The First Year Teacher: Protecting the Investment – An Excerpt

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As Colleges of Education, we must ask the question concerning our role in minimizing attrition. We realize the benefits of a stable teaching force on program delivery and effectiveness, but how can we encourage that longevity of our graduates in their chosen profession. This paper identifies a program in the College of Education at the University of Central Florida whereby needs were identified by teachers within central Florida inner city schools. Site-specific courses of study were devised in partnership with University faculty and teacher participants. Resources, whether instructional or course-related, were supplied and teachers were provided with an environment where they could share, vent in safety, and grow professionally.

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All those concerned with public and private education, as well as those concerned with the education of teachers have vested interests in ensuring the success of graduates from Teacher Education Programs. There are both tangible and intangible costs for all parties associated with Teacher Education. Costs for students include time, tuition that can range upwards of $52,000 for a four-year degree at a public institution, loss of income and health benefits for those pursuing teaching as a second profession, social pressures for those with families…. Faculty members have an investment of time and self; there is an emotional investment. Society has a significant investment into these graduates, both in terms of taxpayer subsidizes through underwriting institutions and scholarship/grant funds. These costs can either be viewed as a one-time expenditure or as
an investment that should be safeguarded. If we choose the latter path, then Colleges of Education must play an expanded role to protect their investment, the first-year teacher.

Far too often, we in higher education, legislators, and parents have little understanding of the reality that confronts beginning teachers. These teachers, often full of new ideas and budding professionalism, enter teaching expecting the challenges of creating lesson plans, facilitating discussion, leading instruction, and undertaking those activities which will develop young minds. Within a very short time, the reality of their position becomes evident as pressures mount from a bureaucracy, from political negativity, from seemingly endless time-consuming tasks that detract from the job of being a teacher. The pressures are numerous and suffocating - for many teachers, their first year in the profession is their last. This is a resource that cannot be squandered; this is a resource that must be supported fully if we believe in the need for a stable, qualified workforce of motivated professionals.

Failure to provide adequate support has been one of the compounding factors that leads us to headlines such as, “I Quit! Drop-outs: Teachers are leaving because the hassles aren’t worth the money” (Bell, 2000). Without a new way of viewing first-year teachers, without new strategies to support these teachers, the attrition rate will negatively impact the future of our children, our communities, and the nation. Teacher attrition is not a new phenomenon and between the 1960s and 1970s Murnane noted the probability of leaving the field jumped from .16 to .33 and that 25% of all those with teaching certificates leave the field within a few years (Croasmun et al., 1999). States surrounding Florida or sharing similar demographics note that attrition rates have continued to rise. Silberman, examining the North Carolina attrition rate noted, “More than a third of the
8,150 teachers statewide new to North Carolina classrooms… in 1997 dropped out of teaching in the state’s schools before their third year. By the fourth year, the fall of 2000, about 45 percent of them were gone” (Silberman, 2002). Silberman also reminded his readers that national, state and even district attrition rates can be misleading as some schools suffer significantly higher losses. Tennessee Tomorrow (2002) asks the question, “Why then are new teachers leaving the teaching profession early in their careers? 42% of new teachers will leave the teaching profession in Tennessee in the first five years of a career.” The State of Texas, which has similar demographics and educational initiatives to Florida, has generated data that reveals ”…just 75 of every 100 certified teachers go into teaching within two years of graduating from college. And only 35 of those graduates are teaching after five years” (Johnson, 2000).

Throughout the nation, attrition is a serious problem; however, states, such as Florida, experiencing phenomenal growth in student numbers are especially hard-hit by any attrition. Colleges of Education in the state cannot fill the vacancies that occur each year; the state has initiated “quick fixes” to the problem and such programs still fall short of meeting the needs for classroom teachers. Davis and Graham, citing Florida Department of Education statistics, claim, “…our state's public schools must fill nearly 10,500 teacher vacancies before school begins this year. Unfortunately, Florida colleges and universities graduate only 6,000 new teachers in an average year. That deficit is troubling enough. But vacancy projections for future academic years show no relief in sight” (Davis and Graham, 2000).

In addition, teachers within the State of Florida seem to have less personal attachment to the profession, which can impact attrition. The Southeast Center for
Teaching Quality (SCTQ) has ominous projections for the state. A SCTQ survey found that teachers in the Southeast are “less wedded to their career choice” than other teachers in the region and Florida’s teachers “were most likely to report their dissatisfaction. In fact, one out of every four Florida teachers said that they would probably or certainly not become a teacher again. They were also more likely (6%) to indicate they would leave teaching as soon as possible” (Berry, Luczak, and Norton, 2003). Florida’s teacher shortage is real and no remedy is in sight. In fact, anecdotal information from the field would suggest that the increasing pressures of the profession will exacerbate the attrition rate.

As Colleges of Education, we must ask the question concerning our role in minimizing attrition. We realize the benefits of a stable teaching force on program delivery and effectiveness, but how can we encourage that longevity of our graduates in their chosen profession. We first must open our eyes, ears, and heart to listen to those in the field. Only by listening to the concerns that drive first-year teachers from the field will we be able to supply the support required. University of Central Florida made a move in this direction several years ago as several committed faculty members began to work with Inner City beginning teachers to develop programs that would assist those teachers in surviving the first year. Needs were identified by teachers within those Inner City schools and site-specific courses of study were devised in partnership with University faculty and teacher participants. Resources, whether instructional or course-related, were supplied and teachers were provided with an environment where they could share, vent in safety, and grow professionally.
One of the requirements of the program was for participants to journal reflections on their teaching experiences. The pressures faced by the beginning teachers were many and, for these teachers, all were significant. These teachers often spoke of their initial baptism by fire when confronted with mounds of paperwork, a chore that grew throughout the year. The pressures on a teacher's time, in terms of Department requirements, District P.D. plans, ESOL training, parent conferences, specialized curriculum training, team meetings, IEP meetings, ad infinitum, simply consume beginning teachers. Within the classroom, the teachers faced other issues; sometimes, these are simply the tools that were inadequate or missing. The bureaucracy further compounded the feeling of isolation and disempowerment through impersonal and non-supportive attitudes. Then there was the testing, "Today was my first experience with the F-CAT. This was truly a STRESSFUL experience! There was so much tension among the faculty and students. Children were afraid that if they did badly in the test that they might fail or be retained. It was incredible. I administered the F-CAT to the 3rd graders with specific learning disabilities. This was truly painful for my students and myself. Most of these students are reading at a primer-first grade level. The reading sections were almost impossible for them. Two of my students burst our crying… why must we put these kids through this if their scores don't even count? I don't understand this concept." One teacher broke down as she expressed that the year and a half growth in her students did not bring them to the cut-off FCAT scores; she and her students were categorized as below average.

These teachers, among them some of the best and brightest, often felt themselves overwhelmed by issues that prevented them from teaching effectively, establishing
community, building self-esteem among their children, participating in decision-making, and feeling respected as a professional. In the past, there has been an understanding that teachers “must assume a highly complex, multidimensional role," "need…. psychological support," and require "positive mentoring relationships." Without such support, Bolden and Deering note, "A preponderance of beginning teachers experience physical fatigue, stress, isolation, and disillusionment" (1998, p. 4). However, that support was elusive during the initial phase of URTP and would seem even more elusive today in so many schools.

The schools in Polk County, Florida, have many of the same challenges as those faced by teachers in the Inner City. Our elementary schools are primarily Title I schools with the challenges that poverty brings into the classroom. Malnutrition, listlessness, lack of school readiness – there are many variables associated with poverty that impact on student achievement and school climate. Many of our schools have large numbers of Second Language students, some of whom are non-English speaking. Polk County also has significant numbers of migrant children in the schools, students who enter later in the school year and must be brought up to speed in terms of academics. These challenges require teachers who are highly motivated, caring, and competent. If all student needs are to be met, teachers must feel empowered to meet individual needs and must feel that they are professionally, and personally, supported. They do not and, often, are not, which leaves them at risk of dropping out of the profession.

Colleges of Education, by their nature, are traditional and hesitant to change. Quite naturally Colleges want to ensure that education students only have “safe” experiences, but in some cases to be “safe” risks must be taken. If we seriously wish to
address the issue of teacher attrition, then we must step outside of our comfort zone and be willing to risk. At Warner Southern, as with most teacher institutions, our students are placed in the public schools several times during their educational program. In our College, students do observations and tutoring in their introductory courses, are placed for Practicums and field experiences with courses in curriculum and instruction, assessment, behavior management, and diagnostic reading, and finally serve an Internship. Each of these experiences is valuable and students gain exposure to the profession and teaching approaches/strategies. The setting is safe because placements are always with seasoned teachers in well-established, well-run classes. However, being “safe” denies some opportunities for pre-service teachers and does nothing to address the needs of those who are first-year teachers, those who still require support.

To this end, Warner Education faculty, using a Service Learning model, decided that a paradigm shift was in order. The need had already been clearly established. First-year teachers require support, and in a very tangible way. These teachers need someone to share educational thoughts, someone to assist with the challenges they face in the classroom, and someone in a non-evaluative position with whom they can vent. A tangible support system is essential if these teachers are to escape feelings of isolation and deal with the frustrations of being a new teacher. Pre-service teachers require a setting where they can see the “real” challenges of the first-year teacher, where their input is valued, where they feel like a colleague, where they begin to understand the many challenges faced by the first-year teacher. There must be reciprocity in Service-Learning and there is such a reciprocity involved in this process; both parties can grow and become more effective in meeting their own needs and the needs of their students.
In the spring of 2003, a pilot program was initiated. Still desirous of maintaining some degree of “safety,” faculty decided to place only two students with first year teachers. Criteria utilized in the choice of students were those who had demonstrated a maturity and openness, and the fact that such placement would not be a burden in travel time and location. The teachers were chosen as representative of former pre-service students who had been non-traditional and traditional, but who both had Clinical Educator training during their Internship. These classroom teachers were also chosen for their warmth and openness. A third teacher was added at her request as she was finding her students to be very difficult. Pre-service teachers were juniors who, as part of their class in Behavior Management, were placed in their Practicum setting one day per week.

Interviews were conducted to ascertain whether this type of placement was beneficial, to one or both parties. Again, the voices of the participants must be heard. The reflection is part of the Service-Learning model; this validates the input of all those involved and permits the reader to share some very personal insights. Space limits the response and a further description of the program, but concluding comments on the part of both student and teacher are revealing.

**Student 1:** “I don’t think that in the traditional setting, you make any difference. WSC students need to be in the classroom more than they are now. In this placement, I could see the difference I was making. I was exposed to the different policies in the school. In this placement, I was making a contribution.”

**Student 2:** “This gives you a feeling of what to expect the first year. You realize the need to rely on other teachers, to talk to other teachers.”
Student 3: “This was a great experience for me. I learned that it’s not all flowery roses. I don’t believe that it’s good to paint a picture where everything is perfect and all of your students will get A’s. I saw that the time in your day is limited and that you need to plan, plan, plan. I have it and read it, but didn’t understand it.”

Teacher 1: “I think this is wonderful – first year teaching can be overwhelming at times. Everything has to be done so fast and, for me, this was especially important as classroom set-up in the middle of the year is so difficult. I don’t know if my room would have been ready if it wasn’t for [Student]. Since she was there before the kids came, she really got to grow. She knew that this child learns this way; that child in that way… She reminded me of things that I forgot… She kept me from pulling my hair out many times.”

Teacher 2: “I don’t know… I’m still unsure if she learned what she needed… I’m only sharing with her what I learned. I did share with her that the first year can be scary and we talked about things I’ve tried and the need to adapt.” “She was wonderful to have in the class. The kids did work harder when she was here – I wish they would do that all the time. It was nice to have someone to help out.”

Teacher 3: “[Intern] did have a positive effect. Students would get excited when he was coming. ‘Oh Yeah, it’s Friday and Mr. [Student] comes today. He was that extra person, that extra set of eyes… He gave me time to work with other kids with less disruptions, and he did have positive effects on the students he worked with – [student] has been much improved since working with [Student]. Sometimes, I think that these kids just need someone to talk with as no one is there to talk with them at home.”

Our students learned, while providing a valuable service to the first-year teacher and her group of students. This was a small pilot program, which we have doubled in size
for the fall of 2003. As professors, we believe that we have a responsibility to our graduates, their students, and society, a responsibility that cannot end upon graduation.

Unfortunately, the pressures in our schools are escalating such that a crisis is being externally generated. Support for teachers has not materialized, despite the fact that Nationally Board certified teachers are to provide mentoring, despite induction requirements, and despite the expenditure on numbers of resource teachers who are to be a support to the classroom teacher. School faculty are bombarded (and that word was carefully chosen) by external factors that are demoralizing and disempowering. The obsession with testing has taken ownership for curriculum from teacher hands – scripted lessons followed by intensive testing deprive the students of valuable learning time, prevent community building, and even drastically limit, or curtail, time spent on other subject area. Mentoring gives way as all efforts become focused only on standardized test preparation. Support for first-year teachers fades away as all-intrusive government mandates set the entire agenda for both programs and tone within the schools. NCLB will only exacerbate the disenfranchisement of teachers and drive more out the door.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future notes in *No Dream Denied*, “The number of teachers entering the schools increased steadily during the 1990s… The problem is that teacher attrition was increasing even faster. It is if we were pouring teachers into a bucket with a fist-sized hole” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003). Despite all those who desire to replace education with schooling, despite all the negative initiatives mandated by politicians, we in Colleges of Education must look towards the future and help protect our graduates from those negative forces which work so hard to submerge their idealism. We must provide the
support to protect our, and society’s, investment by doing what we can to patch that
“hole.”
References

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