

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 22

Issue 1 *Teaching and Advocacy*

Article 12

1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Bills, Patricia; Aiken, Suzan; Steenbergen, Lindsay; and Dubisky, Alicia (2006) "Teachers on the Boundary: New Teacher Action Research as Professional Development," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1182>

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Teachers on the Boundary: New Teacher Action Research as Professional Development

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How should we help new teachers navigate the difficult transition from student to teacher -- from being a teacher-who-watches-others to being a teacher-as-leader? McCann, Johannssen and Ricca (2005) reveal in their study of new teachers that "...a major difficulty new teachers face is the challenge to define for themselves their *teacher persona* (author emphasis)."

It is no surprise that teachers in their first few years grapple with the transition from student-hood to teacher-hood in a myriad of ways; one of which involves the dissonance between what they learned in teacher education programs and what they are learning in the context of actual teaching (McCann, Johannssen & Ricca, 2005; Alsup, 2006). The act of being new at something requires a transition period, an apprenticeship, of sorts.

However, in education, being new to teaching doesn't come with that all-important apprenticeship. Instead, teachers are thrown into teaching as if once they graduate from teacher education programs they are fully-fledged; ready to independently take on all aspects of the job. Common sense would say that this is just not true. In fact, there are many areas in which new teachers need support. In addition to supports that allow new teachers to develop the skill sets necessary for success in the daily life of the classroom, from schedules, parent contact, to behavior and management of students; new teachers also need

supports which allow them to build on their sense of their personal identity, to take on a new teacher identity which acts as a scaffold to all other learning outcomes for teachers.

To complicate matters further, new teachers are told all the time, either explicitly or implicitly, that what they learned in college is discordant with what they will need for their real teaching life, or that in order to survive the first few years of teaching they need to look for mentors in their schools, and emulate what they do. On many levels these messages tell new teachers that they don't possess the tools for teaching, and that they will see success only after years of experience. New teachers are also implicitly told that their prior knowledge doesn't count and that teaching is a purely experiential profession.

And this belief is supported in the academy. While new teachers seek sources of teacher development such as workshops, mentoring, and post-baccalaureate work, we present here an additional, critical piece to the development of new teacher knowledge: a new teacher program that comprehensively addresses their needs, through a professional learning community.

While new teachers seek sources of teacher development such as workshops, mentoring, and post-baccalaureate work, we present here an additional, critical piece to the development of new teacher knowledge: a new teacher program that comprehensively addresses their needs, through a professional learning community.

The National Writing Project launched an initiative to help support new teachers and, specifically, to slow the new teacher attrition rate especially within our urban schools. With the support of the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, the New Teacher Initiative (NTI) was created in 2002. In this model, writing project sites from across the country develop programs for new teachers. The Third Coast Writing Project in Kalamazoo was part of the first three-year cohort to have membership in the NTI. In our work over the last four years, we

have carefully designed a program that evolved into one in which new teachers conduct action research projects in their own classrooms.

Our new teachers, whose work is highlighted in this article, offer a hopeful view and a new approach to new teacher development. Their inquiry spans a broad range of questions from grammar, to active participation, to Shakespearean literature. Their questions represent their particular exigencies and offer answers and still other questions. These teachers represent those who understand that knowledge comes with experience guided by a process of inquiry, of asking one's own questions and seeking one's own answers; that good teaching not only includes reading about and learning about what others have done, and learning to emulate the masters, but that good teaching occurs after careful, meaningful reflection and practice. Such reflection is what we refer to as praxis, or "reflection in practice." Though reflection is a common requirement of teacher education programs, such reflection in practice is minimally supported due to increasing attention to course requirements in content area methods. We must not ignore the fact that teaching is also a personal process of professionalism, one which is best supported by time, skilled mentors, and professional resources.

Our NTI provided those supports. Our new teacher model offered mentoring by National Writing Project leaders, professional study of research literature, and time to engage in a personal-professional inquiry and discourse. The three new teachers in this article have all engaged in a two-year process of classroom research. During the first year, they read and discussed various texts on teaching writing. We coupled the readings with MacLean and Mohr's (1995) text *Teacher Researchers At Work*. This book helped us to outline our research methodology and streamline our data collection strategies. Our monthly meetings served to support new teachers in finding and narrowing research questions, discussing data with colleagues and mentors, and problematizing the multilayered, multifaceted approaches to classroom research.

During the second year of this cycle we focused on dissemination of the research. The

new teachers and mentors formed writing response groups, read and discussed the papers, and were given time to write. After celebrating the powerful effects that this work can have on new teachers who are serious about their professional development, we grew to understand its potential impact on the wider education community. We support the creation of new teacher education programs that engage new teachers in professional learning communities similar to the NTI. We feel, regardless of their teaching context, that new teachers, who experience action research in a carefully organized research community (MacLean and Mohr, 1999), will not only survive the first few years of teaching, but will come away with stronger teacher identities, teaching practice, and more powerful reflective and leadership skills.

To demonstrate these findings we begin this article with research conducted by Ms. Suzan Aiken, a high school teacher in a small rural Jr./Sr. High

School in Michigan. She is a third year teacher who has been with the NTI from the beginning of her career. Her work, "Increasing the Doing By Doing" speaks to the difficulties her speech students were having in writing speeches that were more than the typical stand and deliver, five-paragraph essays. She designed a protocol for teaching her speech students called The Delivery Method. Suzan's work reminds us that new teachers, when given the support they need, can and will become inventive leaders and contribute important new knowledge to the field.

Lindsay Steenbergen's piece entitled "Common Slips, Errors, and Blunders Among High School Literature Students" discusses the struggles she saw in her high school college-bound seniors as they committed the surface errors she expected only to see in younger students. After seeing consistent

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spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors in her college-bound students, Lindsay sought to find out what revision strategies her students actually employed and then found she needed to correct these issues by implementing one-on-one conferences with her students much earlier in the writing process.

Alicia Dubisky, another High School teacher in our group sought out a different, but related problem with revising. She looked at how her students from a small urban school grew to enjoy learning Shakespeare. Alicia looks at her history in learning how to effectively teach Shakespeare to her HS English Class; from taking on the lesson plans from a colleague, to finding her own tools after attending a workshop on teaching Shakespeare. She learned how to put the workshop information into a usable context for herself. Her research supports the inquiry needed to truly make change after attending the typical one-shot workshop. Through her research, Alicia learns that the teaching of Shakespeare to seniors who may or may not be college bound is more meaningful than she once thought.

It is largely through their investigations of their work on specific projects, and their systematic attempts to find the answers to their questions that these three teachers found success. And success for them is measured very differently. Readers will see their success in varying stages, from the little victories of a student who reveals on a survey that she actually likes writing, to the big victories won when students actually improve their writing and skills in public speaking. The three teachers chronicled in this article are examples of action research in true action.

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