

EARLY CHILDHOOD NOVICE TEACHER RETENTION

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Abstract

Early childhood novice teachers often do not receive the support they need upon entering the field. Those who are not provided with effective mentorship and professional development will struggle more to adapt to the demands of teaching. A lack of ability to make decisions about how and what they teach may further contribute to lower job satisfaction and eventual burnout. A combination of such factors contributes to a historically high teacher turnover rate during the first five years of teaching. Early childhood education needs more highly-trained teachers who are willing to stay in year after year. Aside from higher wages, in order to retain teachers, districts should offer better novice teacher mentorship, professional development, administrative support, and more autonomy regarding how and what is taught in the early childhood classroom.

Keywords: early childhood, novice teacher, teacher retention, teacher attrition, teacher turnover, mentorship, professional development, play

In two recent novice teacher pinning ceremonies held at a university in a small rural town, in-service teacher professionals were invited to give a keynote speech inviting upcoming teacher-graduates into the field. Instead of merely delivering uplifting comments about the joys of teaching, their speeches were riddled with warnings about the difficulties of being a novice teacher. The overriding message was that teachers are entering a field with many problems. The important thing is to try to focus on the positive moments from which you can source joy. A recent early childhood education graduate who attended one of these pinning ceremonies acknowledged the concerns in the keynote speaker's message. In a private conversation with one of her professors, she described her first year in an early childhood classroom as being troubled by defiant student behavior and a severe lack of administrative support. This influenced why she decided to leave her position, and almost the field entirely.

Stories akin to those from her first year are echoed throughout the research. Many childhood teachers leave the field during their first five years because they become discouraged by the differences between what they anticipated and their actual teaching experiences. The result is that during the early childhood years children are less likely to be placed with a seasoned teacher who possesses the wisdom and expertise earned through years of experience. This is detrimental because development during the early years is vital to later academic success, as well as to the overall quality of the life of a child. Since the 1960's, various studies have affirmed the effects of the long-term benefits of having access to a high-quality early childhood education.

According to research released by the Learning Policy Institute, studies of the Abecedarian Project, Perry Preschool Project, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers followed children into adulthood and

found additional benefits for graduation rates and educational attainment, which generated cost savings for society as a whole. These long-term benefits appeared whether or not test score differentials were consistently found, suggesting that the range of cognitive, social, and emotional skills and abilities children develop in preschool and carry through grade school may serve them well in a variety of ways throughout life. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019, p.1). Results from studies like these support the necessity for trained teachers who can make meaningful connections with their students and provide a high-quality education based on knowledge gained through experience and learned expertise. High teacher turnover prevents children from developing a secure attachment with teachers (Raikes, 1993) and also has a negative impact on their social, emotional, and language development (Korjenevitch & Dunifon, 2010). Consequently, the high teacher turnover rate can result in lesser quality experiences for children during their early years of schooling.

The recent pandemic has only compounded the problem of teacher turnover (Reich et al., 2020). Thus, talented new teachers are leaving the profession after only a few years due to being exposed to the most negative aspects of schools without having enough exposure to positive experiences. Moreover, many new teachers describe feeling that they are not respected as professionals, unlike professionals in historically respected fields such as law, engineering, or medicine. Instead, many teachers feel they are viewed as glorified babysitters in a field treated as though it does not require a specific skill set. CEO of Jack and Jill Children's Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida states,

We treat these people like they are meaningless, like they're babysitters, like the work they are doing is not important... We are kept at a high standard—all this pressure to get these kids ready, keep them healthy and safe, be mandatory reporters. There are all these things put on us, and then it's like, "Here's your minimum wage." (Sullivan, 2021)

Reasons such as negative experiences and an absence of respect are further compounded by a lack of good mentorship, professional development, and the inability for teachers to make professional decisions regarding the curriculum. It is this combination that leads to such a high teacher attrition rate.

Early Childhood Teacher Attrition Rates

Teacher attrition is not a new issue for the profession; in fact, it has been a problem since at least the early 1960's. According to an article in *Life Magazine* (1962), "Too many will quit permanently because they are fed up (Meryman, 1962, p. 104)." This historical article in *Life Magazine* further discusses the disproportionate number of teachers leaving the field in comparison to those graduating and entering the field. It further cites low wages, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of respect for the profession, all as being problematic to teacher retention, and all of which remain issues of contemporary times. Many of these timeless issues are compounded by expectations placed upon novice teachers as they enter the field.

Once a novice teacher is hired, they face the daunting and demanding task of setting up a classroom that is inviting and safe, and of also successfully impacting student achievement. A typical first year of teaching is filled with nerves, excitement, and uncertainty. The demands are usually great but are too often expected to be met without the needed support from campus and district professionals. The experiences of novice teachers are the most difficult time in a teacher's career (Gavish & Friedman, 2010) and have been described in the research literature as "sink or swim" (Lawson, 1992; Lortie, 1975), "baptism of fire," or "trial of fire" experiences (Hall, 1982; Pataniczek & Isaacson, 1981).

Districts across states have tried to implement systems that support novice teachers as they progress into their next stages of the profession. One type of support provided is an induction program that is set in place to provide novice teachers with the comprehensive support they need to prepare them for work on their specific campus. These needs may include training teachers to deliver a specific curriculum adopted by the school or training them in the type of discipline strategy expected to be used schoolwide. Induction should also assist teachers in building a healthy and organized classroom environment that is efficient in managing and supporting student's social, emotional, and cognitive needs. On the contrary, novice teacher induction is time most often spent learning policies, meeting district mandates, and expectations for administering assessments (Fantilli & Dougall, 2009).

Research on the induction process reveals that induction works best when it is systematically embedded in the culture of a school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). This means that administration must take an active role in the workings of the induction program on their campus. Empirical evidence shows that school administrators' engagement is important for creating a structure supportive of the induction process through their impact on school culture, instructional leader role, support of new teachers, and involvement in mentor selection (Long et al., 2012). Effective induction programs rely heavily on collaborative support structures among all stakeholders; however, without the support and commitment of the campus administrators, the intent of growing novice early childhood teachers into successful and retainable classroom teachers may not be attainable.

Mentorship and Professional Development

Mentorship

Mentoring programs should support novice teachers as they help them adjust to their new professional responsibilities and encourage them to remain in the teaching profession (Chesley & Jordan, 2012). However, Kelly and Northrop (2015) conducted a study using the Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Survey which pointed out that novice teachers feel overwhelmed by a lack of guidance, mentorship, and support, which is compounded by a lack of democratic ownership of choices made by administrators and executive faculty that directly affect what and how they teach. Learning to teach is an ongoing process, and while teacher preparation programs lay the foundation for teaching, a great deal of what teachers learn comes from their experiences after entering the classroom. Therefore, mentorship and professional development should feel like a support network for teachers as they navigate these new experiences.

Yet, novice teachers report being reluctant to ask questions or to seek assistance. This is perhaps because the responsibility of mentorship is often assigned to veteran teachers who already have many other assigned duties. Further, mentors may not be properly trained on how to guide a novice teacher through proper lesson planning, implementation of classroom systems, or delivery of effective instruction. Novice teachers should be provided opportunities to expand their professional growth by having reflective conversations and meaningful engagement with veteran teachers who understand how to serve as mentors, and who are glad to accept the task.

As a former administrator, I found that mentees were more confident as they progressed through the year on campuses where mentors were properly vetted, provided for with clear expectations, and also given continuous professional development. It is important that campuses successfully implement these opportunities to empower and retain novice teachers. However, mentoring can be a daunting task, especially when it is not embedded in the culture of the campus. Furthermore, within and between schools

and districts, there is often no standard format for mentorship in terms of it being introductory or ongoing, and there is no uniformity in how mentorship should be administered. It is proven that effective mentorship relationships are ones that are ongoing, have campus administrative support, along with a financial incentive for the mentor (Kelley, 2004).

Professional Development

Professional development can also be important to the induction process. Unfortunately, it is often not presented as a practical application of teaching strategies and techniques. Perhaps that is because districts often underfund or under plan professional development opportunities and do not place much emphasis on making the experience hands-on, engaging, or for beneficial immediate use and practical application in the classroom. Instead, on many campuses professional development sessions are presented as a one-size-fits-all approach, despite evidence that novice teachers are often in need of a more tailored experience. For example, while they may need learning that is focused on lesson planning, classroom management, and content delivery, they may also have other, more individualized needs. Yet, novice teachers express that the material presented during professional development is often not relevant to what they need in order to be more successful in the classroom (Borko, 2004). Instead, they report feeling that it is time that would have been better spent with their students. Some also believe that professional development held outside of contract hours should be awarded with a stipend for overtime, which it typically is not.

Professional Decision Making Regarding the Curriculum

Professional decision making regarding what is taught in the classroom is often not an option to which teachers have access, despite entering the field carrying with them a toolkit of acquired knowledge from their time spent in a teacher preparation program. This toolkit likely includes ideas such as best practices using a whole-child approach to teaching a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

NAEYC defines ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ as methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning. Educators implement developmentally appropriate practice by recognizing the multiple assets all young children bring to the early learning program as unique individuals. (NAEYC, 2020, p. 4-6)

Implementing a curriculum based on best practice or developmentally appropriate ideals often includes modes of teaching that integrate play and creativity into the curriculum. These modes of teaching may include the use of open-ended hands-on centers, thematic units based upon student interests, project-based learning that allows for collaboration and deeper meaning making over time, and student-led student-inspired lessons that result in high levels of engagement and information retention. However, upon entering the field, novice teachers often find that they are not given the power or freedom to execute professional decisions regarding the curriculum in ways that allow them to implement such modes of teaching. In fact, many novice teachers report finding it nearly impossible to implement modes of teaching that allow for ingenuity on behalf of the teacher professional and/or the learner. McDonald (2019) stated,

When I taught kindergarten, I strove to provide an engaging environment where play was the prominent support for and means of learning. But in truth, I found it challenging. Early in my career I used a didactic approach full of worksheets and drills because it was expected. (p. 22)

Despite research showing that play and creativity are of higher value for deeper meaning making and more learning experiences, the lack of freedom in professional decision-making forces teachers to present the curriculum through the use of textbooks and skill and drill practices that employ deskwork such as worksheets. The result of testing mandates and strict standards-based curriculum demands abolishes any allowance for teachers to make executive decisions concerning the content they deliver. Thus, play and creativity are often eliminated, even in early childhood classrooms where play and creativity are so important to learning and development.

“Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child” (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 182). However, early childhood teachers report being concerned that the students in their classrooms are no longer allowed to play, despite research showing that play during the early years is a primary factor in positive growth and development of the whole child. Play allows them to socialize, explore their emotions, problem solve, communicate, move their bodies, and to interact with their environment and other students in meaningful ways. A 2018 report released by the American Academy of Pediatrics states that based on research, doctors have found

...play helps children learn to cooperate, solve problems, negotiate and develop leadership skills and creativity, and it ensures a strong start in language and cognitive skills...decrease anxiety and may serve as a buffer for toxic stress...The report encourages early childhood programs to ensure a balanced curriculum that includes playful learning to promote healthy development. (Masterson & Bohart, 2019, p. 3)

Such research highlights the value of allowing teachers to make decisions regarding what is included in the curriculum taught in their classroom. Hence, teachers should be able to integrate and provide time for play and creativity, especially since it is considered best practice and developmentally appropriate for children to engage in such activities.

Opportunities for students to use creativity allows students to develop cognitive structures based upon problem-solving, self-expression, logical reasoning, and abstract thinking. Some of the highest forms of thinking take place when a child is engaging with the curriculum in creative ways, which is why creativity is positioned at the utmost level on Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson, 2001). Opportunities for creativity allow for both hemispheres of the brain to be active. However, in order to fully engage students in creative ways, teachers need to first have the freedom to plan and implement a curriculum that fosters elements of creative thinking. This is often not the case. Instead, teachers are often expected to teach so that their students can pass state and district level testing mandates. Even veteran colleagues and administration feel the residual impact of these stressful and rigorous requirements. Such requirements decrease satisfaction with the overall school climate and hinder the development of the whole child, as teachers can no longer make curriculum decisions concerning what is best for the individual needs of each student.

Play and creativity are often seen as a frivolous waste of time by those who do not understand that play is the work of children, and that creativity is possibly one of the most valuable components of learning. One-size-fits-all learning objectives often relay the message to teachers and students that there is no time to enjoy learning because meeting performance-based standards are of higher priority. When early childhood teachers lose the power and freedom to make decisions regarding the curriculum, particularly with regard to integrating play and creativity, both teachers and students tend to become less satisfied with the educational experience. “The current educational emphasis on standards and high-stakes assessments places tremendous pressure on teachers and children, leading to potentially

‘problematic teaching practices’ (McDonald, 2019, p. 22), and like a domino effect, students become bored, negative behaviors and other problems ensue, teacher burnout increases, and turnover results, further contributing to a lack of novice teacher retention in early childhood.

Conclusion

Ingersoll and Strong (2011) examined the effects of induction and mentoring practices for novice teachers. They state, “Teaching has relatively high turnover compared to many other occupations and professions such as lawyers, engineers, architects, professors, pharmacists, and nurses” (p. 202). The emotional toll that early burn-out factors have on novice teachers is magnified by low salary, poor health care benefits, and little to no opportunity for pay increases, performance awards, or career promotion. If the lack of economic and mental well-being negatively affects the self-efficacy of novice teachers in regard to their perceived ability to perform well during their first few years, the likely result is stress, emotional exhaustion, and eventual early burnout.

New evidence at the intersection of neurobiology, developmental science, and early education carries vast implications for how we think about children’s early childhood teachers... We need a much deeper understanding of the personal, workplace, and economic supports that teachers require... And we sorely need to experiment with interventions that focuses on teachers’ economic well-being and mental health.” (Phillips et al., 2016, p. 3)

It is time we begin to explore avenues for teachers to receive high-quality mentorship and applicable and engaging professional development opportunities. Lastly, autonomy concerning curriculum decisions should be placed back into the hands of teachers as trained professionals who understand what is best for students.

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