

Why We Do *Not* Support New Teachers - and What Can Be Done About It

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Those who enter the ranks of teachers do not know how to teach, although they may know everything that is in the innumerable books telling them how to teach.¹
 --William Waller, 1932

New Teachers and Their Profession

It is 2006—74 years since the sociologist William Waller lamented over the lack of support for teachers during their initial years of teaching. For most educators new to the profession, the situation hasn't changed much. You would think that since the time when my own mother was born, policymakers would have learned how to develop and sustain a new-teacher induction approach that systematically helps novices and the students they serve. Could there be an issue more critical to the success of our public schools? Yet here we are, well-launched into the 21st Century, still dependent on a hodge-podge of mostly underfunded induction programs that vary wildly in quality and impact.

Perhaps it is time to unpack the issues at hand and reveal more publicly why policymakers and educators have yet to make the necessary investments in novice teachers.

Let's start with what we know. Thanks to a spate of newly surfaced data, research studies, and commentary from a range of investigators and reformers, we understand more about the struggles of new teachers than ever before. For example, the 2005 MetLife survey found that many teachers felt *ill-prepared* during their first year to deal with critical aspects of their jobs—working with children of varying abilities, getting the support they needed from their principal, and obtaining the resources and supplies necessary to teach effectively.²

Do not get me wrong. Teacher education has improved, and more of the 1200+ colleges and universities that prepare teachers are doing a better job than they have in the past. But most education schools are not sufficiently funded to deeply prepare teachers in clinical settings like those utilized by engineering, nursing, and pharmacy programs. In addition, many university tenure and promotion systems do not value or reward the time and skill needed to prepare and then induct new teachers; and, quite often, the college faculty who teach teachers have not taught K-12 students in many years. In some cases teacher education, with noble mission and lofty vision of what public schools could be tomorrow, fails to prepare new teachers for schools of today. Frequently, education courses with titles like "The Teaching Profession: Birth to Grade Six," or "Ethics and Professionalism in Childhood Teaching," take priority over the art and science of teaching reading and writing to students who come to school performing well

below grade level or whose primary language is not English.³

And then there are the growing numbers of teachers entering the profession without any or only limited preparation. The popular Teach for America program, which places young adults in two-year teaching positions in school districts hit hard by poverty and teacher shortages, is one example. In a news feature profiling Elias Walsh, a Teach for America novice, the young educator described his frustration as he struggled to teach his 9th grade students how to determine if $[x+2x+1]$ "is a monomial, binomial or trinomial." How, he wondered, could he make this content relevant to their inner-city lives? What should he do when only 25% of his students are in the room when the tardy bell rings or when only one-third will turn in their homework assignments? Walsh's story, starkly reported by the Chicago Tribune, surfaced very strong feelings on his part and revealed the inherent problems with rapid-entry programs that attempt to circumvent in-depth teacher preparation. "There have been so many bad days," Walsh reported. "Days when the kids all seem to be out control, and I can tell that they haven't gotten anything out of what I've been saying. Those days take it out of me. It's hugely frustrating. I feel so hurt and tired I don't want to come back the next morning." ⁴

Of course we have known for decades that even when teacher education is rock solid, effective teaching is so complex that teachers will never know all they need to know when they enter their first classrooms. And we keep raising the stakes. Today, teachers are expected to meet higher performance standards and to teach increasingly diverse students with different learning styles, learning disabilities, and limited English proficiency. What's more, what we define as a "good education" is changing, and quickly. In the "Flat World" described by Thomas L. Friedman, all students need to know how to participate fully in the information-charged global economy by possessing and using data-driven, critical thinking skills, team-working expertise, an understanding of different cultures, and the ability to participate fully in America's democratic and civic life.⁵

Because of budget cuts, dysfunctional district offices, or out-of-touch administrators, new teachers are often hired late and do not have access to the kinds of materials and resources necessary to make a class run smoothly and to effectively engage and motivate students. To make matters more complicated, even when new teachers are well prepared, they are most often assigned to the most challenging schools and classes—and are often given the more demanding extracurricular duties. In this context novices have considerable difficulty in on-the-job learning, especially in settings where students have many challenging academic, social, and emotional needs, or where novices have no time to watch or learn from seasoned, expert colleagues. Some of our nation's most challenging schools are rife with teacher turnover, and consequently do not have enough experienced mentors to go around. It's also true that a majority of schools do not support the culture of peer review necessary to spread teaching expertise. New teacher Joanne, who ultimately gave up teaching after two attempts, wrote in an online diary:

The culture of my school, like many schools in the United States, is one of autonomy. If collegiality exists, then it is within the cliques, and therefore (it is) a closed collegiality. If collaboration or cross-curricular teaching exists, no one has told me about it.⁶

Despite the growing knowledge base in teaching⁷ (and David Berliner's insightful analyses of how novices develop in stages over time into expert teachers⁸), new teachers are expected to do everything the highly skilled veteran can do. New teachers are left largely on their own to "sink or swim." And most sink. Over 30 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching, and over 50 percent of novices who teach in urban schools leave within the first *three* years.⁹ If America had deliberately set out to create a highly dysfunctional system of new teacher support, we could not have done a better job.

We Know What to Do

We have the knowledge we need to fix this problem. Research analyses are revealing the critical elements of high quality new teacher induction programs. These include:

- Pair new teachers with trained mentors in similar grades and subject areas;
- Reduce novices' work loads and structure teaching schedules to provide common planning time and frequent face-to-face interaction among mentors and novices;
- Provide release time for both the mentor and novice for observations and analysis;
- Offer ongoing professional development relevant to the needs of novice teachers and give them access to an external network of beginning teachers;
- Develop a standards-based formal assessment of beginning teachers and the induction program itself.¹⁰

Tom Smith and Richard Ingersoll have found that only **one percent** of beginning teachers nationally are receiving comprehensive induction supports.¹¹ Indeed, most new-teacher induction programs in America's public schools are under-conceptualized, under-developed, under-supported, and under-funded. Some analysts have estimated the cost of high quality induction programs at \$6000 per new teacher.¹² According to a 2005 Education Week survey, only 16 states require and finance mentoring programs for its new teachers.¹³ Some states require induction programs, but may invest less than \$100 per new teacher.

The State of Connecticut has developed and maintained an effective effort to both assess and support its new teachers (the Beginning Educator Support and Training or *BEST* Program). And, more recently New York City, partnering with the highly acclaimed New Teacher Center at the University of California-Santa Cruz, launched a \$36 million effort to mentor its novice teachers. These are our nation's most notable, large-scale state and district-level efforts to support novice

teachers. But BEST, with its sophisticated content-based seminars and performance assessments, does not always reach all novice teachers with same kind of support. And, the NYC new teacher support model, while only one-year in the making, does not easily align with the district's other professional development offerings.

The kind of induction and new teacher supports found in other nations hardly ever show up in American schools. In Japan, induction for new teachers lasts one year and includes weekly training both in and out of school. To lighten new teachers' workloads, accommodate their heavy training schedule, and allow release time for extensive mentoring, the program assigns one part-time experienced teacher to each new teacher or one full-time teacher for two new teachers.

Other professions in the United States invest in their novices at much higher levels than education does. Before they practice independently, newly minted doctors must complete a highly supervised internship to earn an initial license, and then pass muster during 2-5 years of residency under the watchful eye of attending physicians. Aspiring architects work under the tutelage of an approved, expert practitioner for three years before earning a license, and most law firms do not send their novice lawyer, fresh out of school, to present arguments in their most important cases. Yet in teaching we make few policy distinctions between the very new and the very experienced professional. It defies common sense.

Holding New Teachers and the Profession Back

Why don't we do what needs to be done? Several reasons that relate to teaching as a profession come to mind. They are embedded in interconnected sociological, technical, financial, and even political dynamics.

Teaching is more difficult than it looks.

America has never invested heavily in teachers. One reason is that many people – including the policymakers and administrators who control education budgets – think teaching looks easy. They imagine teachers routinely implementing lock-step lessons, maintaining discipline, and grading papers for right or wrong answers. As sociologist Dan Lortie noted some 30 years ago, many people develop these views of teaching in their 12 years of “apprenticeship” as public school students.¹⁴ What they see is the very tip of the teaching iceberg, but it often becomes their definition of what teaching is. Ironically, the best teachers “make it look easy.” Consequently, many people believe that they can teach—that *anyone* can teach. As Suzanne Wilson has noted, teaching can be “falsely familiar.”¹⁵

For many people, good teaching hinges simply on a teacher's personality, energy, and effort; not on well-cultivated knowledge and skill, honed over time. Log on to the Web and browse teacher-wanted ads to discover what many principals look for in new teachers. One description reads: “Passion. Enthusiasm. Sensitivity.

Heart. Humor.”¹⁶ Calls for a deep understanding of subject matter, sophisticated skills in assessing student learning, and knowledge of community and culture are not readily found.

The anti-intellectual and anti-pedagogical biases of school administrators are compounded when highly effective teachers cannot describe how and why they are effective, and instead chalk up their success to effort, patience, and trial and error. David Berliner reminds us of the long-standing predisposition against seasoned teachers in teaching. He notes that administrators value less expensive novices who are “bouncy” and “fresh,” and even are believed “to be better at their jobs than experienced teachers.”¹⁷ (In some cases novices may very well be “better,” given the poor preparation and support for teachers who stay around long enough for their ineffective teaching practices to calcify.)

Teaching is low-status work.

Teaching has been classified as low status work—at best, a “semi-profession” with truncated training and unenforced standards, an ill-defined body of knowledge, and lack of autonomy in daily practice.¹⁸ Although best practices exist in abundance, they are rarely disseminated uniformly and there are few mechanisms to spread and reward expertise and accomplished practice. Unlike in medicine, there are inherent difficulties in translating research knowledge of teaching and learning into forms teachers can use to improve their practice. As James Hiebert and colleagues have noted, “teachers rarely draw from a shared knowledge base to improve their practice (and) they do not routinely locate and translate research-based efforts to inform their efforts.”¹⁹ Teaching is often considered “ill-structured...without any inherent ‘proper’ and ‘elegant’ solutions.”

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Teaching is also classified as “women’s work.” Female-dominated occupations continue to engender lower salaries and less empowerment for members. Consequently many policymakers and even some practitioners (at least the school administrators who control entry into teaching) often liken teaching to child care or a job that requires very little, if any, pedagogical training and skill.

Programs like Teach for America—which invites academically able college graduates into our nation's highest need schools for a 2-year, Peace Corp-type experience—reinforce the idea that teachers do not need training and exacerbate teaching’s low status. The easier it is for someone to enter teaching and be called a teacher, the less pressure there is on policy makers to make deeper investments in teacher preparation and induction (as well as salaries).

New teachers are less expensive and more pliable.

With dire budget cuts in public education, many administrators feel obliged to hire novices who are cheaper than experienced teachers with advanced credentials. In 2003-04, the average U.S. beginning teacher salary was \$31,704,

while a teacher with 15 years of experience earned an average \$46,597.²¹ As districts struggle to find enough money to pay for teacher salaries and benefits (with escalating health care costs), support easily wanes for funding new teacher induction and mentoring programs. In a teacher-development "Catch-22," administrators opt for hiring less expensive new teachers but fail to invest in a mentoring program. This leads to higher turnover rates and the need for more and more "cheap" novices to replace those who keep leaving. This constant recruitment has its own price. Despite the growing evidence that new teacher induction programs, even those that cost \$6000 per novice, may be cost-effective, policymakers and administrators cannot see beyond the short term.

But there is more.

Administrators often do not want their *bureaucratic boats* rocked, and seek to find inexperienced teachers who will not question poor policy and will follow directions uniformly. Partly as the result of a combination of high stakes testing and the flood of underqualified teachers entering schools, administrators have opted for highly scripted curriculum materials (e.g., Open Court) that require teachers to teach in a lock-step way. Administrators, with the accountability gun to their heads, are wary of deviation from the script and less concerned about a rich, well-rounded curriculum taught by highly accomplished teachers. They do not want teachers who will question their standardized approaches, often hawked by vendors who promise "guaranteed" higher student test score results. In these situations, principals are expected to submit to a district hierarchy that expects efficiency and authoritative leadership. They have little time to invest in the preparation and support for new teachers to become highly skilled practitioners who may question lock-step practices the way many doctors are now questioning the rules and procedures of HMOs.

What Can Be Done

A 2005 poll released by The Teaching Commission revealed that the majority of Americans want to improve teaching quality by investing heavily in teachers—in training, mentoring, and salaries—even if these investments result in higher taxes.²² There is no evidence that the public wants the robotic-type teaching that has begun to pervade our public schools. However, when it comes to building support for the new-teacher induction programs necessary to produce skillful teaching, policymakers and the public get most of their information from researchers, policy wonks, administrators, and teacher union officials—all of whom have their own special interests and ideological bents. Seldom do we hear from the new teachers themselves—or from the expert teachers who struggle to find the time and resources to mentor novices effectively.

Raising the voices of these front-line professionals can make a difference. Urgency was created in New York City when the State Board of Regents, the local Board of Education, and the Mayor finally heard these voices from the classroom

and realized that something had to be done for new teachers. Across America, these voices need to be louder, more prevalent and more systematic.

We also need more case evidence about the impact of new teacher induction programs and their costs and benefits. Policymakers must invest in solid evaluations of existing induction programs and the effectiveness of their various components. Much more needs to be learned from both the long-standing Connecticut BEST program and the more recent initiative in New York City. More than anything else, the new teachers and the mentors who serve them need to more carefully document what they are doing that is effective, why it is effective, and what is needed from universities, school districts, and the communities to support "what works." Virtual networks, blogs, public events and other engagement strategies must be used to raise the discourse beyond our academic journals. The public and the policymakers they support need to learn more about how difficult teaching is and the specific investments needed to ensure that new teachers can teach effectively in schools that are structured to enhance academic learning and civic responsibility for all students.

Finally, it is too often the case that we expect universities to prepare new teachers and school districts to mentor and induct them. Rarely do universities and school systems approach these tasks as joint ventures with shared responsibilities. Even when attempts are made to coordinate these efforts, mission conflicts, resource hoarding and turf battles often render them ineffectual. Universities and school districts must join forces to simultaneously prepare and support novices, bridge budgets and share personnel. Districts should offer their best teachers as teacher educators, and universities should offer their best faculty as school-based advisors (and learners). Cost savings could be realized, and policymakers lured by a united P-16 effort might be enticed to make the investments required to ensure that every new teacher has access to the kind of mentoring and induction they need and deserve.

No one should be under the illusion that it will be easy to change America's simplistic view of teaching—or unite universities and school systems around a common agenda for teacher preparation *and* induction. But the simple fact is this: Until we treat teacher development in the same way we treat the development of other professionals upon whom society depends, we will continue to have our attention and our resources diverted by school reform games that ignore the real franchise players in our public school system – the millions of classroom teachers whose skills and knowledge ultimately determine the viability of our students and our society. Perhaps we can get the job done before my (perhaps, if I am fortunate, future) grandchildren enter our public schools.

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³ Hartocollis, A. (2005). *Who Needs Education Schools?* New York Times. July 31.

⁴ Zorn. *Ibid.*

⁵ Friedman, T. (2005). *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux

⁶ See <http://www.middleweb.com/mw/msdiaries/01-02wklydiaries/JP32.html>

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- ¹⁸ Etzioni, A. (1969). *The Semi-Professions And Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers*. New York, London: The Free Press
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- ²¹ American Federation of Teachers (2005). Survey and Analysis of Teacher Salary Trends 2004. Washington DC: Author. <http://www.aft.org/salary/2004/download/2004AFTSalarySurvey.pdf>
- ²² See the Hart-Harris polling results conducted for the Teaching Commission at: <http://www.theteachingcommission.org/press/pdfs/pollreport-final.pdf>