The Role and Practice of the Principal in Developing Novice First-Year Teachers

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Abstract: Novice teachers are added to campuses every year. The principals’ challenge is to work with novice teachers to promote high levels of classroom practice, ensure the academic success of all students, and encourage new ways of being in schools for novice and veteran teachers alike. Principals can address these demands by understanding the issues novice teachers encounter as they assimilate into the work of the school, understanding the expectations of novice teachers for principals and colleagues, and developing strategies to meet the needs of novice teachers. The author discusses two proven mentoring strategies—establishing regular developmental meetings and providing meaningful, instructive feedback. The principal is the critical factor in novice teacher success.

Keywords: mentoring strategies, novice teachers, principal roles

Consider the following scenario: You and your loved ones are excited about an upcoming vacation. You are flying to your favorite island resort in the Caribbean. The departure day has arrived, and you and your loved ones board a commercial 747 jet in nervous excitement. As the plane taxis down the runway for takeoff, the captain comes on the intercom. He announces that he is excited to captain this flight but he is nervous because this is his first flying experience after earning his pilot’s license. A palpable collective silence fills the cabin. Did you hear him right? Surely he meant his commercial jet rating license? No, you heard correctly—his basic pilot’s license. The novice pilot’s voice confidently assures you that this plane is not that different from the small plane in which he learned to fly. The principles of flying are all the same. Flying is flying, after all. You stare wide-eyed at the overhead speaker in disbelief and with trepidation as you feel the plane rev its engines for takeoff.

Of course this moment is fiction, but what if it was not? What if it was not only possible but also true? How would you feel strapped into the seat of that airplane taxiing for takeoff? Every year, school districts and administrators welcome novice first-year teachers into their schools, hand them a key to a classroom and a textbook or two, and wish them luck as they prepare to start school in the next few days. These new teachers’ feelings probably resemble your feelings as you contemplated the fictional flight scenario—combinations of fear, panic, and anxiety.

It makes little sense to expect a novice to perform as well as a person of experience in any setting, whether flying a jet filled with travelers or guiding a classroom filled with students. But the reality facing district officials and campus administrators is that we are consistently presented with novice first-year teachers at the beginning of each new school year. Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000) best summed up this reality, noting:

In teaching, new entrants, fresh out of professional training, assume the exact same responsibilities as 20 year veterans. In doing so, they are also undertaking a remarkably complex endeavor, involving as it does the simultaneous management of multiple variables, including student behavior, intellectual engagement, student interaction, materials, physical space, and time. While many novice teachers have had terrific intellectual preparation and an outstanding student teaching experience, their limited experience generally yields an equally
limited repertoire of classroom strategies—far more limited than the variety of teaching challenges a new teacher invariably encounters. (3)

The challenge for administrators, particularly principals, therefore, is to address this reality—novice first-year teachers with little or no practical experiences and limited repertoires—and induct novice teachers in ways that (a) promote high levels of classroom practice, (b) ensure the academic success of all students, and (c) encourage new ways of being in schools for novice and veteran teachers alike (Moir and Gless 2001).

So, how does one go about addressing the demands of this challenge? First, principals need to understand the issues novice first-year teachers encounter as they assimilate into the work of the school. Second, principals need to understand the expectations novice first-year teachers have of principals and colleagues. Third, principals need to develop strategies to meet the needs of novice first-year teachers and, in doing so, ensure their success.

**Understanding the Issues and Concerns of Novice Teachers**

One aspect of taking on a new work experience is encountering a world of unknowns. Novice first-year teachers have few relevant points of reference for enacting their role as teachers and being responsible for the students in their charge. It is natural, then, that novice teachers are often unable to adequately judge their performance and make realistic assessments of their progress when dealing with students, parents, colleagues, supervisors, curriculum, scope and sequences, and benchmarks. McCann and Johannessen (2004) identified five major areas of concern for novice teachers as they progress through their first year. These areas of concern include relationships (with students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors), workload and time management, knowledge of the curriculum, evaluation and grading, and issues of autonomy and control. Questions that need to be answered for the novice teacher are embedded in each of these areas of concern. For example, questions regarding the novice teacher’s relationship to his or her students might be: Will students like me? Will they accept that I am a bona fide teacher? And questions regarding the novice teacher’s relationship with colleagues might be: Will my colleagues believe that I know what I am doing? Will they respect my efforts? Similarly, novice teachers’ concerns regarding their knowledge of their subject or curriculum cause them to ask: What is really important to teach? Finally, considering concerns of autonomy and control they might ask: Can I teach the way I was prepared to teach and the way I believe is the best way to teach? Answers to these and other questions come from assistance and feedback from principals and peers—from those with experience and expertise who have familiarity with these issues and with dealing with the pressures of responsibility and accountability. Timely, meaningful answers pave the way for novice teacher growth and a sense of inclusion in the world and work of the teacher. Questions left unanswered can create uncertainty, anxiety, and frustration for novice teachers and can lead to an early exit from the teaching profession. Considering that 30 percent of beginning teachers do not teach beyond two years and almost 40 percent leave the profession in their first five years of teaching (Perez, Swain, and Hartsough 1997), principals must understand these issues and be cognizant of the questions and concerns novice teachers voice. Furthermore, principals bear the burden of facilitating the necessary connections to peers and colleagues who can positively influence and support novice teachers. Failing to do so leaves novice teachers in a vulnerable position and potentially at the mercy of less than positive role models. As the recognized leader of the school, the principal is the key person to whom novice teachers turn for support and encouragement.

**Understanding the Expectations for Principals and Colleagues of Novice Teachers**

In any new work experience there are expectations for success. It is reasonable that principals have expectations of new first-year teachers. There is usually an established culture and track record of stability and success in each school, and it is to this existing environment that principals expect new teachers to contribute in a reasonable period of time. In a study of the role of principals in the induction of beginning teachers, Brock and Grady (1998) found that principals expected first-year teachers to demonstrate proficiency in or possess (a) a professional attitude, (b) adequate knowledge of subject areas, (c) good classroom management skills, (d) excellent communication skills, (e) a belief that every child can learn, and (f) a desire to help students succeed. The continued success of a school is dependent on the ability of novice first-year teachers to meet these expectations and in doing so, to make a positive contribution to the continued viability of the school. Failure to do so could be like throwing a wrench into the smooth workings of the school. Like the adage declares, a school is only as strong as its weakest link.

It is equally reasonable that novice first-year teachers have expectations of principals and colleagues. Novice teachers naturally look to the principal for leadership and direction for two reasons. First, the principal is the primary contact person for the new teacher through the hiring process and has provided the teaching opportunity. Second, the principal is the authority figure for the school and must be pleased with the work of the novice teacher. Having noted this, beginning teachers also have expectations of principals, including: (a) commu-
communication of the prevailing criteria for good teaching; (b) the importance of communication with the principal and the need for scheduled meeting times; and (c) the importance of classroom visits, feedback, and affirmation (Brock and Grady 1998). Note the significant role that the principal plays in the minds of novice teachers. Novice teachers see principals as knowledgeable of quality teaching not only because they originated in the classroom and have teaching experience, but also because principals are the chief teacher appraisers and make judgments on the novice teachers’ ability to teach. Connected to this expectation, novice teachers want communicative interaction with principals. Whether from the principal’s classroom visits, feedback (formal or informal), or words of encouragement and affirmation, novice teachers want to hear what principals have to say about their performance and efforts in the classroom. Similarly, novice teachers have expectations of colleagues:

What new teachers want in their induction is experienced colleagues who will take their daily dilemmas seriously, watch them teach and provide feedback, help them develop instructional strategies, model skilled teaching, and share insights about students’ work and lives. What teachers need is sustained, school-based professional development—guided by expert colleagues, responsive to their teaching, and continual throughout their early years in the classroom. Principals and teacher leaders have the largest roles to play in fostering such experiences. (Johnson and Kardos 2002, 13)

Again, note the significant role that principals and colleagues play in communicating the details of acceptable teaching behaviors and providing guidance for growth in the minds of novice teachers. Such recognition points to the fact that principals must understand the expectations that novice teachers have and actively interact with them while making meaningful connections between novice and experienced teachers in ways that lead to the growth and development of novice teachers’ abilities.

**Strategies to Meet the Needs of Novice Teachers**

With the role of the principal clearly connected to working with novice teachers, what can principals do to facilitate the growth, development, and success of new teachers? Huling-Austin (1992) offers some general suggestions for working with induction year teachers:

- Give new teachers one teaching assignment—teaching the same thing several times allows new teachers to learn the specific curricular content, to refine their lesson plans, and compare the interactions among several classes.
- Assign new teachers to the content they know best—otherwise, new teachers will be at a pronounced disadvantage.
- Avoid assigning novice teachers to outside and/or extracurricular activities—the additional demands for these activities competes with the time needed to prepare lesson plans, grading, and other critical teaching tasks.
- Assign novice teachers and mentor teachers in the same department and in close proximity to facilitate interaction. Providing new teachers with opportunities to share and to solve problems—working with other teachers prevents isolation and provides meaningful experiences for comparison.
- Providing new teachers with opportunities to be observed and to observe other teachers, especially master teachers—this helps novice teachers to begin to generate stores of experience needed to deal with the verities of teaching. (173–76)

These suggestions reflect the aforementioned needs of teachers, and the implementation of such suggestions can have a positive impact on the experiences of novice first-year teachers. However, for these suggestions to become reality, they need the endorsement and backing of the principal. Are these actions sufficient? Huling-Austin warns principals to realize that (a) new teachers lack experience and are not fully competent despite successful preservice teaching experiences, which often underestimate the requirements of teaching; (b) it takes three to five years for a novice to master the demands of teaching; and (c) learning to teach is complex and requires a progression of learning to move from inexperienced to experienced. With this in mind, the answer to the question of sufficiency is that more is needed. The key component in the success of novice first-year teachers is interaction—that is, meaningful, instructive interactions among novice teachers, colleagues, and principals based on opportunities to share experiences and share in giving and receiving feedback.

How can a principal specifically meet the needs of first-year teachers that have been identified so far? We propose two strategies, both of which depend on the principal for their initiation, maintenance, and ultimate success in helping novice teachers. First, establish opportunities to share experiences through regular professional development meetings with novice teachers. Second, provide novice teachers with meaningful, instructive feedback that is both personal and professional. Both strategies are based on best practices we followed while serving as administrators in public secondary schools.

**Strategy One: Establish Regular Professional Development Meetings with New Teachers**

One critical aspect that allows a novice to move toward expertise is information. Information of varying complexity increases the knowledge base of the novice, and implementation of that knowledge allows the novice to develop skills and behaviors incrementally, the natural course of development. When beginning work with novice teachers, provide them with opportunities to regularly gain pertinent information about teaching and the role of a successful teacher.
Questions abound for novice teachers from the first moments of the first school day. Novice teachers need answers to basic questions, such as: Who does one see for additional textbooks? What are the procedures for recording student attendance? When is the bell for lunch for my students? Where does one go to request a stapler? Why does one have to request parent signatures for permission to watch videos in class? Because of this need for information, we suggest meeting with novice teachers as soon as school begins to share practical information that helps to make their daily lives less complicated and frustrating.

As with any initiative, a principal must take the first step and establish both the time and place for meeting with novice teachers. The principal should pick a short period of time (twenty to thirty minutes) that is convenient to all novice teachers and others (i.e., teachers new to your building, key teachers, or other supportive members of the learning community) and that can be maintained on a regular schedule. There are several important issues here. First, attendance should be required of all novice teachers. They may feel overwhelmed and that a meeting is inconvenient or intrusive, but when they understand the meeting is for their benefit, they will appreciate the opportunity. Second, the meeting times must be consistent and should occur at regular intervals. The intent is for the meetings to become a natural part of the growth regimen of novice teachers and, as such, should be an activity that can be counted on to take place as planned. Hopefully, the novice teachers will look forward to the time together.

Third, the meetings need to be meaningful to those who come. To that end, the meeting time should be used consistently for these purposes:

1. Getting to know the novice first-year teachers.
2. Getting to know their needs.
3. Sharing meaningful information with them.
4. Providing them opportunities to talk and share their experiences with their fellow new teachers and sharing with them experiences and expertise.

From the beginning, a principal should take an incremental and developmental approach that progresses from operational to instructional needs. That is, begin by asking novice teachers what they need to survive the next week. The key is to allow novice teachers to dictate what they need. By allowing them to make requests, the principal is not only letting novice teachers know that he or she is listening and wants to be of assistance, but also that although they may be new, novice teachers are expected to participate in solving the problems they face each day, regardless of size or complexity.

A principal should always encourage novice teachers to share their experiences, regardless of whether they have felt in control. Participants should remember that making connections with a colleague who is having similar experiences can be comforting and can reduce anxiety. Similarly, participants should be encouraged to discuss what they have experienced during the week and how they may feel about the coming week, including the tasks and challenges it may bring. The goal is to provide novice teachers with access to resources, support, or information based on what they have shared during each session regarding their needs and concerns. The information should be concise, connected to procedures or practice, and implementable with little modification. This holds true for all meetings, regardless of the content.

Principals should listen carefully to what new teachers say and should start there. For the first few meetings, let the day-to-day concerns set the agenda. This process establishes early that you, as their principal, are ready, willing, and able to help them cope with the concerns, anxieties, and perplexities novice teachers may have as well as clarify any misconceptions or misunderstandings. Once these concerns begin to wane or at least shift from procedures to process, principals should begin to introduce topics that support the novice teachers’ behaviors in the classroom. Topics for discussion should center on teacher or student behaviors based on what novice teachers share in the session. Topics that have relevance and immediacy to the majority of novice teachers should prevail. If topics are not readily forthcoming, Brock and Grady (1998) suggest topics like classroom management and discipline, working with mainstream students, determining appropriate expectations for students, dealing with parents, dealing with students who are not easily engaged, keeping up with paperwork, grading or evaluating student work, handling student conflicts, pacing lessons, dealing with students of varying abilities, or feeling inadequate as a teacher. The topics for new teacher meetings are practically limitless. However, the choice of topics should always be based on the needs and concerns of novice teachers and should be practical and profitable for growth individually and collectively.

As the year progresses and new teachers become accustomed to their roles and duties, move the focus of the meetings to developmental topics. These topics can be based on the principal’s informal observations of teachers—walk-throughs and other visits—or informal assessments by department chairs and master teachers. Again, topics should be presented in a concise form that is connected to practice and implementable with little modification, and that helps novice teachers conform to expectations of quality and expertise.

Strategy Two: Provide New Teachers with Meaningful, Instructive Feedback

To be considered successful, novice teachers must clearly understand the school and district goals for student achievement. How do novice first-year teachers
gain this understanding? Perhaps through preservice orientation meetings or faculty meetings at the beginning of the school year, both of which are standard fare for inducting new teachers. Although either of these meetings may impress on the new teacher the importance of student achievement, neither provides a complete understanding of how to accomplish school or district goals for student achievement. This is because novice teachers lack relevant experience-based reference points to discern the implications of such information. Only after participating in teaching and engaging students for some time will this information’s importance become meaningful. For this reason, principals and experienced teachers must provide novice teachers with meaningful and instructive feedback at crucial times during the course of the school year to facilitate the incremental changes needed in the classroom setting to accomplish school or district goals.

Csikszentmihalyi (2003) cites three types of feedback needed to help novice teachers develop personally and professionally. The first type, feedback from others, provides an outside perspective to the new teacher. It is vital that novice teachers receive feedback that facilitates, rather than impedes, their steady development from novice to veteran. Obviously, who provides that feedback is critical. Novice teachers need to hear from positive, invested, experienced people—as opposed to negative, detached, ambivalent people—who can provide needed information regarding the performance of novice teachers in relation to school and district goals.

The second, feedback from work, is the ability to self-evaluate one’s performance against expectations from principals and identified school or district goals. Novice teachers are learning the job of teaching as they perform it. Knowing how well one is performing is dependent, to some extent, on experience that one can reflect on and use to adjust one’s actions (or lack thereof). Lacking reference points to teaching, novice teachers must rely on outside feedback to fill the voids of their understanding of their work.

The third type, feedback from personal standards, is based on a personal assessment of performance based on one’s personal work ethic. The critical feature is for novice teachers to have realistic assessments of their efforts. Novice teachers may have a good work ethic in general as they enter the teaching profession but lack experiences to complete understanding of how to accomplish school or district goals. Ganser (2002) suggests there are three factors that contribute to new teacher success. The first factor includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that new teachers bring to their work—what they already know about good teaching as they walk through the schoolhouse door and how they are able to put that knowledge to use. The second factor includes workplace conditions, such as the number of children in the class and their abilities, classroom resources, and curricular and instructional support. The third factor reflects all elements of induction support for new teachers including mentoring and such aspects as staff orientation meetings, special meetings and services for new teachers, and the culture of the school as related to the transition of a new teacher from outsider to insider.

Although Ganser’s factors (2002) are certainly important, we believe that the critical factor in novice first-year teacher success is the principal and the connections to master teachers and supportive colleagues that the principal fosters on behalf of novice teachers. Specifically, we agree with Hope’s admonition (1999):

Orienting novice teachers to the school and the principal’s expectations entails more than reviewing policy and procedures in a handbook, more than a thirty-minute get to know you meeting in the office, or more than a walk around campus to point out the important locations such as the media center, cafeteria, and teacher’s workroom. It involves systemic contact with the intention of assisting in the new teacher’s professional growth and development and of engaging in collegial conversation about the work of teaching. (54, emphasis added)

Why is the principal the critical factor? First, the principal is the focal point of the school to which all people involved first look for direction. As the focal point, it is
imperative for the principal to keep the big picture in mind—the improvement of students academically and of teachers professionally—and ensure that progress is made toward those two important outcomes. Second, the principal is the instructional leader. As such, he or she is accountable for the success or failure of teachers to meet school and district goals and of students to reach performance goals. Third, the principal has the power and authority to set in motion the connections and activities that novice teachers need to be successful. Finally, the principal, operating from a sense of moral purpose, has the responsibility (a) to students to ensure that the classroom environment is one in which they can be successful and meet performance goals and (b) to teachers to ensure they are as prepared as they can be to lead students to success and meet school and district goals. Through the diligent and meaningful efforts of the principal, novice teachers can grow to be the teachers they and their colleagues envisioned.

REFERENCES