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Tensions and Triumphs in the Early Years of Teaching

Susi Long, Ami Abramson, April Boone, Carly Borchelt, Robbie Kalish, Erin Miller, Julie Parks, Carmen Tisdale (2006)
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Tensions and Triumphs in the Early Years of Teaching: Real-World Findings and Advice for Supporting New Teachers is the collective project of eight educators involved in a seven-year study of their practice. The project was initiated by Susi Long, a professor in the teacher certification program at the University of South Carolina (USC), who became disappointed when she encountered some of her former students on her visits to local schools. Long found that “on the whole, graduates’ energy and enthusiasm for new ideas seemed to disappear as they found themselves sucked into the world of high-stakes testing and programmatic mandates” (p. 6). She was struck by the teachers’ comments that they were, for the most part, not creating the classrooms they had envisioned. They were working in schools that held perspectives on learning and teaching that were very different from the ideals that drove the innovative practices that they had been exposed to in their preservice education. The new teachers were rapidly seeing their ideals shattered and their convictions shaken. Their exuberance for teaching was being tainted by guilt and self-doubt.

Long’s discovery that beginning teachers were sometimes disillusioned led her to track the experiences of some of her USC students as they completed the teacher education program and began their careers as teachers. A group of graduates maintained a working group after their graduation and entry into the teaching force. At a gathering in September of their first year of teaching, only a few weeks into the school year, the teachers described how absence of autonomy had caused them to have to compromise their convictions regarding curriculum and instruction, particularly in the area of literacy: programmed phonics instruction, letter-of-the-week, basals, and endless worksheets were, to greater or lesser degrees, required of them. Paradoxical to an absence of autonomy was a sense of aloneness that arose from teaching differently than their colleagues did and from feeling alone in their beliefs. Even where they conformed and taught to the mandates, their *believing* that their practices should be different caused dissonance and a feeling of isolation. Perhaps the worst of it was the new teachers’ bafflement as to why it was so hard to teach in ways that they knew were meaningful. A resulting sense of failure was emerging very early on in their careers.

Long initiated a study of the barriers and supports that these new teachers encountered in their first years of teaching. The intent of the study was to describe the challenges that cause new teachers to question their ability to teach and their desire to remain in the profession. Questions that framed the inquiry included, “Why did some lose their self-confidence and passion for teaching so quickly? Why did they begin to second-guess their knowledge and convictions? . . . For those who did not experience such disappointment, what made the difference?” (p. xii). By the end of the first year of the study, the project had transformed from a professor’s study of teachers to a fully collaborative partnership among teacher-researchers. They formed a long-term professional study group dedicated to collecting data about their teaching and analyzing and writing about these data. The book shares “eight perspectives on the issues and events in the early years of teaching” (p. xvi). They write for an audience of teachers, administrators, professors, and other interested colleagues. However, I present this review to professors who may want to consider this text for adoption in graduate or undergraduate teacher education programs. This book traces the teachers from their days as university students who were forming their beliefs about teaching to their experiences of living up to their visions of teaching and finally gaining the voice that comes from collaboration, relationships with mentors, working through institutional policies, and identifying their own personal routes to professional growth.

Long et al.’s book may appeal to preservice educators for several reasons. Students in initial certification programs sometimes express their doubts that the universities’ education programs resemble the “real world” of the schools and might not prepare them for the day-to-day realities faced by schoolteachers. Long et al. acknowledge the validity of this skepticism. Their book does not provide a happy ending where teachers come full circle to a place where their idealism is actualized in an atmosphere of education reform. Instead, the book offers practical advice for administrators, mentors, directors of induction programs, teacher education faculty, internship coordinators, new teachers, and new graduates seeking jobs. Throughout this book the challenges of being a teacher are more than visible – they are palpable

in the teachers' first-person reflections. The authors place the values, beliefs, and teaching approaches presented by university teacher education programs on the same pages as their descriptions of the challenges the authors faced daily as teachers trying to live up to their ideals. It is more than juxtaposition – it is integration of the teachers' need to carry the ideals they formed while preservice teachers throughout the next seven years of their careers. Their many reflections describe grappling with barriers to actualizing their convictions. They recount their efforts to narrow the gulf between universities and the schools, which can be very different sorts of intellectual communities. One of their suggestions for teacher preparation programs is to help students learn how to use their academic knowledge to negotiate support for the practices they hope to employ as teachers. So it would not only be that the university professor would present a theoretical or practical knowledge base that informs a teaching approach, the professor would also help preservice teachers learn how to articulate the importance of the approach and advocate for its implementation. In short, the university would teach educators what to ask for *and* how to ask for it.

Tensions and Triumphs in the Early Years of Teaching reads like a memoir plus a pedagogy textbook. As memoir, the eight authors offer autobiographical sketches and recount “the story of becoming us” (p. 19), that is, the chronicle of the relationships that deepened during seven years of collaborative self-study. Part of the memoir describes the daunting process of data analysis, which included coding the themes that emerged from tapes of conversations and email reflections that took place for seven years. Some of the themes include *Balancing Beliefs and Mandates*, *The Being Perfect Disease*, *Success Stories*, *Second Year Changes*, and *Colleagues*. After six years of meeting, sharing, transcribing, coding, and analyzing, they outlined what the chapters of the book would be and each began writing and sharing their drafts in authors' circles. Together they crafted the text, one chapter at a time. They discussed each page in depth. They note that in the process of writing the book, they discovered what they wanted to say. The book is a tribute to dialogic theory (Bakhtin, 1982) in that the teachers' identities as authors were constructed in the context of their dialogue. They shared drafts and obtained feedback from twenty-seven teachers, administrators, and university faculty. In the end, they produced a book that honors each individual author but also presents a coherent format and style. The book is extremely well edited, with clear attention grabbers including section headers, subheaders, inset quotes, lists, and “Critical Insights” boxes at the conclusion of each chapter. The writing style is conversational yet professional.

Memoir merges into pedagogy textbook as the authors describe themselves as preservice teachers. They reflect on beliefs they held while in graduate school, for example, “Classrooms should be warm, authentically inviting physical places”; “Good teaching starts with expecting success and building from what children know”; “Careful kidwatching is key to good teaching.” The actualization of these beliefs is shown

through examples of classroom projects they completed at their internship sites. So, here, readers seeking a pedagogy textbook can see exactly how beliefs about teaching are transformed into what teachers and students actually do. The memoir continues as the authors recount lessons learned while on the job hunt (“Gut feelings really do matter”; “We wanted so badly to find what we were looking for that sometimes we saw it when it wasn't there”), while rummaging to set up their classrooms (“If I'd Known Then What I Know Now, I Would Have . . . Dressed presentably when working in the classroom before school started; parents dropped by”), on the first day of school (at dismissal, “two kids took the wrong buses!”), and for the first few weeks of school (“Right now, my dining room is a sea of papers. I haven't had time to stop and get organized.”). Reading this part of the book brings to mind the behaviorist teaching maxim that the best model is someone who is only a bit stronger than the learner, someone rather like the learner but who has achieved a task, not an expert who the learner can have little hope of being like. Teacher education students reading this text might find themselves indulging in a sheepish chuckle of self-recognition as they read the authors' candid reflections of their passages from students to beginning teachers.

The authors discuss how they ultimately integrated their beliefs with the demands of professional practice. Throughout their six-year seasoning as teachers they acknowledged that they were overwhelmed with conflicting ideas about balancing best practices with the realities of testing, grading, and covering the curriculum. They were faced with a dilemma: alienating their colleagues if they behaved differently than the norm versus “slipping toward the status quo” (p. 90) and living a life of compromised beliefs. “We represented disequilibrium at its best,” they quipped (p. 117). Their solution and salvation came in the form of reflective discussion in their working group, which they realized often concentrated on “hard talk” about their struggles, overwork, and perfectionism. Each teacher realized she had a desire to continue to read professional books, and they found guidance and affirmation in *Awakening the Heart* (Heard, 1999), *In the Company of Children* (1996), and *Wondrous Words* (1999). The teachers became “political” not by “storming the gates” (p. 160) but by actions that engendered mutual respect for differing educational ideals and practices. They resisted the temptation to shut their doors and teach as they believed; instead their doors were kept wide open and other teachers stopped in to take interest in what their classes were doing. They found “gentle action that opens the way for productive collegial conversation” (p. 161). Their peers noticed the impact that curriculum and instruction based on children's needs and interests had on children's engagement and learning. Some of the authors' innovations included a multiage program and a co-teaching model.

The knowledge they gained through professional reading and reflective dialogue fueled their confidence to speak frankly with administrators, internal advisory board members, and members of their state House of Representatives. Other

“political” actions included presenting at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and American Educational Research Association (AERA) conferences, conducting inservice workshops for other teachers, supervising student teachers, speaking to university classes, taking leadership roles as grade level team leaders and on district curriculum committees, serving in parent-teacher organizations, opening their classrooms to visitors, writing grants, training school volunteers, organizing parent education programs, completing graduate courses, and obtaining National Board certification. To the authors, taking political action occurs by building knowledge; “knowledge is voice” (p. 178).

The authors devised suggestions for administrators, teacher induction mentors, and all colleagues of new teachers. The authors candidly remind administrators that administrators open up possibilities and set the tone for the instructional climate of schools and districts. They urge administrators to build a caring community characterized by trust, respect, teacher autonomy, and an atmosphere where it is safe to take risks. Administrators should make their confidence in their teachers visible by demonstrating careful listening and by showing genuine curiosity and interest in teachers and students. They should show pride in their teachers by offering appreciation and affirmation for teachers’ completion of responsibilities. Teacher induction mentors can support a “teacher-as-learner mentality” (p. 143) which values examination of day-to-day practice – “a mentor should be your learning partner, should work with you to improve your teaching and theirs” (p. 144). Colleagues of new teachers should make the new teacher feel like a member of the team. While some complaining is inevitable, a pervasive sense of negativity is destructive. The authors remind senior colleagues to have a sense of humor, see the bright side of situations, and enjoy their students.

Finally, the authors encourage undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation programs to prepare their students for the possibility that they will encounter curricular and instructional stagnation. Courses can explore how teachers create contexts for practices that cautiously confront the status quo. Preservice teachers can learn how to work within existing programs without compromising their beliefs. Suggested readings include *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (Nieto, 2003), *Living with Uncertainty: The Messy Reality of Classroom Practice* (Dudley-Marling, 1997), *Teaching through the Storm: A Journal of Hope* (Hankins, 2003), and *The Writing Workshop: Working through the Hard Parts (and They’re All Hard Parts)* (Ray, 2001). Internship experiences need to be with supervisory teachers who are interested in their own continued growth and who model how theory becomes real. Supervisory teachers should help preservice teachers gain the confidence to sustain their ideals when they enter the teaching force and who believe that “good teaching means pushing the boundaries of what is possible” (p. 117).

Tensions and Triumphs in the Early Years of Teaching fits well with the literature on teachers’ identity development, for example, Wenger’s (1998) notion that identity is constructed

by the practices that a person adopts – the key idea being that a person’s identity derives from engagement in his or her surroundings. Danielewicz (2001) and Smith (2006) would also argue that teacher identity is created through practice – the repeated acts by which teachers represent themselves. According to Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop (2004), teachers’ professional identities develop in classroom interactions that foster to who they are and who they want to become. It is particularly important, then, that beginning teachers’ teaching environments be conducive to the development of a comfortable professional identity. The environment must allow for the acts that the new teachers want to practice and which give rise to their emerging identities.

Additionally, *Tensions and Triumphs in the Early Years of Teaching* complements the literature on redefining responsive teacher education (for example, Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990 and Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006) which proposes that theory and practice be linked effectively. As Arthur E. Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, commented in *Education Week*

There is nothing inevitable about the division between schools and colleges. . . . The challenge we face is . . . to establish permanent bonds between higher education and the schools. . . . But to bridge this gap effectively, education schools . . . need to remake themselves into professional schools, focusing on the world of school practice and the work of school practitioners. . . . [I]t would be beneficial to follow the example of medical schools and embrace the equivalent of a teaching hospital for instruction. . . . the “teaching hospital” in education makes the school the center for teacher education. . . . [and] brings together university professors, teacher education students, current teachers, and their students. . . . It gives future teachers unparalleled integration of theory and practice, academic and clinical instruction. . . . Schoolchildren have a far richer educational environment, and their achievement becomes the measure of a teacher education program’s success, providing continuous feedback on how to improve the teacher education curriculum. (2007, pgs. 46, 48, 50)

Long et al. remark that “Good teaching is always a work in progress” (p. 116). Perhaps the same can be said for good preservice education programs. As Darling-Hammond (1998) described, preprofessional programs should ground preservice teachers in the concrete tasks of teaching, should be supported by sustained modeling and coaching, and are, ideally, informed by aspirations for educational change.

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- Authors should submit four copies of the manuscript to Editor (electronic copy will be required upon acceptance of manuscript for publication)
- Manuscripts should be typed and double-spaced (including references) and must follow format of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), (2001), 5th Edition
- Author(s) name, full address and date the manuscript is submitted should appear only on the cover page of the manuscript
- Avoid inclusion of the author's identity in any portion of the manuscript in order to ensure an impartial review
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