

Florida Association of Teacher Educators Journal Volume 1 Number 14 2014 1-7.
<http://www.fate1.org/journals/2014/dassa.pdf>

Being a Superhero: Evolving into the Resilient First Year Teacher and Beyond

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Every year new teachers enter the field but many do not stay past their first year. These beginning teachers struggle with curriculum, mandates, procedures, students, and everything that is thrown at them. In reality these beginning teachers struggle with establishing themselves as a teacher, identifying how and what they want to teach, and how they want to connect with their colleagues. These struggles need to be conquered before they can even begin to successfully work with their students and endure the first year of teaching.

Introduction

“But as a new teacher, you don’t know what you don’t know” (Brown, 2012, p. 25).

Beginning teachers are just that: at the beginning of their career. Yet it is amazing that “no other profession takes newly certified graduates, places them in the same situation as seasoned veterans, and gives them no organized support” (Maistre & Pare, 2010, p. 560). Therefore the unknown becomes the scariest factor they deal with on a daily basis; and they are expected to handle the unknown with the same finesse as a veteran teacher. Beginning teachers may have some insight into handling some classroom management situations through college courses and field work or from practice at a university student teaching experience (working with

a mentor teacher or clinical educator in the classroom on a daily basis). In reality they are more prepared with the methods of being a teacher than the daily skills needed to deal with the unexpected. They can write a standards-based lesson plan and design a “best practice” classroom management plan, but fall short when an unexpected event occurs in which they have to handle without the guidance of a mentor teacher, clinical educator or university supervisor. These beginning teachers are aware of differentiated instruction, alternative assessments, management strategies and modifications in the classrooms, but are unsure how to develop ownership for the students that are now solely theirs. “Teaching not only involves instructing students, but also caring for them, forming bonds and relationships with them” (Tait, 2008, p. 59). In reality, how these beginning teachers deal with these encounters and develop these relationships will shape them into veteran educators that are successful and make a difference in the lives of their students. This is the ultimate goal for the profession but a struggle for the beginning teacher. In reality they can begin this successful venture through developing of a teacher identity, finding the right school with which to work, building relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and ensuring the opportunity for positive practice and continuous improvement.

Creating a Superhero Teacher Identity

Before beginning teachers can tackle the daily tasks such as balancing lesson delivery and classroom management they have to philosophize about how they would handle different challenging situations. For example, creating their teacher identity or the role the beginning teachers want stakeholders to view. These stakeholders include administration, staff, peers, parents, and students. Flores & Day (2006) define this identity as “...an ongoing and dynamic process which entails making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences” (as cited in Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 762). It is the creation of who they are professionally, incorporating what they stand for and how they want to be perceived. “...They must build a hybrid between their authentic personalities and their roles as professional educators” (Brown, 2012, p. 25). They must become “superheroes!”

A superhero is a combination of a “regular” person in society who fights for a great cause while other time does it in disguise for the “wow factor.” Beginning teachers need to be the superheroes that can demonstrate their amazing personality and offer pedagogical knowledge but sometimes disguise those traits and use their strong authority when necessary. They need to develop a balance for this combination so that they can flip perspectives with ease when dealing with the different audiences they encounter, whether it is a student, parent, colleague or administrator. “Developing a strong sense of a professional identity as a teacher may be crucial to the well-being of new members of the profession” (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 762). It is the way to establish themselves as the resilient professional they want to be.

Designing the True Superhero Costume

This identity will be essential when they begin to develop relationships with their students, parents and colleagues. “Effective teaching has as much to do with the quality of student-teacher relationships as it does with the quality of lesson planning” (Strouse, 2003, p. 28). The struggle that many beginning teachers face is with the creation of this identity, especially in the constant changing world of education. Beginning teachers have to be able to

stay true to their beliefs and passions but also adjust to the constant shifting in policies and mandates. Educators are required to "...keep up with constant diversification in society, development of knowledge and increases in access to knowledge" (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 762). They have to be knowledgeable of their state requirements as well as the national ones such as the recent Common Core Standards. This is quite a task for the recent graduate or even professional new to the field.

This idea of creating a teacher identity has been a topic of discussion for beginning teachers for years. In fact, Olsen (2008) conducted a specific study to "...examine relationships among teacher identity components and ways they both illuminate and influence novice teacher development" (p. 24). The investigation consisted of six recent teacher graduates from the same teacher education program at a California University. Several of these beginning teachers identified struggles as they tried to fuse their educational anticipations from their universities with the actualities of existing teaching. They also struggled with connecting "...personal self-understanding with their developing professional identities" (Olsen, 2008, p. 33). Teacher identity isn't just another assignment to complete in order to earn a degree it is the beginning of a successful career.

The Steps Toward Superhero Status

Superheroes aren't created in a day. There is often an evolving process that develops someone into that status. The first step for beginning teachers to create this character is through the experiences and relationships they have had throughout college fieldwork, student teaching and any other positive interactions with children. Using all these recent experiences will allow them to develop who they want to be and still be relevant to the current mandates and programs. This requires a morphing of all the experiences they've seen and even those that may have discouraged them. Beginning teachers are inspired by the great examples but as educators need to be aware of what a powerful a lesson can be learned from the non-examples. All of these examples and experiences have allowed beginning teachers to create the ideals that will be the foundation needed to create their identities. This foundation should NEVER change because it is the purpose they have for becoming a teacher.

Authenticity is another component that will guide these beginning teachers in the process. This initial teacher identity and the relationship with students and colleagues must be authentic because a fake is easily recognized. Simply creating an identity that they think others want to see is not going to allow them to be true to themselves or have resiliency in the teaching profession. Flores and Day (2006) stated "The formation of a professional identity is most malleable during the early years, when teachers may experience isolation, a mismatch of classroom ideals and reality, and a lack of support (as cited in McNutty & Fox, 2010, p. 313). Therefore it is essential that identity creation happens early and is grounded enough to withstand any barriers, such as professional negativism that beginning teachers may encounter.

Clearly this process is continual and beginning teachers develop themselves as they encounter their own teaching experiences both positive and negative. Teachers, like superheroes, are constantly morphing and developing their craft as their experiences influence their perspectives and their decision-making. Those beginning teachers who believe their identity is

static and never altered will struggle with both professional and personal growth in future years. Education is constantly changing and educators, beginning and veteran have to be flexible in their teaching styles and identities while still being true to their foundational ideals.

Finding a Home

There are two essential factors that influence this step-by-step process of teacher identity development. These factors can impact the optimal success of these novice teachers. The first one to address is choosing a proper “home” to begin this metamorphosis. All beginning teachers need to find a school culture that aligns their principles and philosophies in order to begin the first step of the teacher identity creation. They have had the opportunity to see various schools throughout their field work, practicum, internship, student teaching, academic service-learning hours, and possibly substitution positions. Each visit should have assisted in narrowing the type of “home” that aligns with who they are as professionals. Unfortunately when opportunities to become employed arise, beginning teachers often make quick selections to secure a position. They have the philosophy that “getting in the door is the key and a switch can always be made later” (Dassa, 2012, p. 2). Unfortunately “getting in the door” can mean staying for more time than anticipated. Many school districts have policies for beginning teachers that require them to contract at that school for a certain amount of years before being able to extend their contracts. This is not the best environment because working in a school that does not align with their philosophies and teaching styles can be very exasperating (Dassa, 2012) especially if it is for several years.

The most effective method to avoid this pitfall is for beginning teachers develop a list of their own philosophies and style and compare them to the schools they deem as a good fits and choose to interview with. Not every school is a perfect match for every teacher. “Particular teacher identities fit better with particular school situations” (Olsen, 2008, p. 32). Sometimes meeting the faculty and staff at the schools that have been identified as good fits may make the selection process even stronger. As Olsen (2008) identified from his study, Helping novice teachers diagnose their expectations, needs, and future goals, and foreground those as they apply for jobs, interview with schools, and choose their professional sites should increase fit. This in turn should increase teacher quality, teacher satisfaction and teacher retention. (p. 32)

Finding a Superhero Network

The second factor is the need for a strong, supportive network. Much of the negativism in the field can be avoided if beginning teachers are able to build relationships with colleagues. “Teachers, especially rookies, shouldn’t be islands” (Brown, 2012, p. 25). It is essential that beginning teachers do not isolate themselves from colleagues because they fear the unknown and are afraid of veteran perceptions. They do not need a secret superhero cave to hide themselves away from the world. Beginning teachers must communicate and build relationships with colleagues and administrators. An effective way to begin building the network is to seek out those that have similar teacher identities. Teaching professionals that have similar styles and views can help beginning teachers rise toward success through mentorship. “To establish the most positive school climate, beginning teachers often need to seek the most encouraging

teachers and administrators who will appreciate their optimism and new ideas” (McNulty & Fox, 2010, p. 314).

Beginning teachers need to be surrounded by colleagues who share their passion for the field. These veteran educators may have different views and perspectives about teaching which can allow these beginning teachers the potential to grow and learn new ways of seeing the educational world, but their passion to be in the field must be a constant. “It takes a village to raise a competent teacher” (Brown, 2012, p. 24). They can work with these colleagues through team teaching, sharing of ideas through professional development, and creating excitement about the educational field. Beginning teachers should be given the opportunity to observe these successful teachers in action so they can take the great ideas and bring them into their own classrooms. If these mentor teachers have similar teacher identities then beginning teachers can use the traits they see for professional development. Bobek (2002) solidified it best when she said:

New teachers enhance their resilience by fostering productive relationships with people who understand the trials and tribulations of teaching, who reinforce the value of what teachers do, and who offer insight into various options available for dealing with a variety of teacher situations. (as cited in Tait, 2008, p. 57)

Beginning teachers will evolve into veteran teachers if they feel that this support system is there to guide them through the unknown expectations.

Practice Makes Perfect...Even for a Superhero

Once beginning teachers have their teacher identity established and build authentic relationships with other positive identities, they need to remember that everything does not get mastered in the first year. In every superhero story the people do not expect the hero to save every bystander in the beginning. A superhero evolves into an amazing character over time, by mastering the specific skills. Being a teacher requires the same time and mastery of the craft. “Teaching is an art and science. And it takes a lot of time to figure out” (Brown, 2012, p. 26). No teacher would ever expect their students to have immediate academic success without thorough opportunities and support. Yet “...the teaching profession fails to apply some of its corporate pedagogical knowledge to its own neophytes” (Buchanan, 2012, p.205). Beginning teachers are expected to have immediate success and continue on that path for every year to come. This is an unattainable expectation especially in the first year. In reality, “...learning to be a teacher is a very complex undertaking” (Tait, 2008, p. 65). Every year there is new curriculum to develop, new students to accommodate, and new mandates from the policymakers to follow.

How are beginning teachers expected to be immediately successful when the factors are constantly changing and being manipulated? It is a learning process for all levels of teachers in the field, especially the novice ones. As McNulty and Fox (2010) explained, “...beginning teachers must be acutely aware of how their own thoughts and actions significantly influence their professional climate” (p. 312). Beginning teachers must feel success with each new scenario that is addressed in order to feel resilient and accomplished in their first year.

It is essential to keep that superhero mentality, be the best and take every new event as a learning opportunity to evolve into a successful veteran teacher. These beginning teachers enter the field of education to be inspirational and impact future generations. This passion alone makes them powerful! Now add a strong teacher identity, a perfect home, a village of support, and attainable high expectations of success, and these beginning teachers will forge through the first year and beyond!

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Article Citation

Dassa, L. (2014). Being a Superhero: Evolving into the Resilient First Year Teacher and Beyond. *Florida Association of Teacher Educators Journal*, 1(14), 1-7. Retrieved from <http://www.fate1.org/journals/2014/dassa.pdf>
