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Caring for New Teachers Once They Leave Campus

Elaine Tinholt, Covenant College

Abstract

This essay explores one teacher educator's motivation and ideas about how to advocate for induction support for new teachers beyond the teacher preparation program. During the undergraduate preparation process, teacher candidates are given multiple opportunities to receive support from mentor teachers and college supervisors. This support system functions through formal observations, on-going communication, and feedback concerning progression throughout the clinical practice experience. While induction programs abound across the country, students who leave small, faith-based universities often disperse to a variety of settings and support levels. The school based support offered during the first year of teaching can be insufficient or inadequate during this time of transition. When support is lacking, new teachers may experience feelings of insecurity, frustration, and a sense of being overwhelmed. Grounded in educational and spiritual literature, the essay examines some current practices for supporting new teachers and discusses ideas for helping educators prepare their teacher candidates for the intensity of a first year.

When I began my teaching career, I was filled with excitement and anticipation of what lay ahead. I was hired for my first teaching position at the end of May and spent the remaining summer months preparing to meet my students. I studied the teacher manuals for the content areas I would be teaching my first graders in the fall. I met with fellow teachers, janitors, and secretaries. I spent time decorating my classroom, purging file cabinets of the various accumulated materials which had not been used in several years, and even stenciling an apple border along the top of my classroom walls.

Through much prayer and hard work during that summer, I felt my classroom and lesson plans were well prepared for the beginning of school. However,

there were some aspects of being a first-year teacher that I had not been able to plan for during my summer months. As I began teaching, I felt dismayed by my students' slow academic progress. When I met with my first-grade teaching team, we would debrief about our students' progress in relation to the content we had been covering. I continually struggled to understand why my students were not able to comprehend the material at the same pace as the other first-grade students. My students had sweet dispositions and kind hearts, but there was something different about my class compared to my colleagues' students.

By the end of the first six weeks, I mustered the courage to approach my principal and confess my concerns about the lack of progress my students were making. I broke down in tears, thinking my students' struggles were the direct result of my inability to teach. It was at this watershed moment when my principal informed me that my classroom was comprised of students who had indicated pre-kindergarten levels of maturity and learning skills on their entry assessments. These students had been put together in the same class and assigned to the 'new teacher' because they were sweet and kind. Administration felt the new person on the team would be able to focus on teaching content without having to worry about serious behavior problems. This news, while shocking, actually relieved me tremendously. I was able to adjust my expectations and choose more appropriate instructional strategies based on the needs of my students. From that point forward, I was able to focus on meeting their needs and developing their skills instead of measuring their performance against other students in the first grade. We progressed throughout the year, just at a different pace than the other classes. I ended my first year with a positive outlook on the teaching profession, despite this rocky beginning. Had I not gone to my principal and sought advice, I would have continued to struggle to meet the needs of my

students and questioned my own calling in education.

My principal and fellow teachers tried to care for me by giving me the “easy” students, but they failed to communicate the constraints I was working within and the ways it should impact my pedagogy. I was not prepared to walk that road alone and could have used a support system to help me navigate the various needs that existed within my class. This lack of care made a significant mark on my first year of teaching and helped me in my Christian walk to take notice of others. Throughout the scriptures, God shows special concern for those in need. He gives specific declarations to care for the widow, the orphan, and the poor. He also calls us to seek justice for the oppressed and offer refuge for those in distress. As a Christian educator working in a public school setting, I was sometimes given opportunities to walk alongside fellow teachers as they experienced the challenges associated with the profession.

Fast forward twenty years, I can now see how God used my first year of teaching to influence my current perspective as a college professor working with pre-service teachers. The education profession is demanding, rigorous, and challenging. Teachers feel pressure to meet the needs of their students, the desires of the parents, the expectations of their principals, and the content standards required for the state in which they teach. These pressures can be compounded for first-year teachers who are adjusting to both the freedom and responsibility that come with being the fulltime lead teacher in a classroom setting. A lack of support can lead to higher stress levels, which may lower the new teacher’s job satisfaction level (Womack-Wyne, Dees, Leech, LaPlant, Brockmeier, & Gibson, 2011). Increased stress levels can cause these young professionals to question their career choice, and sometimes end their teaching career all together. When an educator chooses to leave the profession, the school must then face the challenge of finding and training another highly qualified teacher (Perrachione, Rosser, & Peterson, 2008).

The Role of Teacher Preparation Programs

At the Christian college where I teach, we care deeply for our students and strive to integrate a

perspective of care into our programmatic decisions. We seek to help our teacher candidates view their calling in education as a means of serving God by caring for His creation. The beauty, wisdom, and knowledge revealed in math, literature, science, history, and the arts can guide us to be effective stewards of His creation. Our courses seek to bring a perspective of redemption to the classroom through differentiated instruction, which honors the student as being made in the image of God. The classroom management strategies we teach seek to restore broken relationships and help students care for their neighbors. Educators are seen as models and facilitators of care in the K-12 setting.

To help care for our teacher candidates and prepare them for the role of being an educator, they enter the teacher preparation program in a cohort model during the spring of their junior year. For three semesters, the candidates take courses together, work collaboratively on group projects, and support one another through peer feedback on certain assignments. Over time, the cohort begins to function as a learning community with shared experiences and goals. Our Education Department helps our candidates prepare for the final semester of Clinical Practice by hosting a Partnership Meeting prior to the start of the semester. Our college pays for substitute teachers to allow mentor teachers to come to campus for an entire day and spend time with their teacher candidates. The day-long meeting is spent discussing ideas to make the clinical practice experience beneficial for both the teacher candidate and the mentor teacher. Throughout the Clinical Practice experience, the teacher candidate is offered support through eight to ten observations and post-observation conferences conducted by his or her college supervisor. The mentor teacher is also present each day to observe and offer feedback to the teacher candidate. In conjunction with Clinical Practice, seminar meetings are held on a weekly basis to allow the candidates to connect with their fellow classmates and discuss topics applicable to the clinical practice experience. During this phase of their professional development, the teacher candidates have multiple support structures in place to help care for them throughout the learning experience.

When candidates graduate, and are hired as teachers, there is a drastic shift in support. The feedback they were accustomed to receiving is often absent in their new school setting. As classroom teachers, they suddenly become responsible for making decisions on their own, interacting directly with parents, fostering relationships with colleagues, and navigating principals' expectations. New teachers often experience the loneliness of a new setting, and in this particularly vulnerable time, they lack supporting relationships to ensure their success.

Building supportive relationships can be viewed as a means of caring for both new teachers and the students they seek to serve. As teachers feel supported, they are able to focus less on self-preservation and more on caring for the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students. When teachers build relationships with students, they are able to establish a foundation to support successful pedagogical activities while creating a positive learning environment (Noddings, 2005).

Preparing Graduates for the Challenges of the First Year of Teaching

Reflecting on my first year of teaching, I can now recognize the types of support systems which were missing. At the time, I was just trying to meet my students' needs and learn the curriculum I was teaching. These tasks overwhelmed me and left little time to reflect on what I needed in the way of support. I was so busy caring for my students that I did not know I needed to seek care for myself. This care could have come from fellow colleagues, administration, mentors, or former professors. It would have been helpful to have another voice speaking into the situation, offering guidance and suggestions on how to cope with the stresses I was facing.

College-based support for teacher graduates is recommended, and sometimes mandated, in various states (Ingersoll, 2012). Institutions of higher education have control when teacher candidates are under their direct supervision, taking specific courses, and participating in selected fieldwork experiences. However, even the best preparation programs cannot foresee every challenge a first year teacher may face. There is a growing understanding

amongst educational establishments to perceive teaching as complex work and to recognize a significant portion of the knowledge needed for success has to be acquired on the job (Ingersoll, 2012).

Teacher preparation programs are given a short window of time to prepare candidates for the expectations associated with the career. Programs are expected to cover required content the teacher candidates will need to know, introduce appropriate pedagogy based on the developmental levels of the students, equip teacher candidates with classroom management strategies, and instruct them on how to analyze student data and adjust their teaching practices based on the learning which is or is not occurring. Given the amount of information preparation programs must cover, it is easy to overlook the on-the-job challenges faced by first year teachers. Such issues include lack of resources, parent/teacher conferences, building relationships with colleagues, the dynamics of bureaucracy that can exist within an organization, and teaching state standards despite a lack of funding for materials to support effective learning strategies (Survival Guide for New Teachers, 2004). These challenges can become focus topics for seminar classes offered during a teacher candidate's final semester of college. Creating time within the clinical practice semester to host informative meetings can help future graduates consider the impact these issues will have on their teaching experience. It can also help prepare them for the interview process by allowing them to think through key questions they may want to ask concerning what types of professional development opportunities and support they will be given during their first year of teaching. Preparing teacher candidates to navigate uncharted waters can help them avoid feeling overwhelmed during their first-year of teaching and allow them to continue developing their teaching abilities.

Supporting First-Year Teachers

As Christian educators, the call to support and care for new teachers is even more poignant. Christ cared for those around him. He recognized people's needs and his ability to minister to them in their given situations. As believers and followers of Christ, we are called to offer to each other the presence of God through our words and actions

(Frank, 2013). Supporting and caring for new teachers begins with recognizing the challenges they face during their first year. In a college classroom setting, the student's ability to learn and ask for guidance can be negatively impacted by the environment the professor creates (Ambrose, Bridges, Dipietro, Lovett & Norman, 2010). I believe the same can be said for the school settings where new teachers are employed. The school environment can be either inviting or forbidding based on the interactions faculty members have with new teachers. New teachers are often hesitant to ask for help, unless they feel the source of potential help can be trusted. Revealing their inadequacies can be either freeing or humiliating, the result is dependent upon the response of the listener. As Christian educators in school settings, we can be Christ's hands to new teachers by embracing them, along with their challenges and frustrations. Acts of care for new teachers may include sharing lesson plans, offering guidance on how to interact with parents, and even just asking how they are doing. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found that administrators could reduce teacher stress by providing mentors from the same field of teaching, offering a common planning time with fellow teachers in the same subject area, allowing new teachers to engage in regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers, and encouraging them to be part of an external network of teachers.

To cope with feelings of ambiguity, new teachers should be encouraged to become their own self-advocate by seeking out support systems through colleagues or administrators. They could seek advice from others about their teaching strategies and ask to observe in other teachers' classes to learn new approaches or classroom management ideas. Parker Palmer (1998) highlighted the need for teachers to reach out to their community of colleagues as a means of enhancing both professional practice and personal growth. Recognizing when and how to seek help may be hard at first, but it can be rewarding in the long run.

Preparation programs are encouraged to institute a formal follow-up to find out how the graduates are doing in their new jobs (Survival Guide for New Teachers, 2004). An electronic survey can be used

to determine how well prepared the graduates felt as they progressed through their first year of teaching. The information gained can then help determine if changes need to be made to the preparation programs in order to prepare candidates for the teaching field. Based on the survey results, institutions could offer webinars for certain areas of concern indicated by the graduates. The webinar topics could cover such issues as the use of assessment results for differentiation, navigating the nuances of working with administrators and parents, and ways to initiate collaborative communities to avoid feelings of isolation. To accommodate teachers' busy schedules, the webinars could be recorded and offered as a resource for teachers who were not able to participate in the initial event. Many of the challenges faced by first-year teachers result from learning to become contributing members of their new community. Staying in touch with graduates allows institutions of higher education to offer support during this time of transition and discovery.

During their college years, teacher candidates work closely alongside faculty members to learn the art and craft of teaching. Freytag (2015) found that teacher candidates felt cared for by faculty members when the faculty members were intentional about building personal relationships with students. Once teacher candidates graduate, maintaining a relationship of care between faculty members and new teachers may require professors to initiate the process by serving as a point of contact. Often, first-year teachers are overwhelmed with their own duties and responsibilities, leaving little time for research in their content areas. College professors can offer support by sharing resources and information concerning current research on best practices. Establishing on-line support communities is another way to allow graduates to stay connected with each other and former professors. Colleges can create regional networks for graduates who are hired in the same school district. The network would be structured to pair alumni who are experienced teachers with first year teachers who have been hired in the same school district. The two teachers would share a common foundation based on their college experience and training in pedagogy. This shared perspective could help foster a working relationship and allow the new teacher to

be more open about struggles he or she may be facing. For graduates who teach locally, colleges could invite them back to speak to pre-service teachers concerning the successes and challenges they faced during their first year. Such opportunities would allow graduates to offer wisdom to the upcoming teachers, while remaining connected to their alma mater.

Conclusion

Caring for new teachers first begins with noticing their needs. Some needs may be evident at the moment--teaching materials, guidance in learning new curriculum, becoming knowledgeable of school procedures and processes, etc. However, other needs may arise over time--feelings of isolation, questions about parent/student dynamics, issues related to classroom management. As college professors, administrators, and fellow teachers, we need to acknowledge the challenges faced by first-year teachers and then look for ways to walk alongside them as they move forward in their careers. As we think of ways to care for new teachers, we are also caring for the students they serve in their classrooms. The teachers of today impact the next generation. Therefore, their success will determine the success of an entire generation of students (Wong, 2005).

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