginning of their careers experience the positive emotions of joy, elation, satisfaction,

encouragement, interest, and relief, and to a lesser degree, the negative emotions of disappointment, frustration, anger, confusion, impatience, and exhaustion. Nieto (2003) contends that teachers will stay in the profession precisely because of these positive emotions, and will “persevere, in spite of all the deprivations and challenges” (p. 7), for reasons that have more to do with teaching’s heart than its physical conditions. Moore Johnson (2004) cautions, however, that all too often the frustrations that new teachers experience result in their moving on to other lines of work.

THEMES FROM DATA ANALYSIS

Teachers and students

Students and their attitudes toward learning caused the most frustration for the second-year teachers in our study. The teachers felt frustrated by what they saw as student apathy, by students “not caring about the quality of their work,” and “not realizing that they might need the education in later years.” Incomplete student work was one of the teachers’ biggest frustrations. During the focus group discussion, every participant agreed that getting students to complete work was a constant chore. Phoebe commented that, “It’s like pulling teeth, getting work done and getting assignments in, and ... constantly phoning the same parents about the same issues and nothing changes and nothing gets done.” Darcy, too, was tired and frustrated by constantly having to pursue students to complete their work. “It just makes you wonder why you’re doing it, every day and why you’re trying to.... It really pushes you to the limit of [saying] if they’re not going to do it ... if they don’t care, why should I care? ... It’s hard to keep everything in check and still keep going because it can get so frustrating. They’re failing art because they won’t hand anything in.... What are we going to do? How are we going to address this problem?”

During the focus group discussion, Lizanne spoke of the students not understanding that she was cajoling them for their own benefit. She was trying very hard to force students to complete all the assignments so that no one would fail. This was a formidable task, since marking was required for assignments that were many months past due, which added to the frustration.

The concerns expressed by the participants in this study were identical to those Loughran (1994) touched on in his research; namely, that beginning teachers have trouble coming to terms with the differences between what they should be doing for the students, what they want from the students, and what is actually possible. Darcy summed up the frustration of caring about the students and the completion of their work in this way: “when you start [your teaching career], you’re going to save the world and you’re going to save every one of them. And every one of them is going to walk in, you’re

going to touch them all in some special way, and they're always going to remember you and they're all going to like you. And, no, they aren't."

Much like the respondents in Barnes' (1993) and Britt's (1997) studies, the teachers in this study didn't feel that their teacher education programs had prepared them for the discrepancies between what they hoped for and what was possible. They weren't prepared for the "real" teaching world, populated by students like this. As they grappled with their frustrations, their disappointments, and their questions about how to resolve these issues, there was a sense of having been sold a false bill of goods: "A lot of the theory does not apply. It's all based on perfect world scenarios. Now, we all know that it's not a perfect world, and they didn't factor laziness into the classroom dynamic when we were in university," noted Darcy.

Teachers and parents

A lack of parental response to teachers' concerns about students' attitudes and disengagement, added to the frustrations. Teachers in this division are expected to communicate frequently with parents. Phone calls home are meant to avoid any surprises come reporting time. Teachers are encouraged by administrators to phone parents to gain support in improving individual student's behaviour. During the focus group discussion, however, every participant agreed that phone calls home to parents often did not help to solve problems. While they acknowledged their own inexperience in dealing with parents and recognized that some of their frustrations could be attributed to that very inexperience, they nevertheless registered a great deal of disappointment with the parents' responses.

Concerns about lack of parental support have been reported in the literature for some time. Taylor, Leitman and Barnett (1992), in their survey of reasons why new teachers are frustrated and leave the profession, note that 40% of those surveyed "cite lack of parental support as a major factor in their decision" (p. 4). Smeltzer Erb (2002) contends that anxiety caused by confrontational parental interactions is one of the three most highly ranked areas of negative emotional tension for beginning teachers. Moore Johnson (2004) identifies another area of frustration: while many schools ask teachers to call parents, few administrators provide guidance about how best to do this. The teachers in this study confirmed these findings.

One participant in this study admitted to crying in frustration after a telephone conversation with a parent; another reported encounters with parents who dismissed the teacher's concerns; a third lamented that parents appeared to be responsive only when the teacher's concerns related to their children's performance in the major subject areas. A general sense of helplessness is evident in this teacher's description of his encounter with an unruly student:

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It was kind of like every other day this week; he's rude to others, he's disrespectful to others, he's destructive to property, he doesn't do any of his work. We could go through the list every single day if you'd like ... but you know what? He can't serve his detention today because he has hockey. And as much as I'm for extra-curricular and the kids need it because it will keep them out of trouble and everything else; what reinforcement are you getting? The child thinks, "Dad's going to bust me out of detention because I have hockey."

An added frustration for these teachers was the follow-up paperwork or phone call logs that administrators required of them after every phone conversation with a parent.

Teachers and administrators

The teachers' frustration with administrators went well beyond the paperwork that was required after consulting with parents. They were frustrated by the way teaching assignments were made; they felt that their work in the classroom was not supported by administrators; and they expressed concern about inequitable administrative practices.

The teachers in this study were most frustrated in their first year in the classroom by principals who assigned them courses to teach outside of their areas of expertise. About her first year course assignment, Marilyn remarked, "I didn't know how to teach language arts. I didn't really know where to start. I have no training to teach language arts. It's not one of my favourite subjects. Right from the start of my first year, the administration knew that I didn't like teaching L.A., and they gave it to me anyway." This frustration continued in her second year because she still could not teach exactly what she was trained for. "I'm a choir teacher. Obviously, I want more of that than social studies. For me to be completely happy, I would have the majority of my courses being choir and not the majority being social studies. Right now, I feel like I'm the social studies teacher in the school because I teach most of it." Rod was happier in his first year of teaching than he is in his second year. His frustration came from a change in course load. He explained that this year "I'm also doing a math class which doesn't fit well with me." Lizanne's frustration about the courses she was teaching stemmed from her being asked to make a quick decision about whether or not she wanted to switch from teaching full time English to part-time English and part-time physical education. Unlike three of the other participants, she was consulted about the change in workload, but she was not pleased with how the administration delivered the question. She explained, "[My principal] just kind of said, 'We need to know NOW,' and that really upset me because it's something I'd been thinking about, but I was unprepared to make that decision (snaps fingers) like that.... I got called down and he said, 'You know we need to know this now.' I just felt like everything had to be done immediately." She described this as one of the toughest decisions that she

had been asked to make. She did not appreciate the haste the administrator demanded of her, and felt seriously ill trying to make the decision.

Regardless of their level of satisfaction with their teaching assignments, the teachers in this study wanted feedback on their progress, and were frustrated when this wasn't forthcoming. As one teacher commented, "Well, you [the administration] haven't been in the room once this year. You have absolutely no idea if I'm doing a good job or a bad job." The teachers were frustrated that their evaluations were not as thoroughly completed as they would have liked.

Participants also reported that they followed administrative directives as closely as possible in order to uphold school rules, only to discover that senior teachers were much more lenient about rule enforcement, and that, in many instances, the administration could not be counted on to support teachers or follow up on rule infractions that related to homework completion, absenteeism, or detention. As Rod noted, teachers were "disappointed in the fact that the discipline policies at the school did little." As second-year teachers, the participants did not yet have permanent teaching contracts and recognized very clearly the administrator's power to terminate their position or to provide them with the security of a permanent contract. One participant described this state of being as having "to walk around on egg shells to a certain extent." This may account for the teachers' diligence in following "orders from the office," and the subsequent disappointment when their efforts were neither acknowledged nor supported by the very administrators they needed to impress.

Another cause of frustration for these teachers was the way in which administrators made decisions that affected their daily teaching life. Having experienced a full cycle of the school year and with a bit more time to reflect on events, these second-year teachers became more keenly aware than they had been during the first year, of instances of seeming inequity in administrative practices. They cited a number of areas controlled by the administration where they felt dissatisfied but helpless to change the situation. Rod wrote into the transcript of his first interview, "I sometimes get stressed out over thinking about administrative decisions. For example, why does teacher A get 4 more preps than I do?"

All participants shared concerns about the lack of funds to support them in their teaching. Additionally, they all expressed concerns about the lack of transparency and the inequities they experienced when school funds were disbursed to support special programs or to purchase supplies. They felt that what counted was "playing the game, knowing who to go to and how to get money in your budget," and that "equity amongst staff in terms of the budget process does not exist."

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The sense of inequity extends to the condition of the classrooms and the workspaces. The process of setting up Lizanne's classroom has spanned two years, but is not yet complete. She was told before her first year that the classroom and the computer would be set up for her arrival. But when she arrived, nothing was ready. She was searching for desks until the first day of school in her first year. "I had five desks for students. I had nothing. So I found I had to really fight for stuff.... I had to go into the hall and take things. I had to ask teachers 'Do you have a couple of extra desks?'" In the second year, the frustrating issue of workspace was still not resolved:

My biggest beef right now is that because I'm a new teacher, my room is terrible! My classroom is small. It's got one white board and one black board. I've got a mish mash of furniture. It's stuck way down the corner by the day care.... It used to be a computer lab, and so there are plug-ins all around the room and on the floor, so I've asked for some of those to be removed. I'm supposed to get a chair to replace my gummed up yucky one that I have a towel on right now, and some bookshelves.

The participants were clear that they all like, or even love, the teaching part of the job. It was the "everything else" that had some of them thinking that this profession may not be the right fit for them. Marilyn commented that she didn't know "it would be this hard, this challenging.... how much other 'stuff' there would be besides teaching, like administrivia, paperwork, and aside from planning lessons and marking, how much other 'stuff' you have to do."

Teachers and the school system

The teachers in this study were not only frustrated with administrative decisions in their own schools, but also felt, as Ness (2001) described, that 'the school system was floundering.' They questioned divisional policies, the politics in the school system, and talked about the need for widespread changes in the school system as a whole. While all participants agreed that the system needed change, they had no specific suggestions for improvement. It was as if, in frustration, they were looking outward to understand the tensions they were feeling inside their school settings. One teacher expressed it this way:

Why aren't we changing, somehow? I'd love to have the answer. I'd be a multi-millionaire if I did, but the system's the same.... Well, we start earlier, we leave later, or lunch is different, or there's different recess, or we have different options for the kids to take. And you know, maybe phys ed wasn't available or shops wasn't available a hundred years ago, [but] the system's the same. The kids come in, they open their mouths, you shovel the information in, and you hope it stays in there. Then they leave. The system's got to change; I just don't know how.

At the divisional level they could point to specific policies that frustrated them, citing the student promotion policies, the policy whereby students are not allowed to fail more than once, the emphasis on division-wide examinations, and the need to teach to the test because administrators compared test results across schools. As untenured members of the profession, the teachers felt powerless to oppose the system, and frustrated because “the kids know they have the system beat.”

Personal and professional lives

Just as the teachers feel voiceless and powerless to effect change within the larger educational system, they have similar feelings in relation to the general public. They are not sure that the public appreciates their work with students. They question if the public is aware of what is going on in the classrooms of public schools. As Rod put it, “the public doesn’t have a fair understanding of what we do and all the different aspects of the job.” Darcy added that, in his experience, people only see the perks of the job, and then they chide teachers for having three months vacation each year, and earning too much money. It seems to him that teachers are not as valued or respected as they once were.

At times, administrators, too, seemed to lack understanding of the boundaries of teachers’ professional lives. One principal reminded staff that week-ends were ideal times to put the finishing touches on lesson plans, and assured them that “Sundays are days that the building is open and available for you to come and take care of these things.” While teaching was at one time understood to be a calling where volunteerism was common, these young professionals do not see their role in those terms. Moore Johnson (2004) contends that while the context of teaching has changed dramatically over the past three decades, the expectations that principals have of teachers have not kept up with this transformation. She documents what she describes as a new generation of teachers that views teaching from the perspective of a transformed labour market, and brings to the profession a different set of expectations. Working at teaching seven days a week is not one of these expectations. As one teacher put it, it’s not the case that, when “I put my teacher’s hat on, it stays on twenty-four hours a day.”

Despite that contention, the teachers in this study still had difficulty balancing their personal and professional lives. The frustration of trying to mesh work and home life caused some of these second-year teachers to question a long time commitment to the profession. During the focus group discussion, Lizanne said, “I am frustrated with the little time spent with my husband over the past year.” All participants admitted that they felt burnt out at home. They were frustrated that they couldn’t do what they wanted when they wanted, and had to change their lifestyle to fit the profession. They noted that they didn’t have time to play sports or to socialize because

work consumed them, and they were exhausted when they got home. Darcy concluded that “it is a struggle, and it really makes you question whether or not you can do it for thirty years.”

Marilyn acknowledged that the second year was slightly better than the first year. She now has a more well-balanced view of who she is. “I am not JUST a teacher. I am a member of my family. I enjoy doing other things aside from teaching. It’s easier to be more of those things this year than it was last year. Last year, it was like teacher, teacher, teacher, all the time. And that was my focus for the whole year; [I was] definitely more stressed.” She continued by saying that now “I have more contact with friends. I’m obviously home more, and that’s healthy all around.”

DISCUSSION

New teachers

The frustrations experienced by the teachers in this study mirrored those in the research literature. As reported in the literature, the concerns of the teachers in this study touched on every aspect of schooling, beginning with students, parents, and administrators, and extending to their pre-service programs, the general public, and the school system as a whole. Students and their attitudes toward learning caused the teachers in this study the most frustration. They had difficulty coming to terms with their inability to do for and with students the things that they thought they should be doing. In seeking to come to grips with this problem, they pointed to their teacher education programs, saying that these had not prepared them for the “real” world of teaching, where students were not engaged and “didn’t care.” They were also frustrated by what they described as unsupportive parents, unsupportive and, at times, unfair administrators, school and divisional policies that got in the way of good teaching and learning, and a public that didn’t seem to understand or appreciate them. All of these frustrations in their professional lives affected their sense of personal well-being, and caused them to wonder whether teaching was “the best fit” for them, or whether they would be able “to do it for thirty years.”

The first year or two of teaching is frequently described as a time of survival, a period of “getting through” (Huberman, 1989). The experiences of the teachers in this study reflect just that. The next cycle of growth and development is often referred to as a time of greater independence, experimentation, and consolidation. Further experience generally yields greater confidence, flexibility, and a sense of professional autonomy. How can we ensure that new teachers will stay in the teaching profession long enough to reach this stage?

DeWert, Babinski and Jones (2003) suggest that one solution is an online network where experienced teacher mentors and other beginning teachers can provide the necessary “social, emotional, practical and professional support” (p. 311). Teachers who are hesitant to talk about frustrations with a colleague or an administrator in their own school, especially if the administrator happens to be the source of the frustration, may be more comfortable using an on-line community to voice their concerns. Additional advantages are that an on-line community may be more accessible and convenient than attending face-to-face support group meetings and, if they wish, participants can remain anonymous in the conversations.

An on-line support network responds to the immediacy of the issues raised by the teachers in this study, but Moore Johnson and Birkeland’s (2003) work suggests that external supports may not be enough. They note that when second-year teachers felt unsupported in their schools, they sought transfers to schools where there was “organized support for new teachers and school wide collegial interaction” (p. 598). In addition to transferring out of schools, more and more teachers are also choosing to transfer right out of the profession. Issues of teacher frustration are tied to teacher retention. The issue of teacher retention is very current, with much attention being paid to the statistic that approximately 30% of teachers leave teaching within their first five years in the profession.

School administration

Moore Johnson (2004), in her extensive study of the difficulties that new teachers face, makes recommendations for how to retain new teachers in the profession. Among her conclusions is the contention that teachers in this new generation are less accepting of the traditional top-down hierarchy in schools and fixed channels of communication. They do not want to work alone. Instead, they actively seek schools where they can work collaboratively with others in professional learning communities and receive frequent feedback about their performance. They expect to be treated fairly and they believe that schools should encourage, support, and reward them as they grow and improve their practice.

The new teachers in this study raised similar issues to those cited in the Moore Johnson study. They were frustrated by administrators who made top-down decisions about their teaching assignments, without taking into consideration teachers’ areas of expertise. They felt unsupported in their struggles with students and parents. They cited lack of feedback, inequitable treatment, poor communication and inadequate physical working space as additional stressors. Further, they questioned whether they should stay in teaching.

These findings invite administrators to consider how they might make schools more supportive of new teachers. Administrators could begin by asking questions such as the following: Is our school an inviting place for new teachers? What structural and cultural supports are in place for them? Are we a community of learners? Is this a school where teachers can learn? Do we encourage and create time for educators to meet, work collaboratively, and draw on the expertise of others – within and beyond the school – to support their learning? Are we providing teachers with an appropriate and properly resourced physical teaching space? Lizanne's frustrations centered on being given a classroom without desks. Because she is the new teacher, she feels that she has been given the small room that's stuck in the corner, filled with a "mish mash of furniture" and a teacher's chair that has chewing gum all over it. Moore Johnson and Birkeland (2003) confirm that a good workplace can increase a teacher's success and "an unsupportive principal, or a broken copy machine can interfere with good teaching and make it hard for teachers to achieve the intrinsic rewards they seek" (p. 584).

Teacher education programs

However, the responsibility of supporting new teachers does not lie solely with administrators. The new teachers in this study felt unprepared by their teacher education programs, because they believed that what they had learned at the pre-service level was out of touch with the "real" world of teaching they encountered in their schools. Educators can begin by working more actively to bridge the divide between theory and practice. Teacher education programs can increase efforts to ensure that teacher education programs work with schools in what Cochran-Smith (1998) refers to as a partnership of "collaborative resonance." To support the growth and development of new teachers, faculties of education must extend their presence beyond the pre-service program to in-service teaching by providing specific ongoing support to student teachers after graduation.

The University of Nottingham in England is an example of how a university works to facilitate the transition from student teaching to teaching students. In England, legislation requires that schools and universities work as partners in the preparation of new teachers and that they share the responsibility of inducting new teachers into the profession. To this end, classroom teachers are trained to mentor both student teachers and newly qualified teachers. In addition to trained mentors, each partnership school has a trained coordinator with responsibility for administering all aspects of the school/university partnership arrangements. A partnership committee made up of both school-based and university-based staff manages the partnership, which operates under clearly articulated roles and responsibilities for all those working with teacher candidates and newly qualified teachers.

Statutory induction arrangements were introduced by the University of Nottingham in 1999 to ensure that newly qualified teachers are supported throughout their first year of teaching. During the induction period, new teachers receive full pay but have a timetable reduced by 10%. They work with an in-school mentor to develop an individualized program of classroom support, lesson observations, and progress reporting. Additionally, they return to the university at regular intervals to continue discussions of the theory/practice connection and draw on the support of their former university cohort and their university professors to deal with issues encountered in their school setting.

To achieve the intrinsic rewards of teaching and to stay in teaching, today's teachers need supportive school conditions. When schools and faculties of education recognize the frustrations that new teachers experience, and choose to work together in collaborative resonance to address this issue, their joint efforts can create rich instructional opportunities for new teachers, and enhance their desire to remain in the profession.

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