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Chapter One

Understanding the Beginning Teacher

The term *beginning teacher* describes a variety of individuals. Some so-called beginners are entering the teaching profession directly from college. Others arrive at the school door after raising a family or after a brief venture into the business world. A few individuals enter the profession without teaching backgrounds and are learning to teach on the job. Many beginners are experienced teachers who are making the transition to a new school. During the 1999–2000 school year, 17% of all teachers were new hires at their school. These new hires included teachers directly out of college, individuals previously employed in other careers, teachers who had transferred to new schools, and experienced teachers returning to the workforce (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). To design effective induction programs for these beginners, principals need to know something about the backgrounds of the individuals the programs will serve. Many induction efforts fail because they do not match the needs of the participants.

Some beginning teachers are recent college graduates. During the 1999–2000 school year, they represented a little less than a fifth of the new hires at their schools (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Yesterday, they were blue-jeaned students groaning about professors' lectures and anticipating weekend parties. Today, they are teachers who are expected to look, behave, and speak as professionals.

On the inside, they are terrified. They have stepped out of a college culture of good friends and supportive professors. As students,

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they were probably financially dependent on their parents. They might have lived in a dorm or apartment but still considered their parents' house home. Now, they are real teachers who have professional responsibilities. This step is quite a transition for someone who is only twentysomething.

Researchers describe this stage of beginning adulthood as the exploratory-trial stage, which involves the initial transition from school to work. This stage is characterized by insecurity, false starts, and instability. The typical teacher-education graduate who is entering teaching directly out of college is in the exploratory stage, according to Barocas, Reichman, Schewel, Belkin, and Nass (Camp & Heath-Camp, 1991). Other authors consider the first three years of teaching the apprentice phase (Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000).

The first year of teaching is often filled with high expectations and extreme difficulties. The conditions under which new teachers carry out the first year determine the effectiveness, attitudes, and behaviors they will develop and sustain for an entire career. The first-year experience is also a frequent factor in the decision whether to remain in the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; Zumwalt, 1984). Many motivated and potentially superb teachers leave prematurely. Edinburg's studies (Cuellar & Huling-Austin, 1991) and the studies of Ingersoll and Smith (2003) reveal that teachers have forced administrators and policymakers to reexamine and revise past approaches in order to retain first-year teachers.

The first year of teaching includes three major characteristics that are reflected in most career changes: (a) changes in the definition of oneself, (b) experiences in a totally new situation, and (c) major changes in one's interpersonal support network. New teachers experience the new environment of the school in addition to the new informal and formal expectations of being a teacher. For many teachers, entering the teaching profession is concomitant with entering adulthood (Heck & Williams, 1984).

The issues that young teachers face as they venture into adulthood and their teaching careers begin with the change in the definition of themselves. The beginning teacher exchanges the familiar status of college student for that of teacher. Behavior, dress, and lifestyles that are acceptable for college students are not always acceptable for teachers. Establishing and becoming comfortable with a new identity and leadership expectations are adjustments.

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New teachers look to colleagues in their school to model appropriate professional behavior, dress, and lifestyles.

A second issue that new teachers experience is the total novelty of the situation. First-year teachers who have had successful college experiences look forward to the first year. Most move into the role of teacher with confidence and enthusiasm. Accustomed to academic success, they might not anticipate problems. After all, schools are familiar settings. First-year teachers have spent more than 17 years in them and have watched countless people teach. Because they have been successful in most academic endeavors, beginning teachers expect that they will be excellent teachers. However, the reality from the other side of the desk is often much different. The yearlong responsibilities of teaching, managing students, and relating to colleagues and parents are unlike anything they have ever experienced. When problems occur, some beginners become dismayed and blame themselves. They mistakenly regard typical problems of first-year teachers as personal failures. Unless they are provided with support and opportunities to talk with other novices, they will become discouraged. Unaccustomed to dealing with anything less than success, some beginning teachers assume that they are in the wrong profession and quit.

A third issue is the change in interpersonal support networks. The change from college student to teacher affects relationships with parents, college professors, and friends. For many new teachers, this situation is the first time that decisions must be made without the assistance of the people in their former support network. The first step toward independent adulthood also means a new set of personal relationships. At the time when young teachers are most unsure of themselves and are most vulnerable, they no longer have the familiar support of campus friends and college professors. Some have recently married and have the added stress of adjusting to a spouse (Heck & Williams, 1984).

Often the first and most fundamental pressures that a beginning teacher will face have little to do with teaching but are critical to the beginning of a career. First, there are the financial choices that the beginning teacher needs to make. Many college students are financially dependent on their parents. Even when students live away from home during college, parents often provide a home base, living expenses, and health and dental care. Many students drive cars that are owned or insured by their parents. Some do not have cars.

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Graduation and the first teaching job change this financial picture. For the first time, the young professional becomes financially independent, tackling real financial issues such as renting a place to live, buying a car, and securing insurance.

The benefit menus provided by school districts present many confusing choices for beginners. They are confronted with health, dental, and disability benefits and must select a retirement plan. As one young woman said, “Yesterday, I didn’t even know I needed these things. I have no idea what most of this means. How do I know what to select?”

Even the teaching contract is a foreign document. Presented with her first teaching contract, one young teacher responded with trepidation, “I’m afraid to sign this. I have never read a contract before, and I don’t understand what it means. I need someone to explain it to me.”

Teachers might have taken a position in an unfamiliar place. For them, the stress is compounded by loneliness. Family and friends are far away. The individuals who interviewed and hired them might be the only people they know.

Their first priority is finding services to meet their basic needs: a place to live, a bank, a place to shop, recreation areas, a physician, a dentist, and the best routes to work. Before the school year begins, they need to become familiar with the community and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students who attend the school.

The Mature Beginner

Some beginning teachers are older and more mature. An increasing number of people are entering teaching preparation programs later in life and later in their careers (National Center for Education Information, 2005). During the 1999–2000 school year, 2% of teachers (slightly more than a tenth of the new hires) were delayed entrants, individuals who had occupations prior to entering teaching (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Many of these individuals have returned to college to obtain certification, often through postbaccalaureate programs, and are entering the teaching profession as mature adults. One would expect stability, realistic expectations, and few false starts from mature adults (Camp & Heath-Camp, 1991). Although life experiences and maturity may reduce personal

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adjustment problems, even mature beginners experience the usual classroom dilemmas of beginning teachers. Daily lesson planning, motivating and managing a classroom full of lively students, and interacting with parents, colleagues, and administrators are new experiences. Mature beginners need the same assistance as younger teachers do in these aspects of the daily challenges of teaching. Unfortunately, administrators might forget that these mature adults are novices in the teaching world. They, too, need orientation and ongoing assistance.

Alternative Certification

In 2004, about 35,000 individuals entered teaching through alternative pathways (National Center for Education Information, 2005). Alternative certification programs provide opportunities for individuals who have degrees in other fields to become teachers without enrolling in traditional teacher-education programs. Depending on state requirements, options for alternative preparation and certification may include education service units, school districts, community colleges, and private entities, as well as universities (Herbert, 2004). In some instances, the responsibility for training these novice teachers rests largely with the school districts that employ them. Other programs are university based in collaboration with school districts. Most programs provide criteria for entry, an intensive training program, a system of supervision that involves mentor teachers and supervisors, and a state-mandated exit exam.

Alternative certification first appeared in the literature in the 1970s. Since the mid-1980s, several states have adopted laws to provide alternative certification programs. The first state to enact such a certification alternative was New Jersey, followed by California and Texas (Wise, Johnson, & Parson, 1994). In 2006, 47 states and the District of Columbia offered 538 alternative programs, giving individuals with and without backgrounds in education the opportunity to become certified teachers by meeting individual state requirements (National Center for Education Information, 2005). Alternative certification is the model employed in a number of programs, such as Troops to Teachers (1994) and Transition to Teaching (2001), both of which are supported by the No Child Left Behind Act. In some states, the alternative certification route has been

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particularly strong and is becoming a primary source of new teachers (Herbert, 2004).

The rapidly growing number of persons entering teaching through nontraditional programs is helping school districts meet teacher shortages while also bringing into the field more men; more individuals with expertise, maturity, and career experience outside education (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory [NCREL], 2002); and more minorities (National Center for Education Information, 2005). Research demonstrates that mature individuals experience more satisfaction with teaching, feel more competent, and are more likely to remain in teaching than is the case with recent college graduates (Feistritzer, 2005).

Teachers in alternative certification programs are usually recruited in rural and urban areas, where teacher shortages are most critical, and into subjects in which demand is greatest, such as science, mathematics (NCREL, 2002), special education, and bilingual education (Herbert, 2004). Although components of alternative certification programs vary, they typically involve a period of intensive, condensed academic course work and supervised training in the classroom (NCREL, 2002; National Center for Education Information, 2005). Although statistics reveal that alternatively prepared teachers feel as competent to teach as traditional graduates do (NCREL, 2002), research related to their performance level remains mixed and largely inconclusive.

Given the typically short duration of alternative programs and the quick transition into full-time teaching, induction and mentoring are critical to the performance and retention of alternatively certified teachers. Pedagogical knowledge, curriculum development, and classroom management are areas in which these teachers may require support (Cleveland, 2003; NCREL, 2002).

In a study of alternatively certified vocational teachers, Camp and Heath-Camp (1991) reported that the interns who were studied had the advantages of maturity, experience, and knowledge of subject matter but required assistance with curriculum development, teaching strategies, and instructional delivery. Their age and experiences provided the powerful advantage of being able to adjust readily to the work environment. The education world is much different from the business world, however, and these teachers needed ongoing assistance during their first year to orient them to their new career. A study by Wise et al. (1994) comparing student teachers and teachers

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in alternative certification programs noted that teachers in alternative programs continued to exhibit stress over the context of the teaching environment longer than their counterparts in traditional programs did. Studies such as these indicate a need for the provision of extensive ongoing induction programs for teachers in alternative certification programs. Critical to the success of teachers from alternative certification programs are a solid training program and a strong network of support (Cleveland, 2003; McKibbin, 1988).

Beginning Teachers From Minority Groups

The personal challenges and insecurities that come from being in a new organizational setting are often intensified for teachers from minority groups (Edinburg, in Cuellar & Huling-Austin, 1991). Teachers who possess a disability (Brock, in press) or are different culturally or linguistically may feel separated from the majority and minority groups already represented in the faculty. Sometimes the school culture is confusing, and district requirements, demands, and procedures are unclear. Afraid to express uncertainties to peers and administrators, they have nowhere to turn for help (Montemayor, 1990–1991).

In some instances, the entire school community does not welcome teachers or programs representing diversity or inclusion. Some large school districts hire teachers from minority groups to provide a minority presence or to fulfill a requirement. However, the presence of teachers who represent a minority culture, are linguistically diverse, or possess a disability may conflict with prevailing community philosophies. When this situation is the case, the newcomer might be the target of intense scrutiny and criticism. Biased and bigoted behaviors might compound the stressful issues that confront the novice teacher. Schools can support and retain teachers from minority groups by making diversity a practiced school value and providing induction responsive to the teachers' specific needs.

In other instances, minority teachers find themselves welcomed but considered as representatives of an entire ethnic group or of all students with disabilities. They are asked to solve all the problems that the majority teacher experiences when teaching students of a particular minority population. The children's parents, on the other

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hand, view them as advocates for minority families and express their frustrations with the educational system. The novice teachers quickly find themselves in the middle of overwhelming societal problems they cannot solve (Montemayor, 1990–1991).

Minority teachers are often assigned roles as advocates to address the needs of at-risk students and those in bilingual education programs. Often these assignments are the most challenging in the school. Although minority teachers might have a strong desire to work with minority children, sharing an ethnic origin is not sufficient preparation for tackling assignments that would challenge seasoned veterans (Montemayor, 1990–1991).

Thrust into societal issues beyond their control and frustrated that their students are not learning, the novices feel incompetent. Left alone to struggle, many decide that they are ineffective and that they have chosen the wrong career. Ultimately, some leave the teaching profession (Montemayor, 1990–1991).

Reentry to Teaching

Some returning teachers have been at home raising children for several years. During the 1999–2000 school year, reentrants made up a little less than a quarter of the new hires in schools (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). The transition to work may be difficult for the reentry teacher's entire family and may require personal adjustments by the teacher. The realities of transportation problems, daycare, sick children, and returning home to the needs of a family might prove overwhelming to the teacher. Until the personal issues are addressed, the teacher will experience great difficulty in adjusting to the demands of students and teaching.

In addition, some reentry teachers might have taught only one or two years before leaving teaching for full-time parenting. They are, in fact, beginning teachers and will likely experience all the pitfalls and dilemmas of complete novices.

Former teachers who are returning to the classroom are often treated like seasoned veterans. The perception is that because they have taught before and are mature, they know what to do. The truth is that, although they might have their personal lives in order, much has changed in the profession during their absence from teaching. Teaching styles, student needs, curriculum demands, and district

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expectations might be quite different. Unless the returning teachers have kept current, they may be in for a shock.

Some returning teachers might have left teaching after their first year, so they are still in the formative stages of their teaching development. They are actually beginning teachers who will encounter many of the same problems and dilemmas other novice teachers do. Despite their maturity, they should be considered beginning teachers and should be provided with appropriate assistance.

One principal related the following story about a teacher who returned to teaching after several years of working in the business world. The teacher was mature, held a master's degree, and had a wealth of business experience. Before going into business, she had taught math to high school students for two years. Her new position was teaching math to middle-level students. Early in the fall, she requested and was granted permission to allow her students to have a Saturday morning car wash. By late Saturday morning, the principal was receiving calls from irate parents who reported horrendous behavior at the car wash. According to reports, students were doing everything but washing cars. A visit to the car wash site explained the problem. No teacher was present. Later, when confronted by the principal, a surprised and perplexed teacher explained, "I was there to get them started, and they were doing very well. I thought they were mature enough to handle it by themselves, so I left."

Experienced Teachers in a New School

The term *induction* usually refers to the entry of individuals into the teaching profession. Although this book focuses primarily on teachers who are in their first year of teaching, another group of teachers is often overlooked when induction programs are designed. These are the veteran teachers who have migrated to new schools or districts and who have become newcomers again. During the 1999–2000 school year, a little more than half of the new hires were teachers transferring to a new school (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Many assume, incorrectly, that they already know what to do. After all, they are mature and have taught for several years. As a result, they are expected to be competent, although they might have made a significant geographic change or taken on new responsibilities at their new school (Hartzell, 1990).

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One veteran high school teacher told us,

> I would like more emphasis on the role of the principal in seeking out the new teacher and not the other way around. The situation I am in this year has raised my level of awareness of the needs of the veteran teacher who changed buildings, level, and assignment. A veteran teacher must not be viewed as someone who can easily adjust to a new building and . . . figure out the building's routines and procedures. We need just as much assistance in the socializing of the new assignment and building.

Some of the changes that an experienced teacher will confront might be more difficult than those of a novice. The novice experiencing an initiation into the profession has few entrenched behaviors and ideas. The experienced teacher has a set of preconceptions regarding the role of a teacher and the operation of a school. This conceptual framework might need to be altered considerably in order to fit into the new school setting (Hartzell, 1990). An experienced teacher new to a school district expressed her frustration: "We all have to follow the same lesson plan, which is difficult for me. . . . I think it's good to plan together, but we also have different teaching styles. We should be able to design our own lesson plans. . . . I need to have ownership of my classroom."

Each school has a culture—"the way things are done here." If "the way things are done here" differs widely from the everyday occurrences and expectations at the veteran's previous school, the veteran may experience great discomfort.

Another veteran high school teacher said, "I wasn't a 'brand-new' teacher. I was new to the district. Only first-year-teacher needs were addressed. Nothing was said about the district and its expectations."

The newcomer will encounter a faculty with established norms and social groupings. The enthusiasm of the newcomer's reception will depend on a variety of factors. Does this person fill a critical need and thus merit a welcoming response? Does the newcomer threaten already established territories? Depending on the answers, integration into the group may be difficult. If the newcomer is different in ethnicity or gender from the group, established teachers might be wary, and the reception might be strained. In addition, the newcomer might miss relationships that were left behind.

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The newcomer might have to reassess and realign preconceived notions of student expectations in order to meet the needs of the population served. One experienced first-grade teacher who was struggling to match her expectations to the students' abilities explained to her principal, "I am having trouble designing lessons that meet the abilities of the students. End-of-the-year test scores for the students that I previously taught are far below the level at which these students began the year. When these children entered my room the first day of school, most could already read. I wasn't prepared for that." Frustration might also result from having to prove oneself again: "I was successful in my previous school—don't they know it here?"

SUMMARY

Regardless of their varied circumstances, all beginners will undergo dramatic changes in their personal and professional lives as they begin a challenging year of teaching. Teaching is a complex and idiosyncratic process, developed over time in the context of a school environment. College classes and student teaching cannot replicate the realities of day-to-day classroom teaching or the diversity of school environments that beginners will encounter. Administrators need to recognize that novice teachers are not thoroughly proficient and will need ongoing assistance. Induction programs need to address the varied levels of preparation and skills of beginning teachers.

The transition of individuals into the teaching world is dramatic (and potentially stressful). It is often characterized by changes in personal lifestyles, residence, and support groups, as well as the commencement of the demands of teaching. Although dramatic, the changes need not be traumatic if the principal ensures that someone is present to guide the beginner through the transition. The key is being sensitive to the varied needs of the newcomers and responding with appropriate individualized assistance.

The early months of teaching are critical for the first-year teacher. Left on their own, beginning teachers focus on whatever works. During this initial teaching period, attitudes tend to become negative, and behavior may become inflexible. When novices discover something that works, they tend to stick with the practice for

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a long time. The resulting teaching practices become a style that is adopted without examining its particular merits. Only a narrow range of teaching practices is explored, and the beginning teachers fail to strive for the most effective practices. This situation leads to teacher stagnation rather than ongoing teacher development (Shulman & Colbert, 1988).

Efforts to keep a new teacher growing need to begin as soon as the teacher is hired and should continue throughout the early years of teaching. Too often, new teachers have conversations with their principal only when problems occur or when it is time for formal evaluations. In addition, new teachers are largely ignored by their experienced peers and seldom have an opportunity to observe any of them teaching. For growth to occur, new teachers must have a psychologically safe environment that is conducive to nonevaluative problem solving, analysis, and reflection. The new teachers must be exposed to frequent sharing with their experienced colleagues (Zumwalt, 1984). Induction programs must be geared to fit individual needs as perceived by the beginning teachers.

Principals should become knowledgeable about the employee assistance plans and human resource offices in large school districts. In the past, new employees were left to find their own solutions to the so-called problems of newness. Professionals need a wide range of services in order to be successful. Principals must be prepared to offer first-year teachers support that encompasses personal and professional needs.