

The Beginning Teacher's Search for Assistance from Colleagues

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Les données obtenues par entrevues et par observations participantes montrent que les professeurs qui commencent à enseigner au niveau élémentaire sont d'abord préoccupés par deux facteurs lorsqu'ils envisagent de faire appel à l'assistance de professeurs plus expérimentés. Les débutants demandent de l'aide premièrement à ceux qui enseignent à des élèves de même classe ou bien qui ont une conception de l'enseignement semblable à la leur. S'il leur est impossible de trouver ce genre de personne dans leur école, ils abandonnent tout espoir d'obtenir de l'aide de la part d'un professeur expérimenté et ils se débrouillent seuls. Ce rapport de recherche documente cette conclusion et en dégage l'impact sur le premier emploi d'un débutant.

The larger research study out of which this report arises focused on three questions:

1. Who influences beginning teachers?
2. How are beginning teachers influenced?
3. What do beginning teachers learn from those who influence them?

Some findings related to the second and third research questions have already been reported in other educational publications (Newberry 1977a, 1977b, 1978). This particular report deals with the beginning teacher's search for assistance from colleagues. It provides some answers to the question, "Who influences beginning teachers?" In particular, it suggests from whom beginning teachers seek assistance and what factors may restrict the search before it has really begun.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Evidence from the literature indicates that beginning teachers undergo considerable change during the first year of teaching. Studies using interaction analysis and observation techniques have shown that their classroom behavior changes (Sandefur *et al.*, 1969; Moskowitz and Hayman, 1974). Longitudinal surveys using questionnaires and interviews have indicated that attitudes toward the self and the teacher role change (Wright and Tuska, 1968; Edgar and Brod, 1970). A change in attitudes toward the teacher/student relationship is indicated by other longitudinal surveys (Hoy, 1968; Muuss, 1969; Drozda, 1972).

While these studies have documented changes occurring in beginning teachers, they have made few attempts to analyze who or what causes these changes. The studies do provide a base for examining the problem. From the literature it is known:

1. beginning teachers receive little assistance from their supervisors (Bond and Smith, 1967);
2. beginning teachers prefer to get their assistance from experienced teachers rather than from principals (Hermanowicz, 1966; Southwell, 1970);
3. experienced teachers are the greatest source of assistance to beginning teachers (Moller, 1968; Fair, 1973);
4. experienced teachers are the most frequent source of information for beginning teachers on school rules and conventions (Taylor and Dale, 1971).

These studies suggest that beginning teachers do use experienced teachers as sources of information and assistance. Assuming that this does happen, which experienced teachers do the beginners seek out? Where do they start in their search for assistance?

METHOD

Field research appeared to be the most suitable method for a study involving a social process. First, it seemed likely that a process could be best understood through the extended data collection of field research, and, second, field research would allow those in the situation being studied an opportunity to present the incidents and interactions of importance in their eyes.

For the purposes of this study, beginning teachers were defined as teachers who had begun their teaching experience in the current school year, and experienced teachers were defined as teachers who had at least one full school year's experience prior to the current year.

The first stage of data collection involved open-ended interviews with 17 people, including principals and beginning and experienced teachers in elementary schools in Ontario. Some patterns quickly became apparent. Discipline, for example, was repeatedly mentioned as a serious problem for beginning teachers. A concern about keeping certain difficulties hidden from other staff members was also raised frequently. As such patterns emerged, they were noted and used as probe points in succeeding interviews.

As the interviews proceeded, some tentative statements on the experience of the beginning teachers were developed. Specific questions were then asked of subsequent interviewees to establish whether those persons' experi-

ence was congruent with generalizations being formulated. The developing generalizations were revised accordingly. For example, at first it seemed experienced teachers were extremely reluctant to offer beginning teachers any assistance or advice at all. When this suggestion was specifically pursued, it became apparent that certain experienced teachers were heavily involved in working with the beginners while others had almost no contact with them.

Tentative generalizations developed in this first stage were modified and refined in the participant observation which followed with 23 beginning teachers in elementary schools in a large school district in suburban Toronto who were visited for a total of 38 school days during the spring of 1975. From one to five school days were spent with each teacher, with the amount of time spent with individual teachers decreasing as the study progressed.

The initial contacts with each school were made through the principals, some of whom required that the consent of the beginning teacher be obtained over the phone before the visit. In all cases, the principal or the beginning teacher was advised that the researcher would be happy to act as a teacher aide during the visit. In fact, the role played by the researcher in the different classrooms varied. Some teachers had planned activities that required the assistance of another adult in the classroom. Some asked the researcher to walk around, observe, talk to the children, and get involved informally. Others asked the researcher to work with individual children. Still others preferred to carry on in their usual way, allowing the researcher simply to observe.

As the participant observation proceeded, a set of questions was developed to test working hypotheses. The responses to these questions formed part of the data base. Other data included incidents observed, conversations overheard, and statements volunteered by people in the school setting.

SAMPLE

Of the 17 people interviewed in the first stage of data collection, there were four beginning teachers, five elementary school principals, five experienced elementary school teachers, two teachers' federation staff members, and one superintendent.

The 23 beginning teachers whose classrooms were visited included 19 women and four men. Twenty-one of them were in their early 20s, and two were in their late 20s. Thirteen were married and 10 were single. Eighteen were teaching in regular classrooms, and five were teaching in open plan or semi-open plan schools. Fifteen were teaching at the primary level (kindergarten to Grade 3) and eight were teaching at the junior level (Grades 4 to 6).

TABLE 1
Relationships Between Beginning Teachers and Experienced Teachers at the Same Grade Level

Beginning Teacher Number	Sex of Beginning Teacher	Grade Taught	Experienced Teacher at Same Grade Level in School	Experienced Teacher at Same Grade Level Used as Major Source of Help	Reason Given For Not Using Experienced Teacher at Same Grade Level as Major Source of Help	Close Relationship Developed with the Experienced Teacher at the Same Grade Level
1	F	1	Yes	Yes	—	No
2	F	4	Yes	Yes	—	Yes
3	F	1	Yes	Yes	—	Yes
4	F	K	Yes	Yes	—	Yes
5	F	3-4	No	—	—	—
6	F	K	No	—	—	—
7	F	3-4	No	—	—	—
8	F	1	Yes	No	Ideology	No
9	F	3	Yes	Yes	—	Yes
10	F	1	Yes (2)	No	Distance, On-going Friendship	No
11	F	5	Yes	Yes	—	No
12	F	1	No	—	—	—
13	F	2	Yes	Yes	—	No
14	F	1	No	—	—	—
15	M	4-5	No	—	—	—
16	F	6	Yes (2)	No	Distance, On-going Friendship	No
17	F	2	Yes (2)	No	Ideology, Distance	No
18	F	K	Yes	No	Ideology	No
19	M	6	Yes (2)	No	On-going Friendship	No
20	F	2	Yes	Yes	—	Yes
21	M	5	Yes	Yes	—	No
22	M	1	Yes	Yes	—	No
23	F	3	Yes	No	Ideology	No

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are not the findings of a broadly based survey designed to test specific hypotheses. Rather, the study involved observation, discussion and analysis of the experiences of a limited number of people. Obviously, then, the findings will apply to the group studied, but should be generalized with caution to any larger group. The findings which are presented might well be viewed as hypotheses to be tested in a future research study with a survey design.

As the study progressed, certain ideas that beginning teachers have about their situations and their relationships with other people in the school environment emerged. In searching for a possible source of assistance among colleagues in their schools, the beginning teacher appears to ask two questions:

1. Who teaches the same grade as I do?
2. Who teaches the way I want to?

If the same name answered both questions, the beginning teacher had identified a source of professional support and guidance for the year. If these two questions could not be answered by the same name, the beginning teacher abandoned hope of finding a source of extended assistance from an experienced teacher on staff.

The next two sections give some specific data on these two criteria used by beginning teachers in selecting an experienced teacher source of assistance. Table 1 summarizes some of this data and designates each of the beginning teachers in the study by number.

Who Teaches the Same Grade as I Do?

Interaction between the beginning and experienced teachers involved in this study was very limited. However, without exception, any close relationships that did develop were between beginning and experienced teachers working with children at the same grade level.

These relationships were very visible. The two teachers sat together in the staffroom, they went out to lunch together, and they chatted while standing in the hallways waiting for the children. They moved back and forth between each other's classrooms borrowing equipment and supplies, checking information regarding school procedures, laughing over incidents, and sharing problems and ideas. In all but one of these relationships, the two teachers had gradually moved toward equality, with the beginning teacher contributing her share of ideas and the experienced teacher contributing her share of questions and problems. The only relationship where the teachers had not moved toward equality (#3) was also the only one where the teachers were more than approximately two years apart in age, and this may have accounted for the beginning teacher's

near idolization of the experienced teacher, but lack of a close personal relationship with her.

Teaching at the same grade level appeared to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of a close working relationship between a beginning and experienced teacher. Seventeen of the 23 beginning teachers in the study had colleagues in their schools teaching at their grade level. In each of the five cases where a beginning teacher had developed a close relationship with an experienced teacher, the relationship involved people teaching the same grades. Not one of the six beginning teachers who found themselves in schools where they were the only teachers teaching their particular grade levels developed a close relationship with a colleague teaching another grade.

In one school, within two minutes of introductions, the beginning teacher (#10) volunteered that she felt cut off from the other Grade 1 teachers. She said this was partly because they were located in another wing of the building, and partly because the two were close friends, were doing a lot of team teaching together, and she was afraid to intrude. She offered this information to justify the assistance she was receiving from a Grade 1-2 teacher next door. She had assumed that the appropriate source of assistance for her was the two teachers working on her own grade level, and felt it necessary to account for why she was not working with them.

In two other cases (#16 and #19), experienced teachers on the same grade level as the beginning teacher were already engaged in close friendships with other teachers on staff. Both of these beginning teachers said they felt like intruders if they attempted more than very casual conversation with them. Neither of these beginning teachers had formed a relationship with someone teaching a different grade.

Where the classrooms of teachers of the same grade as the beginning teacher were any distance from her classroom, no close working relationship developed. One case was the beginning teacher (#10) who hesitated to interfere in the relationship of the two experienced teachers who were teaching her grade, but were located in another wing of the school. In another case, the beginning teacher (#17) was on a different floor and at the opposite end of the building from one of the two other teachers on her grade level. She reported that the distance between their two classrooms made it difficult for them to get to know each other. This possible source of help, then, was eliminated by distance.

A beginning teacher (#14) who was the only Grade 1 teacher in her school repeatedly mentioned regret at not having had someone with whom to consult. She raised the subject five times in one day. She was transferring to a school the following year where there would be other teachers working at her grade level, and several times expressed satisfaction that there would finally be someone with whom she could talk things over. When questioned as to what other possible teacher sources of help there were in her school, she explained she had eliminated both the kindergarten

and the Grade 2 teachers as possibilities because the difference in grade levels meant they would not have enough in common with her to be helpful.

This beginning teacher was aware that the researcher had previously taught the same grade. Several times on the first day of the visit she asked for advice on classroom organizational problems. On the second day of the visit, the suggestions were all implemented. The beginning teacher seemed so anxious to talk that the research study was temporarily abandoned and the lunch hour spent discussing the beginning teacher's problems. It was very clear that this beginning teacher viewed as possible sources of help only teachers of her own grade level (including the researcher) and that she regretted having been in a situation where there was no one teaching the same grade to consult.

In one school, both the Grade 1 teachers were beginners. One had run into difficulties and had resigned during the fall. In describing what had happened, the remaining beginning teacher (#8) commented that while the other's problems were coming to a peak, "... of course, I was the one she came to ask about what she should do next." Even in this case, the "same grade" criterion was critical in the search for assistance from colleagues. This happened when the teacher from whom help was being sought was, even in her own view, too inexperienced to assist.

There were five other beginners (#'s 5, 6, 7, 12, 15) who were the only teachers in their schools of their particular grades. They all claimed to have coped without the assistance of other teachers over the year. A couple (#5 and #10) were receiving some assistance from what they regarded as the next best source of help — a teacher whose students overlapped with theirs in ability and maturity. For example, a beginning teacher of the only Grade 3-4 was receiving some help from a teacher who had a Grade 2-3. She explained that, of all the teachers in the school, this particular one had the group of children most similar to her own, and therefore help had been sought from her.

In summary, if the experienced teacher of the same grade as the beginning teacher already had a close relationship with another teacher, if her classroom was distant from the beginning teacher's, or if there was no experienced teacher of the same grade, without exception the beginning teacher coped without the assistance of experienced teachers. It seemed they assumed other teachers of their grade level were the only people with whom they might develop close working relationships. If such a relationship did not develop, the beginning teacher abandoned the search for assistance from other teachers on staff. While the sample size was small, this generalization fits the data from all teachers in the study, both male and female, and those working at various grade levels.

Who Teaches the Way I Want To?

The second question asked by beginning teachers during their search for assistance from colleagues appeared to be, "Who teaches like I want to?" If they disapproved of the methods used by teachers working at their grade level, the beginning teachers did not bother to look for help from other colleagues. For example, one teacher (#8) said she had nowhere to turn for support because the other Grade 1 teacher "was not the sort of person to whom [she'd] go." She explained: "To be blunt, she's lousy. She just doesn't care. She has dittoed coloring book pages and has the kids coloring them in all day. That's just busy work, in my opinion."

This same teacher also had a public disagreement with the experienced teacher at a professional development day over teaching methods. The beginning teacher commented: "Why should I ask her for help? What's the use?" This beginning teacher had *not* turned to teachers of other grades for assistance, and fervently stated her hope that the next teacher to be hired to teach her grade level would be someone with whom she could get along.

Another beginner (#23), working in an open area, had hoped to do some team teaching, but found the other Grade 3 teacher to be "very structured and methodical with no room in her program for anyone else." For this beginning teacher, the next best source of assistance was the teacher who taught her students the previous year. However, consultation was related only to problems of discipline and was limited to the first couple of months of the school year.

In each of these cases, then, the beginner's teaching ideology was significantly different from that of other teachers of the same grade and this prevented a relationship from forming. Both beginning teachers felt they had nowhere to turn but to the other teachers on their grade level, and stated disappointment that things had not worked out. Each expressed hope that next year there would be someone teaching on her grade level whose teaching approach would be more compatible with her own.

A beginning primary teacher (#17) began her year with a very strong commitment to an activity-centered program. She went to another teacher on her grade level for assistance in constructing materials and got the response, "Are you sure you really want to do that? You'll only be able to use it once, then you'll have to throw it away." A series of negative, disapproving comments from the experienced teacher quickly ended the possibility of any helping relationship and the beginning teacher went to the primary consultant, where there was support and agreement with her approach.

A beginning teacher (#18) was working in a two-room pod with the movable doors open, sharing ideas, problems, and materials with another teacher of her grade. A few months later, the experienced teacher left and another teacher arrived. Cooperation and mutual assistance between the

two teachers promptly was cut back and the movable doors were shut. This teacher's approach was too "structured" for the beginning teacher. However, she was looking forward to opening the doors again in the fall, when a new, more "open" teacher was expected to arrive. This case is another example of a beginning teacher who exercised her option to work or not to work with the teacher of her grade level depending on whether or not their teaching styles were compatible.

SUMMARY

Table 1 summarizes the major findings reported above. Of the 23 teachers involved in the study, six were teaching in schools where there were no other teachers working at their grade levels. None of these six developed close relationships with experienced teachers on their staffs. Of the remaining 17 teachers, 10 used the other teacher or teachers on their grade level as a major source of assistance. The seven who did not use teachers on their grade level as sources of assistance gave a range of reasons. Either that experienced teacher was too different ideologically (perhaps even viewed as incompetent), she was already involved in a close relationship with someone else, or she was located too far away from the beginning teacher. Of the 10 who used experienced teachers at the same grade level as a major source of assistance, five developed very close working relationships with them. Every one of these close relationships formed between a beginning and an experienced teacher of the same grade whose classroom doors were visible to each other, and whose teaching ideologies were compatible.

In other words, beginning teachers perceived experienced teachers at their own grade level as their logical, indeed their only possible, source of extended assistance from other teachers, and if their situation somehow mediated against the formation of a relationship with such a teacher, they pursued help no further from colleagues on staff.

IMPLICATIONS

In this study at least, beginning teachers viewed experienced teachers working on the same grade level as their most logical source of assistance. If it is true that other beginning teachers hold the same view, this preference should be taken into consideration when beginning teacher assignments are made. They should not be assigned to schools where they are the only ones teaching their grade level, as this may result in an almost automatic sense of professional isolation. Clearly, there will be school situations where this is not feasible. Small schools with only one class at each grade level do not provide enough flexibility for such placements. It is worth noting, however, that the traditional problems with professional isolation in small schools, which may also be rural schools, may be exacer-

bated for the beginning teacher who hopes for assistance from a teacher of the same grade level.

Since the teachers in this study found that physical separation appeared to make the development of a close working relationship difficult even within the same school, perhaps beginning teachers should be located in classrooms next to teachers of the same grade.

Since the teachers in this study found that physical separation appeared necessary in the group studied before close working relationships developed, beginning teachers might be placed near experienced teachers with whom they will be compatible. Establishing whether or not compatibility is likely to occur may not be easy, but one possible way might be to involve in final hiring decisions experienced teachers who are teaching at the grade levels where vacancies exist.

If the beginning teacher does *not* have the professional assistance she wants in the beginning stages of her career, she will be far more susceptible to pressures arising in her day-to-day teaching situation pushing her away from teaching methods not evolving as she hoped they would. Presumably, she was hired at least partially on the basis of her stated ideology, with the assumption that she would develop her style and methods from that ideology. In the longer work on which this study was based (McIntosh, 1976), beginning teachers were found to be remarkably susceptible to pressures placed on them in the course of their day-to-day activities by students and, more surprisingly, the parents of their students. Student behavior seen as inappropriate by the beginning teacher was a major force toward major alteration in teaching methodology. The changes were somewhat frantic and random as the beginning teachers struggled to establish a learning environment with which they could be satisfied. A beginning teacher with a close professional advice and support system probably is better able to develop strategies enabling her to operationalize her ideology. If the findings of this study can be generalized, the beginning teacher develops a close working relationship only with a colleague who, among other factors, shares a compatible teaching ideology. It appears worth considering a placement that will maximize her chances of developing such a relationship and hence increase the probability that she will be successful in teaching the way she expected and those who hired her expected.

In other words, if one is to capitalize on what may be a tendency of beginning teachers to develop close working relationships only with other teachers of the same grade, who are close to them geographically and who have a similar teaching philosophy, it will be necessary to consider carefully new staff assignments. In moving towards meeting these conditions, there will be a greater possibility of beginning teachers having appropriate models. This might well shorten the period of confusion during which beginning teachers are struggling, often unaided, to develop workable learning situations for their students.

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