

Too Little or Too Much:

Teacher Preparation and the First Years of Teaching

Dan Liston, Jennie Whitcomb & Hilda Borko<sup>i</sup>

University of Colorado at Boulder

Exhilarated and exhausted, hopeful and cynical, fulfilled and dejected—these adjectives depict the emotional spectrum characterizing teachers’ first year experiences. Narratives of teachers’ initial years speak to the gritty reality of “really learning to teach.” Their stories tell of the challenges experienced as they come to understand the depth and texture of their students’ lives and their unique developmental needs. They work to develop humane, yet efficient, routines to manage the daily business of classroom and school life. They struggle to design engaging curriculum and to build knowledge of rigorous and fair standards for student work. They try to fend off fatigue, seeking to balance career demands with activities and connections that rejuvenate. They grapple with the absurdities and paradoxes of school bureaucracies, choosing when to critique and resist ill-framed policies and practices. They stumble in some interactions with colleagues, administrators, and parents. They wonder why their trying work and hard won accomplishments are viewed with such low regard by the general public. In short, narratives of first years pivot between epiphany and disillusionment (e.g., Johnston, 2002; Kane, 1991; Michie 1999).

The challenges brought to life in these narratives are persistently documented in the research literature (Fuller, 1969; Veenman, 1984; Roehrig, Pressley, & Talotta, 2002). Difficulties in the first years of teaching have implications for both practice and policy, particularly because the estimated financial cost of teacher turnover is \$2.6 billion





children. Feiman-Nemser's discussion of a professional learning continuum also suggests that learning these central tasks takes place in different contexts and with different supports. As such, it underscores that "no single institution has the expertise, authority, or financial resources to create the necessary structures and learning opportunities" (p. 1037) to foster a teacher's complete development along this continuum.

### Teacher Education and the First Years of Teaching

Given what we know about the nature of new teachers' learning and development, how might teacher education respond to the challenges of the first years of teaching? To address this question, we need some understanding of the sources of beginning teachers' struggles. We offer three common explanations: First, new teachers say the theoretical grounding learned in teacher preparation does not equip them sufficiently for the demands of daily classroom life; second, they wrestle with the emotional intensity of teaching; and third, they often teach in workplaces that are not adequately organized to support their learning.

#### The problem of theory.

One explanation for the difficulties beginning teachers experience is that the curriculum in university-based teacher preparation programs does not prepare them for the specific tasks they must accomplish. This criticism goes beyond the typical concerns with classroom management; the basic argument is that teacher preparation programs devote too much attention to theory and not enough to the practical skills of teaching. A variation of this argument is that teacher educators teach the wrong theory.

Consider the dilemmas new teachers face with curriculum. These teachers, like their veteran colleagues, have responsibility for daily decisions about what and how to



teach. District policies on standards, curriculum, and induction play a role in what materials and supports are available to beginning teachers (Grossman & Thompson, 2004; Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002). Yet, even when these resources are plentiful and strong, many beginning teachers report spending significant time finding



reading courses at 72 randomly selected teacher education programs throughout the



teachers are still integrating and consolidating their knowledge of teaching and learning, and they lack the wisdom of experience held by veteran teachers to trust their choices. Third, moments of disillusionment often punctuate the first year. Individuals choose teaching on the basis of powerful visions, ideal individuals about



A third explanation for challenges in the first years has to do with whether beginning teachers land in workplaces that support their development and learning. Research on induction and professional development shows organizational contexts vary, and some are much better places for new teachers to continue their development. The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, led by Susan Moore Johnson and colleagues (2004), outlines the following features of schools that are organized for teacher and student learning: They have principals who are instructional leaders and who develop personal relationships with new teachers; they give new teachers appropriate and reasonable assignments; they provide sufficient supplies and equipment to support student learning; they have reasonable and consistent policies and infrastructure; they use





Generation study, of the fifty teachers in their sample, only thirteen (26%) were described



teacher preparation. Over the last thirty years scholars have articulated a knowledge base for what teachers should know and models for how they learn to teach (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Shulman, 1987; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). When critiques are put forward, teacher educators need to speak out and present the evidentiary base for the knowledge and skills candidates learn in our programs and for how individuals learn to teach.

For example, in response to the NCTQ study finding that most elementary teacher candidates do not learn the science of reading, teacher educators should speak out about what *is* taught in reading courses and the broad research base informing that curriculum (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Few in the reading community discount the *National Reading Panel (NRP) Report* evidence supporting the five components of effective reading instruction. However, some scholarly appraisals of the *Report* argue that the criteria used to include studies were too stringent; as a result, it excluded important empirical evidence about how children learn to read and write, and classroom practices that support literacy d 7e,( 0.00eracy)-5.9n8 7.9(t)-6.8(TD-0.., Pr6( 7.9sslee )-5.7(.9(r)1.8(i20.00e.2(nA0 uf)-4.1( effe( rea)7, wc







Second, using technology resources, they can establish virtual networks that allow  
prograpdttttte(t)-s8tther h pr



during their first years of teaching. All teachers were graduates of a “specialized teacher education program” that prepares urban teachers, and the professional development was offered either through that program’s Urban Educator Network (UEN) or their schools. The authors offer suggestions for how universities might build strong linkages that support program graduates to develop long and rewarding careers. Pardo's study, “The Role of Context in Learning to Teach Writing: What Beginning Urban Teachers Need to Know” examines the impact of three beginning teachers' varied knowledge sources and instructional contexts on their writing instruction. “Effective Teaching/Effective Urban Teaching: Grappling with Definitions, Grappling with Difference” by Anderson and Olsen consider the contrasts between novice teachers’ definitions/descriptions of

## References

- Alliance for Excellent Education (2004). *Tapping the potential: Retaining and developing high-quality new teachers*. Retrieved on May 19, 2006 from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TappingThePotential/TappingThePotential.pdf>
- Berliner, D. (1994). Expertise: The wonder of exemplary performances. In J. Mangieri & C.C. Block (Eds.), *Creating powerful thinking in teachers and students: Diverse perspectives* (pp. 161-186). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Borko, H. & Putnam, R. (1996). Learning to teach. In D. Berliner & R. Calfee (Eds.) *Handbook of educational psychology* (673-708). New York: MacMillan.
- Britton, E., Paine, L., Pimm, D., Raizen, S. (2003). *Comprehensive teacher induction: Systems for early career learning*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bullough, R.V. & Baughman, K. (1997). *'First-year teacher' eight years later: An inquiry into teacher development*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L.D. (2006). *Powerful teacher education: Lessons from exemplary programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Bransford, J. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Banks, J., Zumwalt, K., Gomez, L., Sherin, M., Griesdorn, J., & Finn, L. (2005). Educational goals and purposes: Developing a curricular vision for teaching. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.) *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 169-200). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.





- Johnson, S.M. & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. (2004). *Finders and keepers: Helping new teachers survive and thrive in our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Johnston, M. (2002). *In the deep heart's core*. New York: Grove Press.
- Kane, P. (Ed.) (1991). *My first year as a teacher*. New York: Penguin.
- Kauffman, D., Johnson, S.M., Kardos, S.M., Liu, E., Pske, H.G. (2002). "Lost at sea": New teachers' experiences with curriculum and assessment. *Teachers College Record*, 104 (2), 273-300.
- Liston, D. (2000). Love and despair in teaching. *Educational Theory*, 50 (1), 81-102.
- Michie, G. (1999). *Holler if you hear me: The education of a teacher and his students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Molner-Kelly, L. (2004). Why induction matters. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55, 438-448.
- Morson, B. (2006, May 10). Teacher schools faulted. Retrieved May 10, 2006 from [http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN\\_9574686483,00.html](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN_9574686483,00.html)
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. (1996). *What matters most: Teaching for America's future*. New York: NCTAF.
- National Council on Teacher Quality. (2006). *What education schools aren't teaching about reading and what elementary teachers aren't learning*. Retrieved May 20, 2006 from <http://www.nctq.org/nctq/>.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: an evidence-based*

*assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Retrieved May 20, 2006 from

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm>

- Pressley, M. (2002). Effective beginning reading instruction: A paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34, 165-188.
- Pressley, M., Wharton-McDonald, R., Allington, R., Block, C.C., Morrow, L., Tracey, D., Baker, K., Brooks, G., Cronin, J., Nelson, E., & Woo, D. (2001). A study of effective grade-1 literacy instruction. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 5, 35-58.
- Roehrig, A.D., Pressley, M., Talotta, D.A. (2002). *Stories of beginning teachers: First-*