

Original Paper

Reflections from the field: Novice teachers reflect on their first year of teaching

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Abstract

This paper examines the stories of novice teachers and the challenges they faced in their first year of teaching. A sample of 20 teachers at the end of their first year were interviewed about their experiences. Four themes emerged from the data, which included: *obstacles beyond the classroom walls*, *rewards outweigh the negatives*, *support is vital to success*, and *"juggling diverse classrooms."* The data revealed that many first-year educators felt ill-prepared to teach in complex, diverse classrooms facing challenges both inside and outside the classroom. Of note, mentor teachers and supportive administration were mentioned as components of success. The research is valuable for administration, policy makers and preservice teacher programs.

Keywords: teacher education, teacher retention/attrition, inservice education, professional development, mentoring

Introduction

Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) has long been examined in teacher training literature and is considered instrumental in assisting teachers in becoming successful in their careers. TSE refers to a teacher's belief in their ability to educate and engage students. The concept of self-efficacy is born from Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). At the center of this theory is the teacher's confidence in their expertise to be successful in the classroom and their belief in their capabilities to organize and execute teaching tasks (Caprara et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2022). When a teacher's self-efficacy is high, students find success which can be a powerful predictor of teaching quality and, ultimately, student outcomes. Teachers with high self-efficacy tend to be more persistent when facing challenges, more willing to try innovative instructional methods, and more competent at creating positive learning environments (Bandura, 1997). Research consistently shows that teacher self-efficacy can be strengthened through mastery experiences, observing competent colleagues, receiving supportive/corrective feedback, and working in environments that reduce stress and provide adequate resources (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Ross, 1992).

The belief of professional success and self-efficacy for new or novice teachers might be slow to emerge, especially for newly certified educators who are faced with a myriad of problems, including lack of administrative support (Hamlin & Hering, 1988; Ko et al., 2000), limited resources and professional development opportunities (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), difficulties in managing personal and professional time leading to burnout (Ko et al., 2000; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), limited content knowledge resulting in feelings of doubt, (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009), and difficulty managing a classroom of diverse learners (Gay, 2002; Manning & Bucher, 2007; Liu & Meyer, 2005). Because novice teachers often feel overwhelmed and underpaid, there is an increased rate of attrition. Le Maistre and Paré (2008) found that as high as 50% of teachers leave the profession in the first five years of their career and 98% of novice teachers attribute low salary as the main reason they consider leaving their jobs (Steiner et al., 2023). The number is even higher in the post-Covid era (RAND, 2023; Bouchrika, 2025). The paper examines the lived experiences of first year teachers.

Review of Related Literature

Absence of Administrative Support

Teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate (Talley, 2017) and educators often cite lack of administrative support as one of the main reasons. Teachers, especially novice teachers in their first five years, need intentional, targeted support (Boyd et al., 2011; Hoy & Miskel, 2013). A transformative leader, who can provide a clear vision through mentoring and coaching, can help teachers build a sense of confidence and identity, which ultimately leads to higher self-efficacy (Brown & Wynn, 2007; Vroom & Jago, 2007). A higher sense of self-efficacy can ultimately lead to job satisfaction and increased retention (Witmer, 2005). Novice teachers, who feel overwhelmed and undervalued, may benefit from an administrative team who can provide motivation through effective feedback and encouragement (Kim & Roth, 2011). Most importantly, novice teachers can benefit from emotional support characterized by trust, active listening, and empathy (Littrell et al., 1994). Teachers take instructional risks when they are in a space that provides motivation, autonomy and a sense of accomplishment, and supportive administration has the capability to provide these opportunities to novice educators.

Limited Resources/Lack of Professional Development

Newly certified teachers often work in underfunded schools with restricted budgets. Because of these obstacles, attrition of new teachers may occur. In response to the high percentage of teachers leaving the profession, many states have developed and implemented induction support programs for beginning teachers to combat the attrition and turnover so prevalent in our nation's schools (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). By 2008, 22 states funded induction programs for new teachers, which ultimately retains teachers (*Education Week*, 2008). Goldrick et al. (2012) found that comprehensive induction programs featuring structured mentoring, collaborative planning time, and ongoing professional learning opportunities reduced new teacher attrition rates by up to 40% while simultaneously improving student achievement outcomes. Furthermore, effective induction programs provide mentors that can have a significant impact on retention efforts (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). For instance, Evertson and Smithey (2000) found that new teachers with trained mentors had improved classroom management and highly engaged students. Teachers armed with support, resources and knowledge can create classrooms that are impactful negating what Liu and Meyer (2005) call the "poverty of practice."

Moreover, teachers often cite lack of resources as a reason they leave the profession. New teachers face unparalleled challenges as they transition from preservice preparation with supervision to full classroom responsibility, making comprehensive professional development and resource support essential for their success and retention. Beginning educators experience a steep learning curve characterized by classroom management difficulties, curriculum implementation challenges, and the complex task of differentiating instruction for diverse learners (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The first years of teaching are particularly challenging as novice educators simultaneously master content knowledge, develop effective pedagogy, and navigate school culture and administrative expectations with limited resources (Lew & Nelson, 2016). Without adequate support systems, many promising new teachers become overwhelmed and leave the profession, contributing to the ongoing teacher shortage crisis that has been felt nationwide.

Effective professional development and resource allocation significantly impacts new teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction, and career longevity. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) demonstrated that when beginning teachers receive sustained support through high-quality professional development focused on evidence-based practices, classroom observation with feedback, and access to curriculum resources, they develop instructional competencies more rapidly and report higher levels of confidence and job satisfaction. These findings speak to professional development as a fundamental investment in teacher quality and student success that requires systematic implementation and adequate funding to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Teacher Burnout

Teachers have reported increased administrative tasks, decline in job satisfaction, and personal health issues as just a few of the obstacles faced in today's classrooms (Agyapong et al., 2022; 2023 Work in America Survey, 2023). According to Doan et al. (2022), 58 % of teachers reported high levels of job

stress and 56% experienced burnout. According to Maslach (1976), people who suffer from burnout experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Feeling overextended or defeated and depleted can have consequences such as poor work performance (Schaufeli et al., 1993) coupled with physical and mental exhaustion (Kremer-Hayon & Kurtz, 1985). Moreover, the teacher's environment (classroom, school, district) that causes stress and anxiety can lead to job burnout (Burke & Richardsen, 1996).

According to a 2022 Gallup Poll, 44% of K-12 teachers in the United States reported feeling burned out at work "very often" or "always", making teaching one of the top two occupations for burnout among 14 professions surveyed. Additionally, a National Education Association survey of 3,621 educators found that 67% consider burnout to be a "very serious" issue, while 90% view it as at least a "somewhat serious" problem facing the profession (Peck, 2025). Teachers face numerous stressors in their jobs and are at risk of burnout.

Difficulty Managing Diverse Classrooms

Novice teachers often cite managing diverse classrooms as a contributing factor to job frustration and dissatisfaction. Tomlinson et al. (2003) found that teachers' ability levels to manage diverse classrooms impacts student learning and academic success. Yet, a RAND survey found that 80% of teachers surveyed reported feeling unprepared to teach diverse student populations (RAND, 2005). Through differentiated instruction, inclusive practices, flexible grouping and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2002, 2010), teachers can arm themselves with strategies to better manage their classrooms to be a place of inclusivity. In particular, CRT is a pedagogy that honors and recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in learning including high academic expectations for students, building students' knowledge and skills, and creating appropriate relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Moreover, social and emotional learning is vital to student success.

New teachers frequently encounter significant challenges when managing cultural and linguistically diverse classrooms, often feeling unprepared to address the complex needs of students from varied backgrounds, ability levels, and learning preferences. Gay (2018) emphasized that beginning educators commonly struggle with implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. This struggle often stems from inadequate training in preservice training programs. Many novice teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the task of differentiating instruction for diverse learning needs, leading to one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to engage all learners effectively. Additionally, new teachers often lack the experience and confidence to navigate sensitive cultural issues while maintaining academic rigor and behavioral expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The complexity of managing diverse classrooms is further compounded by new teachers' limited understanding of how to leverage student diversity as a strength rather than an obstacle to overcome. Beginning teachers frequently resort to deficit-based thinking (Kumar & Hamer, 2013). This perspective often results in lowered expectations, inappropriate implementation of instructional strategies or mismatch of strategies, as well as missing opportunities for multicultural learning experiences that benefit all students. Research by Rodriguez et al. (2020) demonstrates that new teachers who receive targeted professional development in culturally sustaining pedagogy and differentiated instruction show marked improvement in their ability to create equitable learning environments. These findings suggest that novice educators can develop the skills necessary to be successful with diverse student populations with targeted and powerful training.

Objective

The objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of new and novice teachers as they explored and reflected on their careers in the first year of classroom teaching. The lived experiences of teachers offer in-depth and critical perspectives that add value to the literature on new teachers, in particular new teacher attrition.

Research questions/Hypotheses

Three research questions were examined:

1. What are the lived experiences of novice teachers in their first year of teaching?

2. What are the lessons learned in the first year of teaching?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed in this instrumental case study, which was limited to novice teachers in their first year of teaching and aimed to "go beyond the case" (Stake, 1995). This enabled the researcher to concentrate on investigating the participants' lived experiences which provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Baxter and Jack (2008) explain that researchers employing instrumental case study methodology select cases not because of their inherent interest, but because they provide a strategic opportunity to examine complex social phenomena that extend beyond the boundaries of the individual case. The instrumental approach allows researchers to move from specific observations to broader generalizations, making it particularly valuable for theory development and refinement in educational research and social science investigations. Moreover, Yin (2014) emphasizes that the strength of instrumental case studies lies in their ability to provide rich, contextual data that can illuminate theoretical concepts while maintaining the holistic perspective that characterizes all case study research, ultimately contributing to deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Sample

A purposeful sample of novice teachers (grades K-12) at the end of their first year of teaching served as the participants for this study. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data relevant to answering the research questions. Interviews lasted an average of 45-60 minutes. Themes emerged from the data of 20 participants, and saturation was reached within the sample. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by the implementation of inductive content analysis to develop categories from the data. Finally, member checking was conducted to enhance the study's credibility and trustworthiness. Table 1 includes the demographic information for the participants:

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information of First Year Teachers

Participant number	Gender	Grade	Content Area(s)	Certification
1	M	7 & 8	Math	Secondary Math (7-12)
2	F	Kindergarten	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)/Special Education (k-8)
3	F	9-12	English	Secondary English (7-12)
4	M	3	Reading/ELA	Early Childhood (prek-4)
5	M	5	Math/Science	Middle Level (4-8)
6	M	6-8	Social Studies/ELA	Secondary Social Studies/English (7-12)
7	F	1	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
8	F	K	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)/Special Education (k-8)
9	F	1	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
10	F	2	All	Early Childhood prek-4
11	F	9-12	English	Secondary English (7-12)
12	M	1	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
13	M	3	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
14	F	k-2	Special Education	Early Childhood (prek-4)/Special Education (k-8)

15	M	K	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
16	F	K	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
17	F	6-8	Special Education	Special Education (k-12)
18	F	2	All	Early Childhood (prek-4)
19	F	6-8	Math	Secondary Math (7-12)/Middle Level (4-8)
20	M		Special Education	Special Education (k-12)

Table 1 presents demographic and professional information for 20 teacher participants. The sample includes 13 female teachers (65%) and 7 male teachers (35%). Most participants teach at the elementary level, with 13 teachers working in grades k-5, including 5 kindergarten teachers. Four teachers work at the middle school level (grades 6-8), two teach high school (grades 9-12), and two are special education teachers serving multiple grade levels. In terms of content areas, 11 teachers are elementary generalists who teach all subjects, while the remaining participants are content specialized. Three teachers focus on special education, three teach English Language Arts (ELA) (one also teaches social studies), two teach math (one also teaches science), and one teaches a combination of social studies and ELA. The certification data reveals that early childhood certification (prek-4) is most common, held by 12 teachers as their primary or sole credential. Three teachers hold dual certifications in both early childhood and special education (k-8). Four teachers have secondary certifications (grades 7-12) in subject areas including English, math, or social studies. Two teachers are certified in special education (k-12), and two hold middle level certifications (grades 4-8), with one of these as a dual certification. Overall, the sample is predominantly composed of elementary-level educators with early childhood certification.

Results

Data were categorized into four overarching themes which included: *obstacles beyond the classroom walls, positives outweigh the negatives, support is vital to success and "juggling diverse classrooms"*.

Theme 1: Obstacles beyond the classroom walls

All participants (n=20) discussed obstacles they faced in the first year of teaching that were not student-centered or related to their classrooms. Novice teachers discussed relationships with administrators, colleagues and parents. For instance, P12 stated, "I love my job. I love my students. The job would be perfect without all the other issues like administrator overstep, conflicts between colleagues, or parent complaints."

Friction between colleagues was mentioned by half (n=10) of the participants. "I always feel on edge when certain teachers are around because I know there will be some sort of argument" P3 commented. Teacher colleague conflict represents a significant yet often unaddressed challenge in educational settings that can profoundly impact both professional well-being and student outcomes. Many times, conflicts arise from differences in teaching philosophies, classroom management strategies or generational differences. P17 mentioned, "We have a small group of older teachers in the building who do not like when we use technology in our instruction. They think the younger teachers use it too much. They don't realize that we are using what students use at home. It helps with engagement and differentiation."

Interpersonal conflict among colleagues represents just one facet of workplace stress for educators. Seventeen of the 20 participants identified parental interactions as a significant challenge in their professional practice. P8 stated,

I spend a significant amount of time each day communicating
with parents. I know that is part of the job, but I have to spend
my time teaching their children. Parents often want an

immediate reply to an email or GroupMe message, I cannot be on my phone when I should be teaching children to read and write. It becomes very stressful.

Finding time to communicate with parents is difficult given all that teachers must do in a school day. Moreover, P9 stated, “It is like a disease. When one parent is mad at you, they get the other parents to attack you as well. It feels like I am being bullied on some days. I have cried in my car in the parking lot.” These findings underscore the need for school administrators and educational policymakers to establish clearer boundaries and support systems around parent-teacher communication. While parental engagement remains crucial for student success, the current expectations and practices appear to be contributing to teacher stress and potential burnout for the participants in this study.

Administrative burden emerged as the third most frequently cited obstacle among participants, encompassing tasks such as grading papers beyond regular work hours, planning and preparation, and completing extensive documentation mandated by administration. Fourteen of the twenty participants identified administrative tasks as creating significant burden on their professional responsibilities. P20 stated, “I love teaching, but I am overworked outside of the classroom. I have to write IEPs, plan lessons, create the materials for the lessons, grade assignments and tests, and document all of this in an organized way. I don’t have enough hours in the day!”

The hierarchical structure in schools can intensify these issues as power dynamics may play a part in conflict between veteran-novice teachers, grade-level teams, or mentor-mentee relationships. Unresolved conflicts between colleagues contribute to teacher stress, job satisfaction, and ultimately teacher burnout (Dinham & Scott, 2010; Filiz, 2014), which can ultimately impact student success (Banerjee et al., 2017). Maintaining a positive school culture can increase teacher self-efficacy by helping teachers stay in classrooms longer (Schipper, 2020; Loes de Jong et al., 2025). Furthermore, providing sufficient planning time to eliminate excessive work outside of school hours could help alleviate stress for new teachers.

Theme 2: Positives outweigh the negatives

The participants expressed that their first year of teaching was rewarding in many regards. Although they mentioned obstacles such as lack of resources, high class size, and difficulty managing diverse classrooms, they cited the positives associated with the job. P2 stated, “I love my students. I had so many great teachable moments while I was working with first graders. Watching them blossom into readers was so rewarding it is hard to put into words.” Likewise, P19 mentioned, “I cannot express how tired I was each day, but it was worth the lack of sleep and the late nights planning engaging lessons. I have found that the good stuff keeps me coming back each day.” Although most of the participants stated high stress, burnout and frustration, 19 of the 20 participants stated the job was rewarding. P14 stated, “I knew the job was going to be hard. I wasn’t wrong. It is so hard, but it is also different each day and that is gratifying. When I think back to my freshman year of college and I chose my major, I never would have thought this is the path I would take, but I am so happy I did.”

Finding small victories each day kept these novice teachers in the classroom at least for another year. P16 detailed her journey, “Among all the things that happen in a day that stress me out, and sometimes makes me cry, the kids will bring me back for another school year. I am not sure I will be a teacher forever, but I will stay for now as long as it is fulfilling and rewarding. I cannot think too far into the future.”

The interviews revealed that student growth and achievement provide deep professional satisfaction. Creating meaningful relationships with students provided lasting positive impacts on both teachers and students (Xintong et al., 2022; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Recent research has found that positive teacher/student relationships may promote teachers’ self-efficacy (Mashburn et al., 2006), emotional well-being (Milatz et al., 2015), and job satisfaction (Admiraal et al., 2019). Passion for the profession helped teachers persist, indicating resiliency and perseverance.

Theme 3: Support is vital to success

Most participants (n=16) detailed accounts of support and collaboration that were at the center of their school year. “I can’t imagine I would have survived without my co-teacher. Her experience and expertise were so important to my learning. College prepared me to teach the content, but it did not prepare me to manage the behaviors that I had in my class. She was lifesaver,” according to P7. Managing classroom behaviors coupled with academic needs is often cited as an obstacle for first year teachers. The social and emotional needs of students have increased since the Covid-19 pandemic, and teachers are not adequately prepared to handle these needs. P11 stated, “My class had a lot of emotional needs with students who have experienced trauma. That was hard for me. My mentor helped me so much in understanding trauma but also gave me strategies to deal with this issue in my classroom. I couldn’t survive without her.”

Fourteen of the twenty participants revealed a mentor or experienced teacher who helped them navigate difficult conversations with parents, conflicts with colleagues, obstacles to student engagement, and feelings of self-doubt. P20 stated, “When I wanted to quit, my mentor teacher was there to tell me everything would be okay.” Feelings of hopelessness and defeat were overcome with support from others. “I know I would have walked out the door without my co-teacher. She was my mentor, coach and mom on some days” according to P2.

Support systems emerged as an important component of retention for new educators. Teacher effectiveness and sustainability were evident in the data. Collaboration between colleagues and support from peers create essential professional communities needed for young teachers to thrive (Wiebke & Bardin, 2009). According to the American Federation of Teachers (2001), “A one- to two-year period of induction can make the difference between a teacher who succeeds early in their career and one who does not, and between a teacher who remains in the profession and one who does not.” Additionally, professional development that is relevant, ongoing and realistic could support new teachers as they learn to juggle the demands of the 21st century classroom. When adequate support is lacking, teacher burnout, turnover, and effectiveness increases (Harju & Niemi, 2020; Perez et al., 1997).

Theme 4: “Juggling diverse classrooms”

Fifteen of twenty participants mentioned managing diverse classrooms. Some stated their students were diverse in background and culture while others mentioned their classrooms were diverse in learning needs. Nonetheless, the participants stressed their constant need to differentiate instruction and assessment measures in ways to meet student requirements. P3 stated, “My classroom has many cultures, which I love, but also it is a challenge to meet every student where they are and speak and understand all the languages. I juggle a lot of differentiation daily.” The sentiment of diversity was often broached in a positive light shining brightly on their classroom. “I love my diverse student body; it makes teaching fun. I learn something new each and every day in terms of what my students need and I look to other teachers for advice on how to make it all work,” stated P16.

Classrooms across the country have become much more diverse in the last decade while teachers find new ways to engage students, differentiate instruction and involve families in ways that they have not done in the past. “All of my students speak and read English, but I have parents who do not. This is challenging when I need to call home. Traditionally, I can email but now I have to do a little extra work to ensure parents get the message in their first language,” P1 stated. “...this is new for me, but I am not complaining. I just need a bit more support in some areas more than others.”

Differentiation requires significant resources such as time and knowledge (Marshall & Horton, 2011). To meet students’ diverse needs, teachers must be able to handle the challenges. With meaningful and intentional professional development, school administrators can help bridge the gap. Educators armed with practical strategies and adequate planning time can be successful in their first year of teaching and beyond.

Discussion

Four themes emerged from the data from 20 teachers as they shared their lived experiences at the conclusion of their first year of teaching. Taking the four themes into consideration there are

implications for school districts, policy makers and teacher preparation programs.

First and foremost, it is imperative that school systems/districts/policy makers invest in comprehensive support systems beyond the basic curriculum. According to Bransford et al. (2000), adults learn best when the learning is situated in authentic contexts, provides opportunities to engage in collaborative problem solving, and allows time to practice the skills they are learning. This learning should take place over an extended period. The idea of ongoing professional development is not a new phenomenon, yet it is rarely realized in schools. Professional development may be further enhanced if teachers receive ongoing, in-classroom coaching, or mentoring (Spodek, 1996). Implementation of support such as mentoring has shown to have positive effects such as improved teacher and student relationships (Corsini & Caruso, 1989). Moreover, structured mentoring can reduce teachers' feelings of isolation and, potentially, reduce high rates of teacher turnover (Landry et al., 2006). It is in the best interest for all invested in education to ensure our teachers are properly mentored and supported in the most difficult time of their career.

Moreover, the value of parent/school connection cannot be underestimated. Creating school cultures where parents are part of the instructional team takes time and effort, but it is beneficial for students, teachers and parents. According to Sempeles and Cui (2024), parent involvement improves students' grades, attendance, behavior, and mental health, but according to the Lin et al., (2024), there is a significant gap between the level of parental involvement teachers experience and what they believe is ideal. Specifically, teachers reported insufficient parental involvement in holding children accountable for misbehavior (79%), assisting with schoolwork (68%), and ensuring consistent school attendance (63%). When schools are accessible, parents are more likely to engage in authentic ways and the relationships they build with teachers can be meaningful.

Lastly, teacher preparation programs must equip preservice teachers with both the practical skills and adaptive mindset necessary to navigate the complexities of their first year in the classroom. Beyond mastering content knowledge and pedagogical theory, teacher preparation should emphasize extensive, well-supported clinical experiences that expose candidates to diverse classroom settings, student populations, and teaching challenges they will encounter. Programs should prioritize classroom management techniques (Kwok, 2021), differentiation strategies for varied learners (Premier & Miller, 2010), and trauma-informed practices (Hobbs et al., 2019) that reflect the realities of today's schools. Additionally, future teachers will benefit greatly from training in collaboration skills for working with colleagues and families, and explicit guidance on managing work-life balance to avoid burning out. Most importantly, preservice teachers must be able to manage the ups and downs of their first year of teaching, and universities can support their graduates through mentoring programs beyond the four years. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, higher education can transform their graduates' first year into a positive time of growth and development.

Conclusion

Teaching is a rewarding yet challenging profession, especially at the start of an educator's career. The first-year teachers interviewed for this research provided insights into what needs are often neglected in the development of the profession such as systematic administrative support, targeted professional development, ongoing mentorship and support, and collaborative environments that capitalize on their strengths. These insights provide administration, policy makers and institutions of higher education a framework from which to develop targeted interventions that bridge the gap between pre-service training and classroom realities, fostering sustainable support structures for early-career teachers. The time to act on these findings is now, as the success of our newest educators directly shapes the future of the teaching profession and the students they serve.

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