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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

The Contradictions of First-Year Teaching: Why New Teachers Don't Want to Return to the
Classroom

Honors Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

Fall 2023

By

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Abstract

Teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. Beginning teachers are one of the largest groups of teachers to leave the profession every year. This paper examines the common internal and external conflicts that first-year teachers struggle with in order to create their teaching identity and how that affects their retention. Through the analysis of educational experts and their evidence-based research, the conflicts of new teachers have been collected and analyzed to determine the reasons why new teachers are not staying in the profession. Conclusions are drawn regarding how education teachers, district/school officials, and political officials can make changes so that first-year teachers will remain in the teaching profession.

Keywords: teaching, first-year teachers, retention, conflicts within teaching, identity

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank my amazing mentor for all of his help. I could not have written my thesis without his support and guidance. I have to thank him for all of the midday meetings and white-board brain sessions that led me to love talking about teaching and eventually writing this thesis. I would also like to thank my education professors for encouraging my love of teaching and learning about teaching.

I also want to thank my family and friends for supporting me as I wrote this thesis. Without their support, I could not have made it through the long nights of researching and writing.

Introduction

In recent years it has become apparently clear that teachers are leaving the classroom at alarming rates. School districts across the country have shown a plethora of job openings and the lack of teachers is starting to be felt across the nation. There is no doubt that teachers must deal with constant struggles in their day-to-day tasks, especially teachers who are new to the profession. Overseeing 30 children while being required to look after their education and well-being is no easy task whether it is from kindergarten or 12th grade. As teacher candidates are prepared to enter the classroom, they are often taught a specific, idealized way of teaching that includes multiple strategies for dealing with problems that may occur in the classroom. However, no matter how prepared the students are for their first year of teaching, there is still a constant struggle to survive their first year in the classroom. Thus, the internalized and externalized conflicts of beginning

teachers due to the contradictory ideologies disrupt first-year teachers' ability to create a teaching identity and thus lead to lower levels of teacher retention. In my research, I have identified the conflicts of beginning teachers through research and analysis of related research and offered solutions to help alleviate the struggle that first-year teachers face. This research and analysis is aimed at facilitating a dialogue with important stakeholders like legislators and district/school administrators about the ways to improve teacher retention through targeted support for new teachers.

Teacher Retention

Keeping teachers in the workforce has been increasingly challenging for schools and districts in recent years. There is also an ongoing teacher shortage in the U.S., and the problem of teachers leaving the profession is contributing to this problem. Year-to-year, about 16% of teachers leave the profession voluntarily for various reasons with only about 33% of those teachers leaving for retirement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). That means that two-thirds of teachers who leave the profession are looking to do something other than teach. Alarming, a significant proportion of teachers who are leaving are new teachers. Almost 30% leave the profession before their fifth year (Sutcher et al., 2016). This is a startling number given that there are approximately 308,000 new teachers each year. (National Center, 2023). This means that more than 90,000 teachers leave the profession before hitting their second year. Locally in Kentucky, the current attrition rate is about 20% (Buczek, 2023). This means that on average there is a completely new faculty of teachers at a given school every five years.

Attrition at this rate has lasting impacts on the teaching and learning that occurs in schools.

Teacher retention also affects everyone because it costs a significant amount of taxpayers' money and resources to replace a teacher and affects the level and quality of teaching that students receive. According to *A Coming Crisis in Teaching*, the cost of replacing teachers who have left costs the US an estimated \$8 billion a year. As well as, when a teacher leaves a school, it costs the district approximately \$18,000 to replace that teacher (Sutcher et al., 2016). These costs include paying for the induction of a new teacher into the district, any subs or emergency teachers used for replacement if the teacher leaves in the middle of a school year, and any support for students whose learning has been affected by the teacher leaving. By increasing help to new teachers this could shift the educational budget to help with mentoring and other strategies to help teachers who are already there within the district. Additionally, since there has been a significant increase in teachers leaving the profession there has also been an increase in emergency certification to compensate for the teachers who are leaving. This was especially common during the COVID-19 pandemic when states like Massachusetts “created an emergency license with substantial reductions to the minimum requirements needed to teach” (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023). Having an increase in emergency-certified teachers within the workforce decreases the quality of teachers that students have and only adds to the inexperience of new teachers. Furthermore, the inexperience of these emergency-certified teachers only increases the chance that they will leave the profession since they are “more than twice as likely to leave teaching as those who are fully prepared” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 7). Thus, emergency certification is not a long-term solution to the increasing

teacher turnover problem. Conjointly, there are not enough people who want to become teachers to supply the teacher demand. According to Sutchter et al. (2019), “between 2009 and 2014, teacher preparation enrollments declined by 35%, and 23% fewer preparation candidates completed their programs.” (p. 4). So not only are people not wanting to become teachers, but teacher candidates are switching out of their major or not completing the program to become full teachers. The influx of new teachers cannot sustain the exodus of teachers from the workforce. Thus, there are not enough teachers entering the profession so the teachers who choose to stay are required to pick up the slack and the students suffer due to an overworked teacher. Lastly, just as the supply of teachers is decreasing, the demand for teachers is steadily increasing. Teacher demand is determined by the increasing student population, the changing student-to-teacher ratios, and of course the teachers who leave the profession. Historically, the public school student population has grown increasingly with each year. From 1986 to 2007, the population grew from “39 million students to 49 million students” (Sutchter et al., 2019, p.10). Additionally, teacher-to-student ratios have continued to decrease from nearly 18-to-1 in 1986 to 15.3-to-1 in 2008 (Sutchter et al., 2019). Thus, more teachers are needed to meet the requirement of smaller student-to-teacher ratios. However, this trend was interrupted by the recession in 2008 and again during the COVID-19 pandemic. This interruption increased student ratios to a country average of approximately 16-to-1. Such a quick increase in students only adds to the stress of teachers and can contribute to them leaving the workforce. Student-to-teacher ratios are also dependent on the location and requirements of the school. Thus, ratios can vary greatly among states. For instance, “from a high of 24-to-1 in California to a low of 11-to-1 in Vermont” (Sutchter et al.,

2019, p.11). Thus, densely populated states such as California suffer more from the increase in teacher turnover. High teacher turnover rates are thus felt throughout the United States.

Symptoms of the Low Retention

There are many causes to why teachers choose not to return to the classroom. Just like with any profession, there are common difficulties that arise that cause employees to leave the profession. For instance, the most common problem is compensation. It is no secret that teachers do not get into the profession to make money. However, in recent years it has been found that “US teacher salaries were 1.7% lower in 2016-17 than in 1989-90” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 17). On top of this, the cost of living in the US has also spiked in recent years. Thus, living on a teacher’s salary makes it difficult for teachers to pay off their student loans and afford housing and living essentials. Additionally, because of the number of tasks that teachers are expected to do, teachers feel that their workload is not equivalent to the pay they receive. Teaching is different than a traditional 40-hour-a-week job because teachers are often hired for a certain number of days within their contract and are only paid for that many days. However, teachers are also expected to lead after-school programs or extracurriculars, spend hours after contract hours lesson planning without overtime, or cover other teacher’s classes while maintaining their own. According to Hargreaves (2000), “many teachers caught up in educational reform and change are experiencing role expansion and role diffuseness, with no sense of where their commitments and responsibilities should end” (p. 166). Teachers are being asked to do new responsibilities but are not being rewarded for those responsibilities. Hence, teachers look for other areas that will pay

them appropriately and comfortably for their work. Another common reason that causes teachers to leave is the working conditions within the school. Many teachers leave low-income schools because they are not provided with enough resources or learning opportunities to appropriately teach students. According to Sutchter et al. (2016), “relatively poor teaching conditions in many high-poverty schools are a major reason why teachers in these schools are more than twice as likely to leave due to dissatisfaction as those in low-poverty schools (p. 6). Additionally, teachers who teach in a rural setting were more likely to list pursuing another job as a reason for their departures than either urban or suburban teachers (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Thus, the type of resources and location of the school play a big role in teacher retention. Working conditions can also include the lack of support from the administration or other teachers within a school. Teachers who feel that they are unsupported or feel they have no input in decision-making feel that they are not respected within the profession and then seek to use their skills elsewhere. The last major concern for teachers who leave is student behavior. How students act in the classroom plays a big role in teachers leaving. In recent years student behavior has gotten worse. One study has found that “teachers [have] experienced an increase in student conduct problems since the onset of the pandemic” and these problems are “linked to teachers’ experiences of burnout, including greater emotional exhaustion and lack of job satisfaction” (Oxley et al., 2023, p. 13). Plus, with the lack of intervention from unsupportive administrators, teachers are fed up. Teachers who must deal with constant disrespectful and even violent students are starting to leave the profession because they feel unsafe. McLean et al. (2020) found that “classroom student adversity was positively related to depressive symptoms after accounting for material

resources, climate, and other covariates” (p. 10). Thus, teachers’ mental health is also at stake when they enter the classroom containing students with behavioral problems.

Classroom and behavioral management strategies are not working and so teachers are put to the breaking point with these students and end up leaving the profession. Despite the causes of low retention being dependent on the school, district, or state in which a teacher resides, the reasons for leaving are felt throughout the teaching community, and first-year teachers are hit the hardest because they are experiencing all of this for the first time.

Competing Centers of Gravity

For new teachers, the struggles that they face are not mutually exclusive events. Many new teachers face many struggles all at once which makes them question their ability to be good teachers and make appropriate decisions within their classroom. Peter Smagorinsky and his team coin the term competing centers of gravity to explain this phenomenon. Smagorinsky (2013) claims that when teacher candidates enter the field they are influenced “implicitly or explicitly toward particular approaches to teaching” (p. 148). This means that new teachers are continuously pulled into different directions whether it be by the curriculum, their mentor, their coursework, administration, or other colleagues on what they should be teaching and how they should be teaching it. They are told contradictory ideas about teaching so that when they go to actually teach, they are conflicted by the many different approaches that have been presented to them. Within the paper, Smagorinsky observes as a teacher candidate, Anita, struggles with the competing centers of gravity through her student teaching semester. By the end of Smagorinsky’s observations of Anita, “she moved from the open-ended and presumably engaging practices that she had embraced prior to student teaching to both behavioral and

pedagogical means of controlling student conduct and restricting their learning opportunities to those assignments and assessments that had clear and ambiguous answers” (Smagorinsky et al., 2013, p. 168). This was contrary to how Anita was taught to teach in her preservice education courses and how she also felt about teaching. Preservice teachers are taught to have a liberal open-ended approach to teaching and therefore are caught unaware by the contradictory restrictive learning practices within schools. Thus, conflicts between a teacher's values and beliefs and the expectations for them are created.

A Teacher's Identity

A teacher's identity is a teacher's ability to believe in oneself as a teacher and to be able to make the most knowledgeable decisions for students learning as an educational professional. A teacher's identity can be broken into multiple parts. A part of the teaching identity is a teacher's self-efficacy. Just as students need to believe they can solve a math problem; teachers need to believe in themselves and their ability to teach. This is especially hard for new teachers because they are new to the profession. They have not yet had the experience to decide what educational decisions to make.

Internalized Factors

Because identity is what makes a person who they are, conflict in developing an identity first comes from the self. First-year teachers' conflict within themselves is the first line of contradictions that they must struggle with. The internalized conflict represents the various thoughts and beliefs that a new teacher has learned from previous experience and must defend against new information or beliefs that challenge them.

Self-efficacy

One of the biggest challenges for new teachers to build their teaching identity is in how much they believe in themselves to teach students well and in their knowledge of the content in which they teach. When new teachers lack confidence in themselves it can affect how they feel about themselves and how they teach their students. First-year teachers typically already have low self-efficacy because they are experiencing something they have never done before and thus cannot feel completely confident in their actions and principles. Internal conflicts can lead new teachers to begin to question who they are as a teacher. For instance, when Andrea had to find a balance between teaching the way she was taught in her pre-service education program and the way that she had to prepare students to meet the needs of the curriculum, Andrea felt that she had failed her students. She would have preferred to teach her students specifically how she was taught in her preservice education program. However, Smagorinsky (2002) stated that "pathetic might describe Andrea's feelings about the compromises she made but not the lesson she taught" (p. 206). This means that Andrea's belief in what she taught affected her idea of herself as a teacher but did not affect her ability to teach. Andrea's thoughts about being a good teacher were battered but as others observed her, she was a good teacher to her students. She still created a lesson that connected to her students while adhering to the curriculum. Only her confidence in her teaching ability was shaken because she had to question the identity that she had already created for herself as a teacher. So, she questioned her ability to teach. This case study is just a common example of how new teachers feel about themselves as they enter the world of teaching. First-year teachers go into the profession with principles already established only to have them questioned and

ignored. Thus, their self-efficacy is lowered even further despite their already low self-efficacy from starting a new profession.

This can also be affected by how new teachers see themselves as teachers and constantly criticize themselves for how they are teaching. According to Dias-Lacy and Guirguis (2017), “first-year teachers [who] expressed sentiments of self-doubt and insecurity lead to the constant re-evaluation of current practices in the classroom” (p. 270). New teachers feel that they are not good enough in their practices and thus are constantly reevaluating themselves to make sure they are on the right path. Although it is a good idea for new teachers to self-evaluate themselves and their teaching practices many new teachers struggle with taking poor experiences to heart. For instance, in her exit interview, Andrea expressed feeling "controlling and authoritarian" towards her students and becoming bored with the curriculum. She felt she was not living up to the potential that she could by not giving her students interesting and engaging academic work. Thus, Andrea's self-efficacy in her ability to teach students well affected her identity as a teacher because she felt she was not the best teacher she could be. New teachers are often harder on themselves than they need to be because they have an idea of what teaching should be based on previous experience and become disheartened when their experiences in the classroom split from that idea.

Isolation

Because new teachers have to deal with their low self-efficacy, they often feel like they cannot reach out for help. They feel that they must power through their struggle in order to be a good teacher for their students. Obviously, this is a flawed way of thinking and yet it happens to so many first-year teachers. Buchanan et al. (2013) describe this

situation as emotional isolation. Within their study, they interviewed many first-year teachers and why they were choosing to leave or stay. One of the teachers they interviewed, who left the profession later on, stated that she “quit because of [her] fear of failure.” She neglected to reach out for help when she was struggling and instead, she decided to “put on an act for the students and come across as a tough teacher.” This teacher relied on her “fake it until you make it” attitude to teach and manage her classroom. However, this method of teaching is unsustainable. As this teacher and many first-year teachers like her come to realize, it is not possible to maintain a classroom with this type of thinking year after year. Thus, new teachers who suffer from emotional isolation create a negative view of teaching that eventually makes them leave the profession.

Emotional isolation is not the only form of isolation that new teachers can face. Because first-year teachers are often placed in a classroom in which they must manage 20 to 30 students by themselves, they experience physical isolation. Buchanan (2013) terms this as the feeling of being alone in the classroom, without the support of another teacher, or being in the company of colleagues who may be withholding their encouragement, or who may have none to give” (p. 122). First, new teachers are put into a profession that places them in a position of power right from the get-go. This means that all planning, teaching, grading, assisting, behavior managing, and scaffolding for students is expected to be done by the new teacher. Imagine a classroom where a student asks a question that the teacher is unable to answer. A new teacher may not have the experience or knowledge to properly deal with that situation, but because they are responsible for watching the children in their class, they cannot leave the classroom to ask another teacher for help.

Thus, for any problem that arises within the classroom, a new teacher must understand how to resolve that problem on the spot without any help. They are positioned to work alone. This adds to the idea that new teachers must learn and do things on their own and not ask for help from other teachers. Thus, when they do ask for help, they feel unprofessional and embarrassed because they feel like they should be able to handle their classroom on their own which lowers their self-efficacy even further. Additionally, by being isolated within their classroom, new teachers can feel physical isolation from their peers. Typically, first-year teachers are younger and have a bright new outlook on teaching. This can be contrary to teachers who have been in the school system for years. Senior teachers can ignore or behave negatively toward younger teachers and thus isolate them further. For instance, in one first-year teacher's interview, he claimed that what he liked least about teaching was "being surrounded by people who have taught so long and with such negativity" (Buchanan et al., 2013, p. 122). By consistently hearing a negative outlook on teaching this teacher could not help but influence his outlook on teaching. Thus, corrupting a new teacher's idea of what teaching is like after so many years, conflicts with their view of teaching that first-year teachers have established before teaching. Therefore, their identity as a teacher is altered by these experiences. Increasing the negative view of teaching only persuades new teachers to leave the profession that they thought they belonged in. Their perspective of what teaching is shifts to a negative view of the profession. These feelings of isolation can also be happening at the same time. Spady (1975) describes, "a pattern of the structurally isolated, resource-poor teacher left to survive without adequate assistance in an unfamiliar environment often made hostile by the conflicting demands of administrative superiors and large groups of

students" is often overwhelming to these new teachers (p. 3). The pressures and demands of the job are only magnified by the solitude of the classroom. Thus, they cannot create the identity they need to feel sufficient in the classroom because they feel like they have no one they can turn to for help.

A Teacher's Perspective

A first-year teacher's perception of teaching is shaped by their experiences as a student, the teachers they have had previously, and their pre-service education. This is what makes up the majority of a beginning teacher's identity when they enter the classroom for the first time. Thus, it stems from their identity as a person as well as a teacher. First of all, everyone has had at least one favorite teacher in their lifetime. First-year teachers are no exception. When new teachers often start teaching, they want to idealize and copy the teacher they loved when they were younger to recreate the education they experienced under that teacher for their students. Thus, they create an idealized picture of what teaching is supposed to be. They only have the experience from when they were students and the little experience they received in the classroom during their education program. New teachers "make decisions based on how their expectations mesh with their experiences in schools" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2011, p. 28). So, when the expectations don't align with what actually happens in the classroom, first-year teachers tend to leave the profession. Thus, the nostalgia of the pre-professional view of teaching feels combative with the actual experience of teaching when new teachers get into a classroom. According to Hargraves, "combating the pre-professional view of teaching means challenging the nostalgia" (p. 157). In other words, new teachers must battle the perception of teaching they have formed while they were a student with the professional

experience of teaching. The student view of teaching must be balanced with the professional view of teaching which affects how new teachers build their identities. He also claims that teachers who have this view of teaching see themselves as "enthusiastic people, who know their subject matter, know how to 'get it across', and can keep order in their classes"(p. 157). This is a flawed view of the classroom because it idealizes the classroom in a perfect world. Teaching is not just explaining content, creating tests and worksheets, and then giving out grades. Teaching is messy and a little bit chaotic at times. Britzman (1991) explains that "culture shock may occur with the realization of the overwhelming complexity of the teacher's work and the myriad ways this complexity is masked and misunderstood" (p. 27). This shock occurs when young teachers go from experiencing teaching as a viewer (student) to a doer (teacher). New teachers must learn quickly to pivot their thinking and the way they do things in the classroom.

Additionally, first-year teachers must learn for themselves that they are not the teacher that they have idolized from their previous experiences. In an additional study that examined the experiences of first-year English teachers through a phenomenological approach and in-depth interviewing, "new teachers necessarily have to envision themselves as something in their first years in the classroom and their teachers serve as significant touchstones" because they have such little working experience within a classroom (Cook, 2009, p. 280). Often first-year teachers structure their teaching identity to imitate that of their favorite teacher. However, when new teachers try to mold their teaching practices to fit the practices of someone they idolize, they can fall short of their expectations. New teachers may not have the experiences, personality, or beliefs that their favorite teacher has dealt with to create their own teaching identity. This leads back to the

internal conflict of self-efficacy because first-year teachers' confidence is shattered when they cannot perfectly copy the teaching style of their favorite teachers. Thus, new teachers feel they are lacking in their ability when they cannot or do not live up to their idea of what they think a good teacher should look like.

Likewise, many secondary teachers claim that they get into teaching because they love the content and have a passion for teaching others what they love. Thus, when the curriculum passes over or does not go into the level of detail they would prefer to teach with, then teachers can become disheartened. First-year teachers' self-efficacy is already lowered so when administration or policy axes the content that they know and love it can cause turmoil within the teacher. The whole reason they get into teaching is shaken. Therefore, the identity they created before becoming a teacher has been challenged. For example, Andrea, a first-year teacher, explained that “[the students] are bored and it’s obvious and I just feel the same way” when she discusses how she acquiesced with the curriculum (Smagorinsky et al., 2002, p. 209). Andrea felt that the curriculum hindered her ability to create an engaging and focused class environment. Thus, Andrea was unable to share her passion for language arts with her students and encourage them to also have a passion for language arts. Her perspective of what she thought teaching would be made her confidence in her ability to teach suffer when she was finally teaching. Plus, this was only her first year of teaching and she was already bored and angry with the way she was teaching her students. These feelings of anger and boredom are common with first-year teachers by the end of their first year. The burnout from teaching is already occurring in the first year for some teachers!

How a new teacher perceives teaching can also have a great effect on their ability to create a teaching identity. According to a first-year teacher from Cook (2009), "a teacher is someone who can play multiple roles, much like an actor who is considered versatile and amorphous, rather than someone who is typecast in a fixed role" (p. 283). This idea of switching roles can take a toll on first-year teachers because there are so many roles that teachers must fill, sometimes all at once. For a teacher who expects to have one outlook on how to act in front of or treat students this can be a particular challenge. For instance, a teacher must learn "to change in those three minutes between periods sometimes from being a hard guy to a nice guy, simply because I know what works with what particular group" (Cook, 2009, p. 282). First-year teachers often struggle with how to act in front of students so they must learn as they go on how to be a professional for the first time.

The Myth of the Good Teacher

Not only do new teachers have romanticized ideas of teaching they must juggle but they also must learn to battle with the idea of being a "good teacher" in the view of society. The way that first-year teachers must toil to find their balance between their teaching identity and society plays a big role in how these new teachers will perceive themselves. Society will always have certain expectations that a teacher must live up to in order to be considered a "good" teacher. Often the characteristics of a "good" teacher are contrary to one another and therefore can be a struggle for a new teacher to try to obtain. For example, a good teacher is supposed to be a professional in the classroom, but they should also be a friend to students by involving themselves in students' lives. Or perhaps, teachers should be teaching with student-centered activities so that students can learn at

their own pace, but also keep up pace with the curriculum so that students can be tested on what they know compared to other students. Elbow (1983) claims that teachers' "commitment to knowledge and society asks [them] to be guardians or bouncers: [they] must discriminatively evaluate, test, grade, certify" (p.328). And yet this idea of being a guardian or bouncer conflicts with the idea of how students should see their teachers. Students should feel safe with their teachers and feel like they can trust them to teach them rather than passing and failing them. Thus there is a "compromise[d] position toward students only if teachers are willing to settle for being sort of committed to students and sort of committed to subject matter and society" (p. 329). Elbow (1983) also claims that this "middleing" of teaching creates teachers "who lack investment in teaching or who have lost" and in reality, it is the teachers who are invested in either realm that succeed (p. 329). These contradictions in who a teacher should only increase new teachers' confusion in creating their identity because they attempt the middle of the spectrum and get lost in society's conflicting expectations. Britzman (1991) argues that "stereotypes [of teachers] engender a static and hence repressed notion of identity" (p. 29). Simply put, not every teacher is the same. They each have their own experiences, methods of teaching, and identities that shape how they teach and who they are. Thus, new teachers cannot fit into a narrow box of qualities that society tries to place them in. However, these first-year teachers have not experienced enough of the teaching profession to learn that the possibility of being a "good" teacher is not achievable. Instead, they stress over the idea of being liked and becoming their students' favorite teacher. New teachers must struggle with the perceptions that others have of them. Students, parents, faculty, and administrators all have different expectations for new

teachers to try to juggle. Each of these parties has different aspects they look for in a good teacher. For instance, administrators may look for a teacher who has a professional demeanor whereas students may look for someone who talks to them on their level. Thus, Cook (2009) states that “not only are the performative aspects of a teacher’s self under scrutiny this negotiation (voice, presence, leadership, control) but also core elements of their identity (gender, sexual orientation, size, ethnicity, accent)” (p. 284). Teachers are being watched and evaluated for every choice they make in the classroom but also the choices they make outside of the classroom. New teachers often feel judged for every little choice they make and can feel personally attacked when others critique those aspects of their personality. For instance, in Freedman and Appleman (2008), the beginning teacher, Sally, “felt that her teacher identity was inextricably intertwined with her identity as a person with political and religious beliefs” (p. 120). Her identity as a person isolated herself as a teacher because she had no “political allies she considered trustworthy” within her school (p. 120). Sally felt that who she was as a person conflicted with herself as a teacher. Thus, the teaching identity then becomes entwined with the identity of the teacher as a person as the choices that a new teacher connects to the experiences of their past.

Battling Authority & Respect

Since new teachers make so many connections to their past when they are teaching, it can be difficult for them to step into the role of the authority figure in the classroom. As previously mentioned, many new teachers are younger when they get their first classroom so it can be a truly jarring situation when they are placed in a classroom alone as the only adult. Cook (2009) claims that new teachers may be “struggling with

[their] developing teaching identity but also with [their] developing adult identity" (p. 283). Thus, they may feel that they are too close to students in age to be an authority figure yet too young to consult with experienced professionals. First-year teachers also have to battle the need to be a friend to their students. In tune with the idea of the "good teacher," new teachers usually will enter the classroom wanting to be their students' favorite teacher or at least to be liked by their students. This causes contradictions for new teachers because, although they want to be their students' friends, they must also remain professional and the authority figures in the classroom. Thus, the first year of teaching is like "walking the tightrope of friend, teacher, friend" (Cook, 2009, p. 285). If teachers become too close to students, then they lose the respect and power of an authority figure; when they become only an authority figure, then they lose the opportunity to connect with students on their level. First-year teachers must consistently battle their need to be liked and their professional attitude in the classroom. Plus, since they are the only authority figure in the room there is no one to guide or correct them while teaching. Thus, their ability to create an identity shift between picking to be the friend or picking to be the authority figure.

As all of these internal factors swirl and collide within the first-year teacher, their conflict with teaching only grows. Each of these factors is not mutually exclusive and oftentimes occurs all at the same time within a teacher. The trouble with self-efficacy, isolation, how they and others perceive, and battling the role of authority that new teachers face is that it increases their struggle with creating an identity as a teacher. Each one of these factors happens on the inside of a teacher's mind and only helps to magnify the external factors that cause havoc on a first-year teacher's ability to create an identity.

Externalized Factors

Just like with the internal factors that occur within a first-year teacher, there are external factors that occur that coincide with what is happening in their minds. As new teachers enter the workforce they are met with a number of challenges that they must work through in order to build their identity. How they react to and manage these factors determines whether they will stay in the profession.

Mentors and Induction Programs

When new teachers face their first classroom, they must face multiple external challenges that threaten their ability to create their identity as a teacher. The first of these challenges that I will focus on is the inconsistent mentor that first-year teachers are often assigned to. Mentors are usually veteran teachers who are typically in the subject or grade that the new teacher is teaching. This mentor is there to observe, offer guidance, and critique the new teacher's abilities in the classroom. However, this is not always the case. Many school districts also offer some sort of induction period into a teacher's first years of teaching. However, this can also look very different between districts. For instance, Mitchell et al. (2021) conducted research on an induction program in California that was completed within two years. The teachers were assigned coaches who were veteran in-service teachers and would mentor and conduct classroom observations. However, even within the program itself the "time allowed to focus on coaching differed by district" for the coaches (p. 415). Some mentors only met with their mentees when it was required of them, so not only were new teachers getting a lack of support from their mentor but it increased their feelings of isolation within the classroom. Thus, new teachers were getting different levels of mentoring within their induction program. Mitchell et al. (2021)

go on to say, "Because the quality of induction programs varies, so do teachers' experiences with them and the resulting impact on their teaching and identity formation" (p. 412). Thus, the varying degrees of mentoring can either be beneficial or harmful to the new teacher's identity depending on the type of mentor that they receive.

In Peter Smagorinsky et al. (2013), they observe Anita's relationship with her mentor teacher and how it affects her approach to teaching. Anita often had a conflicting ideology from that of her mentor. She wanted a more student-centered approach to teaching, but her mentor encouraged a more curriculum-based approach. This difference in centers of gravity created conflict between the two, specifically on the amount of time Anita could spend on a lesson. Her mentor influenced a squeeze of the schedule which "served to limit Anita's choices as a teacher" (Smagorinsky et al., 2013, p.170). They also conflicted on the discipline of students within the classroom and managing the classroom. Anita's mentor preferred to improve students' character in the classroom leading him to "instill a sense of social responsibility that mitigated students' self-centered orientations [which] appeared to be at odds with the individual uniqueness to which Anita had been exposed through her university program" (Smagorinsky et al., 2013, p. 171). Although this research focuses on the experiences of one teacher candidate, Smagorinsky et al. (2013) are certain that the information that is discovered within this study "represents a type of experience that teacher educators should find recognizable in teacher candidates and early career teachers" (p. 154). Thus, the information is not generalizable to all first-year teachers but offers a perspective into what first-year teachers could experience with their mentors.

In an additional study, Smagorinsky et al. (2002) observed a teacher through her student teaching and first year of teaching. The teacher, Andrea, had a state-certified mentor who met with her regularly throughout her first year of teaching on a formal and informal basis. Andrea developed a close relationship with her mentor but in her exit interview explained that her mentor tried to support her by telling her “to ‘just hold on,’ but it was a wisdom [she] could not yet understand” (p. 211). Although Andrea had a better relationship with her mentor than Anita, she struggled with the curriculum she was given by her district. Her mentor had gone through the district’s routine of picking a new routine every few years and knew that she just had to hold on until the new curriculum came to replace the one they had now. As a first-year teacher, Andrea did not have the experience to understand her mentor’s advice. Thus, she could not heed everything her mentor told her. Andrea had to experience teaching herself to understand this struggle. Mentors can be a helpful tool for new teachers, but they cannot prepare them for every struggle a new teacher may have. New teachers must understand that a part of creating their teacher identity is to simply teach. However, this also does not mean they should not ask for help.

According to *What New Teachers Need to Learn* by Sharon Feiman-Namser, "Mentors often offer help only if the new teacher asks [but] they don't think of themselves as their teachers" (p. 28). A mentor is often a colleague who offers advice, but they sometimes do not realize that they also become a teacher of teachers or are trained to properly become so. New teachers are new to the experience of teaching as a whole. Most come straight from student teaching and must reorient themselves to become facilitators of learning, classroom reporters, behavior managers, data collectors, and role

models. Many new teachers come into the profession with the mindset that “it’s their job to go it alone, that teaching is more of a lone enterprise, and that your talent if you have, should carry you forth” (Dweck, 2015, p. 120). Education programs can only prepare teacher candidates so much for these roles, so it is up to mentors to fill in the gaps. They must know when to step in and realize when a new teacher needs help. However, this contradicts the fact that mentors can also not prepare first-year teachers for every obstacle that they must face in their first year of teaching. But the fact remains that mentors must learn how to become teachers of teachers so that they may prepare first-year teachers to become self-sufficient and encourage them in their selves and the building of their teaching identities.

Workplace Atmosphere

Just as Mentors are an important part of constructing teachers' identities, the professional atmosphere of the school can also cause conflict for a new teacher's identity. As discussed earlier, beginning teachers often receive a mentor or complete an induction program to introduce them to their new district and the world of teaching in general. However, for first-year teachers, this is often the first time they will be working and communicating with other teachers and school faculty. So, not only do mentors have a great effect on beginning teachers developing identity, but also the new teacher's coworkers. According to a study in the Australian Journal of Teacher Education, "ECT's [early career teachers] find it discouraging to be in the company of colleagues who are unsupportive or inconsistent in their attitudes and behavior" (Buchanan et al., 2013, p. 118). New teachers gain support and guidance from their fellow teachers and professional learning communities (PLCs). Therefore, if these new teachers have disagreements with

their coworkers about the way the material is being taught or how to manage their classroom this creates conflict in the workplace. New teachers must battle between what they think is right in their classroom and what others claim is the right way of teaching. Additionally, new teachers also have to navigate the demands of administration. For instance, in Stewart et al. (2019), first-year teacher Leah was shut down by her administration for attempting to implement additional instructional time for her students who were failing her class. The parents of the students went over her head to the administration and then the administration told her to stop without any discussion of the matter. This experience left Leah feeling “marginalized when her voice was excluded from discussions surrounding her attempts to support students and meet administrative expectations for student performance” (Stewart et al., 2019, p. 293). As a first-year teacher, Leah did not have the experience to know how to create conversations around her solution and involve the parents and administration involved. She attempted to navigate the administration’s expectations but was shot down in her methods of achieving them. Thus, she was left frustrated because she was trying to be a good teacher to her students but felt that the decisions she had made as a professional were no good. Experienced teachers also may have a new teacher's best interest in mind but “good classroom teachers may not know how to make their thinking visible to explain the principles behind their practice or break down complex teaching moves into components understandable to a beginner” (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, pp. 28-29). Mentoring is also a way of teaching, and if mentors are not given the proper professional development to teach teachers, it can have a negative effect. This may confuse new teachers even more than they were previously or create negative thoughts that their teaching is not as

adequate as those of a veteran teacher and thus lead to low self-efficacy and a reluctance to ask questions.

Smagorinsky et al. (2013) also bring up a good point about classroom politics in their study when they state that, "Anita's conception of teaching was affected by the political dilemma of being a student teacher violating the turf of a senior faculty member who demonstrated disregard for Anita and her students through her extended stays at the beginning of class" (p. 176). Anita felt she could not speak up to this senior faculty member, so she adjusted her teaching style to accommodate that faculty member. It can be difficult for new teachers to speak up against more experienced teachers because they feel that they are deemed as less than since they do not have the experience or knowledge of those teachers. Consequently, this can lead to new teachers not asking for help or feeling unwelcome in their new community. Thus, they are unable to make a connection to the teaching community and their identity as a teacher because they feel inadequate in their decision-making, teaching style, and overall worth as a teacher.

Education Program Preparation vs. Real-World Experience

An additional external factor that influences teachers' ability to create a teaching identity is the conflict between what new teachers learn in their teaching education programs and the real-world experience they get from teaching. The disconnect between what student teachers are taught in pre-service education classes has been a continuous occurrence since the 1960s. According to Hargreaves (2000), "the precepts of teacher preservice education corresponded exceptionally poorly with the realities of classroom practice as most new teachers experienced them, and tragic tales of how new teachers lost their ideals and complied with existing definitions of classroom reality to ensure their

very survival, persisted for many years and continue[s] today" (p. 159). In other words, teachers have to sacrifice the ideals they learned in their previous classrooms to survive in their real-world classrooms. This concept connects back to how Anita had many complications with her mentor because of the way she was taught in the teacher preparation program. She was taught to have a student-centered approach to her teaching, but her mentor disregarded this perspective. Thus, the influence of teacher preparation programs too often conflicts with the way a classroom is run in the real world leading to conflict with a new teacher's semi-constructed identity of what teaching should look like.

New teachers also must face the decision of the purpose of their teaching. Are they teaching so that students can have life skills, learn the curriculum of their subject, or a little bit of both? Teachers must deal with the "pressures and demands in some countries for students to learn new skills such as teamwork, higher order thinking and effective use of new information technologies, call for new styles of teaching to produce these skills-meaning that more and more teachers are now having to teach in ways they were not themselves taught" (Hargreaves, 2000, 151). This hidden curriculum is often not taught to new teachers in their professional education, yet they are supposed to know how to teach these skills to students. For instance, in Smagorinsky et al. (2013), the mentor's need to "develop responsible citizens" conflicted with how Anita wanted to teach (p. 171). She was taught to teach with a student-centered approach in her education program, but her mentor focused on teaching students skills like responsibility, unselfishness, and good study habits within the curriculum. Anita was focused on letting each student truly learn the content while her mentor focused on the themes and activities within the classroom as knowledge and principles for use in the real world. Thus, there was a conflict within

Anita on how she was supposed to be teaching. She was taught to teach with a student-centered learning perspective, but her mentor instructed her to teach students a protestant work ethic. Her preparation program had never instructed her on how to teach these values and even conflicted with the values she was taught to teach. Anita, like so many other student teachers was taught in her college courses to be student-focused and liberally minded. However, this is not always possible in a real-world classroom.

Additionally, in a study conducted on the relationship between Swedish student teachers and mentors, Manderstedt et al. (2022) found that “[student teachers] want [their] mentors to have similar theoretical knowledge to that encountered during their courses prior to teaching practice, but theories are not always related that closely to practice, thus reveal a discrepancy when comparing the groups” (p. 6). The mentors found that in their discussions with their mentees, it was not beneficial to the process to go into deep discussion of theoretical practices. They instead relied heavily on giving advice based on their own experience. The student teachers, however, wanted to focus on how they could incorporate theory into their teaching practices and thus were left unheeded by their mentors in this area. This is yet another area in which mentors are not trained to work with young teachers because they do not remember or have no use for these theories within their classroom. Therefore, the heavy reliance on teaching theory that is taught in preservice programs is neglected or used in moderation in the real-world experience of teaching. Young teachers who are taught this reliance on theory have their identity shaken because they were taught to utilize these theories within every aspect of their teaching. They also do not have the experience that their mentors have so they must

heavily rely on theory because they have nothing else to rely on. Thus, it is a continuous tug-o-war for what takes priority in new teachers' identities.

Contrary Curriculum

Another factor to conflict with new teachers' ability to create a teaching identity is the curriculum. As previously stated, new teachers are often taught to have a student-centered point of view when it comes to teaching. However, when it comes to the curriculum and state testing, new teachers often find conflicts between balancing the two. For example, in Smagorinsky et. al (2013), the new teacher Andrea felt "Her instruction needed to conform to the department pacing chart, that is, the schedule for what should be taught at each point of the semester"(p. 170). Many new teachers must learn to find the balance between following the curriculum and creating meaningful learning experiences that students need to learn. This can be a troubling and anxiety-ridden experience for new teachers who want to follow the rules of the curriculum but also have been instilled by their preservice program to create meaningful experiences for students. Bausell and Blazier (2018) found that "as teachers became more proficient in testing lingo, more a part of the whole testing apparatus, they were also less likely to talk about themselves as autonomous practitioners and about individual learners in ways that set them apart from the whole" (p. 326). Thus, as new teachers immerse themselves into the world of actual teaching they become persuaded to use the teaching-to-the-test method that is so ingrained into the education system. It is a constant battle for them to remind themselves not to fall into the trap of simply regurgitating standards to their students. Hargreaves (2000) states that "overworked and underpaid teachers have had to master and comply with centrally imposed learning standards, detailed curriculum targets, and

pervasive testing regimes- and have seen their work and their worth become broken down and categorized into checklists of performance standards or competencies.” Teaching then becomes a chore for new teachers to weave their way through. They have pressure to get students testing ready and thus neglect the subject or ability to teach students as they came into the profession to do. Then, when the curriculum has "been poorly implemented and [has] resulted in periods of destabilization, increased workload, intensification of work, and a crisis of professional identity for many teachers who perceive a loss of public confidence in their ability to provide a good service" teachers become disheartened in the career that they used to have a passion for (Day, 2012, p.8). Teaching then becomes a checklist of chores that teachers have to check off each day regardless of whether students actually learned the material or not. Additionally, new teachers that teacher who are placed in poorly funded schools do not get the help or resources to accommodate the needs of their students to the curriculum. For instance, Costigan (2005) examines teaching fellows as they teach in adjacent neighborhoods of New York City. He found that after reading the journals of these fellows that “ambivalence and uncertainty [are] exacerbated by various mandated standardized test preparation curricula that make it much more difficult to personalize teaching and learning for students who come from different backgrounds and with different values than these new teachers" (p.138). Thus, not only was it difficult for teachers to teach students the curriculum but the curriculum also made it difficult for teachers to connect to students that they could barely relate to in the first place. First-year teachers also feel that they lose the respect of those who look toward them to become the “good teacher.” They no longer live up to the standards that they had imposed on themselves from the beginning of their teaching career. Thus,

feelings of boredom, burnout, and failure start creeping in even at the earliest stages of the teaching career.

Conclusion

How can we solve first-year teachers' problems so that they can create a teaching identity that will enable them to stay in the profession? We must stop viewing first-year teachers as fully-formed professionals (Stewart & Janksy, 2022). This is their first year on the job, so expectations for first-year teachers should not be as strict as those of a senior teacher. New teachers are learning the profession as they experience it, so allowing them to make mistakes and determine who they are as a teacher is the first step to allowing them to overcome the contradictory realities of teaching. However, since first-year teachers have all of these contradictory ideologies that affect their ability to create a teaching identity, there are a few solutions that can be developed to help solve or prevent these recurring problems.

Firstly, there needs to be a longer apprenticeship time for teachers as they transition from a collegial setting to a real-world setting. If we look at other professional careers that have similar needs for an apprenticeship system, they are vastly different from those of the teaching industry. For instance, a doctor will go through 4 years of college, 4 years of medical school, and then several years in a residency program. In contrast, teachers also typically go through a 4-year degree program and a licensure exam but then they are immediately sent out into the world to teach at the end of their student teaching. Most teachers only get 1-2 semesters of student teaching in which they are in the classroom and interacting with students and the school system. Specifically, in Kentucky, education students receive 200 hours of clinical experience in the classroom

and then a full semester of student teaching. This may seem like a lot of experience but in fact, it only gives students a small glimpse of what teaching is really like. The time spent in clinical is spent on observing other teachers and students in inconsistent spurts of time and then towards the end creating a series of mutually exclusive lesson plans to practice in front of a room full of students you have barely gotten to know. As previously mentioned, induction programs vary significantly between states and even districts, so the induction experiences that first-year teachers are not consistent. Teachers are responsible for educating the next generations of citizens and yet we do not expect them to be as well-educated and trained as possible to teach. We simply rush them through the process so that we can have a body in the classroom. This is specifically worrying when states are passing more emergency certifications which bypass an already struggling system that is already in place. Some education programs have also begun suggesting to students to become teachers of record within their student teaching semester. This is a specific type of emergency certification that allows the student teacher to act as the sole teacher within the classroom. It is almost as if we are setting up teachers to fail within the system. Thus, we need to introduce a mandated apprenticeship program like the residency programs that doctoral candidates complete. By giving new teachers an extended time in the classroom with much-needed support from a mentor, first-year teachers will be more prepared to teach and build their own teaching identity based on their own experiences in the classroom. Having multiple years of teaching under a residency-like program also gives first-year teachers the ability to create their resources, find the strategies that work for them, and slowly increase their responsibilities as a teacher. This will negate some of the stressful situations within the first year of teaching that so many teachers struggle with. It

will also help them keep from feeling like they are drowning when they are trying to lesson plan, differentiate instruction, establish contact with parents, and manage a classroom all at the same time. Thus, once new teachers have reached the end of their residency-like program they will have more confidence in their teaching abilities and have established their identity as a teacher in a more supportive environment.

In addition to longer apprenticeships for new teachers, there should also be a gradual release of responsibility for new teachers to take on. Fontaine et al. (2011) claim that there is a “tendency [for] schools to assign beginning teachers the least favorable and hard-to-fill teaching assignments” (p. 395). Schools often dump all the responsibilities of an average teacher onto a new teacher despite them having to learn everything. Then, they are left wondering why new teachers leave within their first five years. When first-year teachers enter the classroom, they are like newborn babies. They must learn everything from scratch and then build themselves up to be fully formed teachers. There are many ways that schools can apply this method. For instance, having a co-teacher in the room is an excellent way of providing the gradual release method. Just as teachers do with students with the gradual release of responsibility model of instruction, a more experienced teacher could gradually release the responsibilities to the first-year teacher as they gain confidence in their abilities (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Not only would this increase teachers’ self-efficacy but it would also ensure that they do not feel physical or professional isolation within their first year of teaching. Additionally, schools could give new teachers more responsibilities with each year that they teach. For instance, within their first year, new teachers would focus on creating lessons and managing their classrooms. Then in their second year, they could be given additional responsibilities like

after-school duties or leading PLC meetings since they do not have to focus as much on what and how they are going to teach. Then with each additional year, new teachers would gradually become full-fledged teachers with all the responsibilities expected of a teacher.

A further solution to the contradictory realities of first-year teaching is to provide better educational opportunities for mentors of first-year teachers. As was inferred earlier, mentors are also a big source of contention within a new teacher's experience. Just like with induction programs, there are no overall training or requirements for teacher mentors. The qualifications and amount of time spent with a mentor are often up to the school or the district. However, Mitchell et al. (2017) found that the "coach [is] intertwined with and linked to the success of the mentee" (p. 100). Mentors are an important factor when it comes to the induction of first-year teachers. They are experts in their field of teaching but when it comes to teaching new teachers, they are often unsupported. New mentors may also feel the same effects of first-time mentoring as first-year teachers are teaching for the first time. Thus, providing mandatory educational opportunities for mentors would increase their ability to connect and properly instruct new teachers with increased self-efficacy. These opportunities will also allow mentors to address feeling "personally responsible for their candidates' programmatic success" or worries about "the amount of time and effort it takes to coach" new teachers since many mentors are also full-time teachers (Mitchel et al., 2021, p. 424). Therefore, supporting mentors means supporting new teachers. With better mentors, first-year teachers will be encouraged to stay within the teaching profession because they are getting the support they need and will feel a little bit less isolated.

The reality is that we need good teachers to stay in our schools. New teachers are the solution to the emerging crisis in education which is due to the high rate of teacher turnover. By encouraging and helping first-year teachers through these conflicting ideologies we will help them conquer the teaching profession and allow them to develop a cohesive and intelligent teaching identity. Therefore, first-year teachers will be encouraged to stay within the profession.

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