

Draft: Risk and Resilience in Beginning Teachers: The First Year

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine risk and resilience factors for beginning teachers in the first five years of professional practice. This particular document is an interim summary based the results as of the end of the first year of practice.

Participants

The participants in the study (n=21) all graduated from a Bachelor of Education program in May of 2006 and assumed teaching positions in the fall of 2004. Because of the fact that 11 participants changed positions in their second year, the actual number of teaching assignments represented in this study is 32. 14 of these positions were in early years, 11 in middle years, and 17 in senior years classrooms. 8 of these positions were in cities with a population greater than 100,000, 14 in cities under 100,000, and 10 in rural communities. Three private school positions were represented, as well as one position in a Hutterite colony school, and one in a First Nations school setting. 18 of the participants were female and 3 were male, reflecting the relative distribution of students in the Bachelor of Education program from which they graduated. School settings were distributed among the provinces of British Columbia (2), Alberta (2), and Manitoba (28).

Methodology

In their final year of their Bachelor of Education degree program students were invited to participate in the study. At the conclusion of their first year of teaching, participants were contacted for an interview. Semi structured interviews were conducted with each participant either in person (2), by telephone (29), or through email (1). Each verbal interview took approximately 30-45 minutes.

Interviews followed a protocol of questions that served as stepping off points for further discussion and exploration with participants. At the end of the first year, participants were asked to describe the year in general or talk about the major impression that the first year had left them with. Participants were asked what things they felt well prepared for, and what things they felt unprepared for. They were asked to describe the major challenges that had faced them in the year. Participants were asked about what coping strategies they used during particularly difficult or discouraging times at school, and whom they saw as sources of help or support. They were also asked about the effect of their administrators and their colleagues on the quality of their work life. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked what they knew at the end of the year that they didn't know when they started in September.

Results

Workload

“It’s not an easy job. It takes very strong people to do it. I’ve really grown to respect people who can do it. It’s trying in every way.”

In describing the first year, without exception, the volume of work and the stress of teaching were the first things cited by all participants. Initial descriptions varied from “busy”, to “stressful” to “overwhelming”, to “a baptism of fire.” Roughly one quarter of participants related that they cried almost every day either during the school day or at home in the evening over feelings of inadequacy and feeling overwhelmed. The stress was connected with both classroom and administrative workload primarily, but also involved not knowing many of the routines of starting the year, dealing with behavioural issues, developing systems for assessment and reporting, and coping with the emotional components of the job.

One participant’s statement illustrates the kind of personality type that can put a teacher at particular risk for feeling overwhelmed:

You have to take into consideration a teacher’s own values. I admit I am a perfectionist, which can be a good thing, but can be tough on you personally. The first couple of months were a matter of just getting by day to day. The first month or two everything is a blur, and then report cards come in and there’s all the new experiences there to deal with, then in January and February you get into the rhythm of teaching.

Another participant noted this stress and also pointed to a resiliency factor that could provide some protection by saying: “The planning is astronomical. Without being able to call a friend and get a science unit or something like that it would have been impossible.” Sometimes the support was not even necessarily in the lesson planning area: “Friends were indispensable. Even if they didn’t have things, they would say “me too” and that helped.”

A core characteristic of teaching is the fact that no matter how much preparation a person does, there are always other things that they can think of adding on. This apparent bottomless well of work was daunting to beginning teachers: “I never felt well prepared ever, even though I prepped a lot. I always felt like either my marking or my prep was slipping.” Another stated: “There’s just so much to do to be the kind of teacher you want to be. There’s just an endless possibility of work that you can do. It can eat you up if you let yourself be taken over by that.” At times, even when detailed planning was done before the school year began, it’s effects were undone by the demographics of the students, as one participant noted: “Preplanning doesn’t always work because it doesn’t take into account what kind of kids you might have.”

Sometimes this feeling of inadequacy was determined by class assignments. One participant was assigned a music class, though the only background in that area came from private piano instruction as a child. In another case, a student was assigned to teach

computers at the K-12 level in a private school in spite of the fact that she had no computer background, and the school itself had no computer lab.

Administrative work was a key contributor to general workload stress. This was exacerbated by the fact that it seemed to be generally assumed in their schools that everyone knew how to do these tasks and, as a result, there were few initial briefings for new staff on what to expect and how to manage these chores. One new teacher described it this way: "It was stressful. I didn't have a mentor and I felt like I was bugging people all the time asking how we do this. No one took any time to help me or show me anything." One participant stated that: "a lot of the paperwork was new and challenging. I would not have made it without calling colleagues, because you get overwhelmed." Examples of these types of work included book orders, collecting student fees, spending student funds, online attendance, school policies, IEPs, reporting procedures, fire drills, canteen and other extra duties and field trip policies and procedures.

Emotional Dimensions of Teaching

Knowing students and their family lives can be difficult emotionally. You go home and worry about what they're going home to and there's so little you can do about it. I find the emotional side of things way more exhausting than the physical.

The emotional component of teaching was identified as another major stressor by new teachers. One teacher was surprised by the amount of involvement she had with Child and Family Services and the number of desperate and dysfunctional family situations her students were facing. Another teacher in a classroom for at-risk students said: "I was not prepared for the number of family life situations, crisis interventions and suicide interventions I would have to deal with." One early years teacher had to deal with the sudden accidental death of one of her students, and another had to deal with a homicide of a senior years student. Students and their life situations were not the only emotional stressor for new teachers. In some cases, parents created or added to this stress level. This often took the form of aggressive questioning of the teacher in regard to her marking and/or general treatment of a child, threatening to sit in on the teacher's classes to observe and document her actions, or simply telling the new teacher that she was incompetent and no good.

One participant reflected that: "It's stressful. It can consume your entire life and you can become very emotionally involved in your job and very tired. You need to go out and do things in order to survive. You have to have teacher friends because they're the only ones who can understand the emotional exhaustion."

Behaviour and Classroom Management

Some days I feel like it's 99% classroom management and 1% teaching – and right till 3:15 on the last day.

Classroom management and discipline was another significant stressor. Many felt discouraged by the amount of time and energy taken up in dealing with behaviours. This created a dual threat for new teachers. On the one hand, they were worried that behaviour issues conveyed the impression that they were not as capable in the classroom as they should be. Moreover, the time spent on behaviour was time not spent on teaching, and this raised concerns about how the academic progress of their students might reflect upon them as teachers. New teachers were also surprised and concerned with the physicality of many behaviour issues. Applying safe physical restraints to students was a new skill area for some. In one case, a new teacher was bitten by an early years student. The emotional component of behaviours such as these was also an issue: “A child had never lashed out at me when I was student teaching. When you show a lot of care and kindness they don't know how to deal with it. This child was screaming that I wasn't her parent. I was trying to be good to her and take care of her.”

Assessment Literacy

I spent a ridiculous amount of time on report cards. I was the only teacher in that grade so I didn't have someone to compare with.

Assessment literacy was a common thread in the first year as well. Getting oriented to new reporting systems was a challenge. Many new teachers felt that they lacked a vocabulary for reporting and conferencing with parents: “The vocabulary of saying things was a challenge – not having a bank of vocabulary to draw upon - how to word things for parents so you're not too blunt and not avoiding the truth.” The theme of “trying to find a system that works for me” was a common one, though one not restricted just to new teachers, as one participant observed: “We went to an inservice on reporting and I heard a lot of veteran teachers expressing much of the same concerns and uncertainty that I was, so that was helpful.” In one school, new teachers were inserviced on report card policies and strategies. The teacher in this school prepared ten report cards at reporting period and gave them to the administrator, who provided editorial suggestions and handed them back. This teacher then felt more confident about doing the reporting for the remainder of her class.

Supports

I felt that I was successful because of a good administration and another good teacher in the same grade that I worked together with. She guided me through and helped me get accustomed to the curriculum.

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Those who felt less overwhelmed in their first year than the norm tended to attribute this success to a few common factors. Supportive administration was one. A colleague or group of colleagues with whom they could share information, concerns, and resources was another. The ability to work with a class that did not have an inordinate number of exceptional learners was another factor. Some individuals were able to take the summer to devote to preparing lessons and units for the upcoming year and this was seen by them as integral to their survival in their first year.

Things I Was Not Prepared For

On the theme of “Things I was not prepared for”, many of the responses echoed the themes that emerged as participants described their first year.

On the theme of administrative duties, one teacher was surprised by “the volume of work on understanding cumulative folders, paperwork, spending and budgets.” Another said it was: “Administrative things – waiver forms, surplus procedures, code of professional conduct – who to go to first if you have a problem with a colleague.” Yet another teacher said: “I was unprepared for the long “settling in” period – who do I ask about the mundane details not included in the staff handbook? Am I sitting in someone’s usual seat in the staffroom? How do I get more photocopies on my copy quota? There are so many little things that you wouldn’t even imagine to ask about that come up in the first couple of months.”

One respondent talked about reading instruction as an area in which she had felt a need for further knowledge: “I wasn’t prepared for teaching reading – guided reading. How do you find the levels for books so you can address it to the level of the students? It’s so important in K and 1 that they’re reading books that they can read, that aren’t too difficult and that aren’t too easy.”

Assessment issues also came up as surprises for some. For one, the surprise was: “Doing report cards. We hadn’t gone through what kind of comments to make. I didn’t know how to create comments for kids on report cards. I realized that what I should have been doing was keeping more anecdotal records on each kid throughout the term.” Another commented that report cards for French students were different. In addition, her challenges were: “How to do record keeping. How do you get the assessment to reflect the outcomes without doing too much marking.” One participant stated: “I wasn’t prepared for having a solid assessment of skills. I felt I was missing some things. I wasn’t thinking about that when I handed out things. A lot of parents want to know where the students stand in specific areas. They want to see evidence of growth.” In her second year, this teacher found a solution for this by having students write a past-tense letter at the end of each term. These then served to document the growth of each student over the terms.

The challenges of dealing with parents were identified as surprises too. In some cases the surprise was how concerned they were with their children’s progress and in others the surprise was how *unconcerned* they were: “Where I was teaching, some parents just don’t give a crap about education. One little girl had serious academic and

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behaviour problems. Mom never showed up for any interview and didn't respond to calls."

The combination of behaviours and special needs children came as a surprise to some: "It's not always so easy to deal with special needs issues on a daily basis when you have 20 other kids. You can have all the information you want in the world, but it comes down to how you can connect with that kid. And every kid is different." The precociousness of some children's behavioural repertoires surprised one teacher who said: "I was surprised by the behaviours for the level of a six year old. One time when I was on recess duty a grade one girl came up to me and said "Josh was mad at me in the playground and he said 'Suck my c__k!" The exasperation of a new teacher trying to reach a child was expressed by one participant who said: "There was a boy who was hyperactive and couldn't even focus on me with his eyes when I tried to talk to him. How can you teach someone you can't even get to focus on you for five seconds when you're talking to him directly?"

For some teachers, special needs and behaviour issues created threats to safety, both of students and teachers: "One of my students ran away. She didn't want to go to the gym. She's verbal non-responsive. I told her I'd get her something else to do. She got up and walked out of the classroom and didn't come back. We went looking for her. Police went looking for her. She was found in a community outside Winnipeg. She is 12 years old." In another case a teacher described a student who, "was hearing voices, hearing God tell him to kill himself. He came to school with bruising all over. I emailed his parents every day after school, but there were no supports within the system for him." One teacher felt that her faculty of education had not sufficiently prepared her for the teaching of at risk youth, children with oppositional defiant disorders and similar issues: "At first I was bitter – the theory I had down – I didn't know how to deal with students. I knew the material, the curriculum, but not the strategies for getting their attention especially at the high school level."

The most dramatic example of unexpected and challenging behaviour was related by a teacher working in a special needs class:

I was well aware of different disorders, but the comorbidity of these was a surprise to me. One student had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Tourette's and Aspergers all together. At one time I complimented him on his art work and, because of his OCD, he thought it was not good enough for him. Then his Asperger's rage came on and he started stabbing and cutting himself with a pen. The adrenalin gave him extra strength and he became very hard to restrain. He's also a projectile vomiter, so that was the next move. Then he held his breath for a long time, became aroused by the lack of oxygen and then pulled out his penis to masturbate. I'm thinking, 'What do you do when there's such a storm in somebody's head?'

The nature of school politics was a surprise for participants, as one asserted: "I was aware there were office politics. I had no idea that it could get this bizarre." In this case, the teacher was placed in an environment in which the staff were undertaking an active campaign to have their administrator dismissed, and made repeated efforts to enlist

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the new teacher's participation in these efforts. As a result of the stresses of working in this environment, the teacher began to feel ill part of the way through the year. Others in the school were encouraging him to take stress leave, in order that they could use this to build a greater case against the administrator. At one point, the teacher overheard two other staff members talking about him in the hall, with one saying, "How are we supposed to get our point across if he (the teacher) won't go?"

A teacher in a First Nations school said: "Everything on a First Nations community is so different. The school day changes on the spur of the moment. The kids come, they don't come. Kids are miles behind. The politics in the school are amazing. Everything above the principal is Chief and Council and they are the ultimate law. The whole school system answers to them. You learn who's who pretty quickly and then you know that there are some folks you need to be pretty careful around."

In another dramatic case in a small private school, the new teacher arrived to find that: there were no textbooks and none had been ordered; there were no caretakers and the teachers were expected to clean the washrooms themselves; the teacher was assigned to teach computer courses with no computer lab in the school; there was no working TV or VCR in the school; grade 7 texts were issued for grade 8 classes and grade 8 texts were issued for grade 9 classes; the photocopier was inoperative for half of the school year; salaries were paid late, and; staff had to watch the Secretary Treasurer write their paycheques out to ensure that they did not contain mistakes.

For one teacher, the tragic death of a child was the most unexpected event of her first year: "A child in my class was killed in a farm accident. It was two or three months into the school year. It doesn't cross your mind that this can happen to someone this young. On the Monday after the death, the principal came and said the child's parents were there to see me. They wanted me to tell them about his last day. That was really something. I didn't know what to say because it had been a very normal kind of day and nothing he had done had stood out for me. The kids kept bringing up the death throughout the year."

In another case, a student phoned the teacher to tell her that the home of another of her students was on fire. The teacher drove out to the site to find that the structure had burned down, that the body of the student had been found inside, and that the police were ruling the death to be a homicide. The teacher discovered that the best friend of the victim had not been made aware of the death yet, and so she found this girl and broke the news to her. The teacher and teacher aides then tried to track down other students from the class who were on semester break in order to get them access to counselling.

The Difficulties and Challenges

What were the most difficult/challenging parts of the job? Again, in answer to this question, many themes were echoed and reinforced from earlier responses of other participants. 10 of 21 identified behavioural issues as their greatest challenge or difficulty as beginning teachers. Early years teachers described various situations: one in which one student urinated on another student; another where a student had a marker fight with another student and coloured him completely blue; and another case involving a student who had constant outbursts in the class shouting out "Stupid lady! Stupid

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lady!” continuously. In referring to strategies to deal with behaviours, teachers talked about things like having enough activities for students who finished early, getting better at organizing and planning for teacher assistant time, and using proximity and physical cues to manage behaviour.

For middle and senior teachers, the issues revolved more around motivation, defiance and attendance, as one participant said, “An older kid will say no to things. I had to give them choices.” Another stated, “Classroom management is the most difficult thing; how to get them to go to class; How to hook them. What to do with grade 12 students who can’t read or write.”

Restraints were an issue, particularly at the middle and senior levels. One participant noted that, “Having to restrain students was a challenge. There was no training other than in-house training. I got lots of coaching from staff, and experience is a good teacher. Leaving your front end open once is all it takes for you to learn how to be close to a violent student.”

One teacher talked about the need for patience and perseverance in dealing with behavioural issues: “The most difficult thing is when you attempt to change behaviour and it doesn’t change. The problem is that we expect it to change too soon. You have to persevere longer than they do. It takes a long, long time to change behaviour.”

Curriculum and expectations constituted a challenge for 10 of 21 participants. One described her challenge as, “Getting to know the curriculum and understand it. (My university) does better than the other universities in teaching it, but when I was student teaching I did most of my unit plans in other grade levels.” A teacher in an alternative class said, “The toughest part was not being able to adhere to the curriculum. Children weren’t getting the education that I thought they should be getting. I had to be reminded that just life-skills were the goal.” A middle years teacher lamented, “I had 3 boys at grade 3 reading level. They were very embarrassed about it. The challenge was just to keep them up without making a show of it, because they acted out if they had problems. My strategy was to do a lot of reading aloud with the whole class.” Most comments included a statement of some kind about the need for realistic expectations based on the abilities of the students: “It was difficult adapting my expectations. You can’t have everyone done everything. There are some things that aren’t going to get finished and some kids that will never get some things done.” Another stated that the most difficult thing for her was “Admitting to yourself that you’re not going to teach every single outcome in the curriculum.”

Assessment issues and the time involved in doing assessment presented a challenge to new teachers as well: “I knew it was going to be a lot of work, but I didn’t know how much – how many things you have to get ready in terms of assessment. I was overwhelmed by the volume of assessment.” A senior ELA teacher articulated the concern this way: “The most challenging thing has been the overwhelming amount of marking I have as a high school English teacher. I’ve had to figure out (the hard way) that I must stagger the major assignments coming in from the different classes so that I’m not facing stacks of marking from all the classes at the same time. The “bookkeeping” side of teaching is the hardest part for me.” Some described coping strategies such as using checklists, using performance assessments, and using peer assessment as ways of dealing with this kind of overload. The results of assessment created issues for others as one participant described: “Evaluation and reporting to parents was tough when the

parents thought that their kids weren't as successful as they should have been. My solution to that was to have lots of notes on each child and samples of evaluations so that I could show the parents the objective reality."

Finally, the challenge of establishing a professional detachment emotionally was a major challenge for teachers. One described the greatest challenge as, "Leaving work at work. It's always on my mind 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's never done. I worry if I am doing what I need to be doing with the kids. Are they getting what they need?" Another described the dilemma as, "Separating from the kids. Being a young teacher trying to get the respect from the kids. Bringing those kids problems home." Yet another said, "The toughest part is getting the emotional thicker skin. I needed to be able to be helping them, guiding them to the right resources, but not getting involved. Finding the boundaries that are safe for your own mental health is the important thing."

Things I felt well prepared for?

Curriculum knowledge and planning skills were at the top of the list for these new teachers. One said she was "Well prepared for unit planning and overall year plans, assessing children, being able to say why they were at a certain level, and how to improve that." Planning efficiencies were identified by another: "Planning – how to sit down and plan a unit. Look at the outcomes. Put them together and see what you can fit and where you can hit a couple with the same strategy." One participant found that what felt like a bad thing during her training turned out to be a good thing in her practice: "I was well prepared for cooperative planning and other collaboration with teachers in the English department, the school and the division. While in the education program we all complained about the amount of group work, but it certainly prepared me to work with people of varying levels of commitment and ability." Another stated, "I found that I was very familiar with the curriculum and that made me more confident." Yet another cited, "Knowing the curriculum. Having the general knowledge of content. Lesson planning – activating, acquiring, applying. Technology in the classroom."

Subject area confidence was another area mentioned by participants, particularly in math and science areas and ELA areas: "I felt confident with math instruction. I felt adequate in terms of curriculum expectations and where to go if I wasn't really sure. I had learned lots of tricks and strategies for math instruction." An ELA teacher commented, "I knew a lot of strategies for ELA. (My ELA instructor) gave us some good strategies. She helped us in being familiar with using the part of the ELA curriculum that dealt with teaching strategies." Another teacher talked about creating stations and centres, and using Curriculum Navigator.

Instructional skills were another area of solid preparation highlighted by participants, including differentiated instruction. One observed that he felt, "confident in building rapport with students. I felt confident about classroom management." A special needs classroom teacher felt that he had been given a working knowledge of disorders,

noting that, “Proximity doesn’t work for these disordered kids. Proximity is an invitation to physical violence.”

Two participants identified assessment strategies they had learned such as maintaining anecdotal records, questioning students on what they had learned, and assessing presentations, portfolios, and other types of performance assessments.

Administrator Effects

“The principal makes the difference between surviving and not surviving.”

The question on the effect of the administration on the first year of teaching brought a rich profile of responses, characterized primarily by their polarity. It was clear that school administrators exert a powerful influence in the professional lives of new teachers. This influence, however, can be dramatically in the direction of increasing the resilience of the new teacher, or it can be a strong risk factor. Surprisingly, 11 saw their administrator as a positive influence and 10 saw the administrator as either not helpful, or harmful.

Negative administrator descriptors included: condescending, autocratic, critical, uncommunicative, unsupportive, inexperienced, negative, nitpicking and distant. Too many evaluations by an administrator were a stressor for one participant. Disciplinary support was a major theme and 5 of 21 participants felt that they were on their own in terms of disciplining their students. In one case the problem was the principal’s wish to be ‘everyone’s friend’. In another case, the issue was felt to be the principal’s focus on budget rather than student issues. Another principal was perceived to dismiss any idea put forward by a staff member as being unworkable. One principal was described as playing individual staff members off against each other. In general, the primary criterion that seemed to determine if a principal was a damaging influence was in their lack of support for their staff members.

With the positive principals, the opposite was clearly the case. More than anything else, new teachers identified a feeling of support as their principal’s greatest positive influence; in the words of one participant, “He was personable and he defended me with kids and parents within reason. I always knew he had my back.” Another positive principal was described as, “Very supportive. I knew that I could go to her with anything. You knew in advance that she would support you. It’s nice to know that you’re recognized.” One teacher mentioned how her administrator would make a point of noticing and acknowledging the fact that she remained after school till 5:00 most days.

Accessibility and the absence of threat were the two other primary characteristics of positively perceived principals. One participant described her principal as “Fantastic. “Don’t hide your faults” was her saying. “Let me know if you’re having trouble. Teachers can be hard enough on themselves anyway.” She was very open and normalized times when you were experiencing difficulty and offered help.” Another principal was described as, “Wonderful. So laid back. We worked really well together. I was never intimidated to ask a question. He was so calm and relaxed and very encouraging.” One administrator in particular demonstrated for a new teacher his ability to sense when she was under duress and offer assistance: “He could come in the room

and look at your face and say, “Go. I’ve got the room for 20 minutes.” He was so supportive and encouraging.”

Staff effects

My fellow staff members have been both a source of support and a source of stress. The dynamics of my department have been difficult at times. I have been mentored, smothered, dismissed, and respected, sometimes all in one day!

Like administrators, staff members were a powerful influence on beginning teachers and, like administrators, their influence could go in either direction. Unlike administrators, however, the positive and negative effects could coexist within the same schools. 45% of the schools were described as having positive staff effects. 31% were described as negative. The remainder were mixed or unremarkable.

Positive staff characteristics were primarily in the area of support, providing assistance and offering resources to new teachers. Much of the assistance was simply in the form of encouragement or a listening ear when things were difficult. Staff members did team teaching with new teachers and sometimes observed and coached new teachers in their classrooms. Still, it seemed that the emotional support was the greatest contribution made by staff members, as one participant articulated, “There’s nothing quite like knowing someone feels the same way you do. Knowing someone is going through the same things you are is a great stress reliever.”

Descriptions of negative staff effects were more specific and varied. One teacher said, “I pretty much stayed to myself except for one of my teaching partners. As a whole, the staff is really friendly, but then there’s a clique. It was really tough coming in new to the whole situation and dealing with the “you think you’re better” attitude.” Age was seen as a factor by one teacher who felt that the senior teachers tended to be more pessimistic and cynical. Gender was seen as a factor in staffroom climate by another new teacher who was on a staff that was all of the same gender, and felt that a mixed staff would provide a healthier environment. In most cases the problem seemed to be simply negative or pessimistic personalities: “One very negative staff member brought both my teaching partner and I down because she was always negative. Other staff didn’t do anything to stop it. I coped by staying in my room and trying to stay away from all the gossip and negativism.” This coping strategy of withdrawal was the most common one described by teachers as exemplified by one who said, “I tried to just listen and not get sucked in.” In one case, an attempt by staff members to “orient” the new teacher was seen as negative: “I wasn’t prepared for the politics of the staffroom and how negative a place it can be, learning who to associate with and who not to. The two grade three teachers gave me a briefing on my kids and I was worried in advance, but they didn’t turn out as bad as they said.” Staff politics reared its head for one participant at the end of the first year: “This week the course timetables came out – let the games begin! I had no idea how strongly people would react. There has been a lot of stress as individuals jockey for position, criticize the scheduling, and pressure others to trade classes.” In one case the actions of staff became quite intrusive on the work of the teacher: “We had a staff member who was undiagnosed bipolar and when she was down she took it out on

me. I spoke with her about it and got nowhere. There were lots of snide remarks from her. She asked to see how I was marking my students because she thought that I wasn't being hard enough. She undermined me in front of the kids. The principal said I shouldn't take it personally because she's like that with everyone and I should document all the interactions."

Coping strategies

One day I broke down hyperventilating in front of my class. Had to leave the room and put my head between my knees outside. One student came in and gave me a hug. Next day they asked "Are you going to cry again." They have learned in their homes that if someone shows a weakness you need to exploit it.

"What do you do when things get really discouraging and you feel like giving up?" This was the question put to participants. "What is it that makes you able to go back the next day?" For some it was stubbornness. For others it was feeling like there were no alternatives. For most, it was their love of the profession and their students that gave them the will to try to put some perspective on the day's events and look forward to a better day the next day.

Personal and family relationships were a critical resource for new teachers. For one, a change of scene after school helped: "I tried not to go straight home. I went out with friends or went to the gym and then came home. Then you could look at the situation more objectively. You could look at the positive experiences to balance the negative one." Two others credited their spouses for being supportive confidants, as one described, "Being able to confide in my spouse who is also a teacher was a help. I put a smile on my face no matter what kind of BS was going on and tried to keep a positive attitude. Keep the focus on students. Negativity is contagious." Those who had a family member who was also in the profession were clearly well placed to get an understanding ear, as was the case with another teacher whose mother was also in the profession. Each night they debriefed the day on the phone. Another lived with friends who were teachers and good listeners. One teacher joined an association of teachers of at-risk students and found common cause with them. 25% of respondents said that colleagues were a source of support in difficult times.

Physical activity was a relief for approximately 25% of participants. Yoga, gym time, meditation, walking, weights, and aerobics were mentioned as healing and stress relieving strategies.

Scheduling a balanced life became a priority for another 25% of respondents. One participant asserted, "Making sure that I set aside some time in each week is essential. Now I'm giving myself a certain amount of time every day. I'll be at school from 7:45 till 5:30 and that's all the time I need. Then when I get home I'm confident and comfortable with taking the night off. It's the same thing on weekends. Saturday is my day. Sunday I can do schoolwork."

The students themselves provided a strong protective factor for teachers after a difficult day. One teacher observed that, "The kids come in the next day and they don't remember anything from a bad time the day before. It's new day for them." For this

teacher, it therefore followed that if the students wouldn't remember the day before, the teacher should not either. One participant said that after a bad day "I thought of some of the kids. I focused on positive experiences – thinking about gifts kids had brought you or times they had confided in you, or thanked you." Another echoed this sentiment saying that the stress reliever for her was "The kids. They're an awesome class. They got me through it. I have this one little girl that must makes me laugh. When I'm feeling bad I'll just go there and she'll make me laugh." Parents as well as students contributed to teacher resilience as in the case of one participant who said, "At the end of the day I always knew why I was teaching. I was able to say I was helping them for the time I was with them. A lot of kids write love letters to the teachers and sometimes I would look through those boxes. A lot of parents are good and make me feel positive."

Many teachers employed a kind of cognitive restructuring strategy in which they attempted to get some rational distance on the situation, balance this situation with all the good situations they had experienced, and arrive at a more positive assessment of their overall situation. One said, "You need to reflect on what happened and what didn't work out as you planned. Try not to do it that way again. Remember that tomorrow won't be the same, because there won't be the same kinds of disruptions." A middle years teacher remarked, "I would think back to better times with those kids and activities that had worked. My co-worker would talk to me about how I was a good teacher, even though it didn't feel like it at that moment." Another concluded, "Now I know that there will always be those kinds of days, and that's just the way it is."

Two participants cited stubbornness and determination as the thing that kept them going. In one case, the teacher said the thing that kept her there was, "Being stubborn - having no choice – thinking this is what I have to do – this is part of the job – thinking maybe today is going to be different." In the case of the teacher who was being coached to take stress leave to support the union, the teacher stated that when he overheard staff asking, "Why isn't he gone?" that gave him the resolve to rebound and to fight.

Two respondents replied that they did not experience these moments of discouragement. In one case the participant attributed this to life experience and the experience of working in other less desirable jobs. Another stated simply, "There weren't those times. There was always something good."

What I know now that I didn't know when I started

Many of the themes that emerged in the first part of the interviews were revisited in the responses of teachers to this question.

For some the learning was content focused: "I learned the curriculum and how to run centres. I became confident with guided reading." Other responses pointed to learning in the area of teaching reading, writing report cards, dealing with parents, dealing with paperwork and administrative tasks, developing strategies for ongoing assessment, setting up the classroom, developing centres, and assigning students to tasks that would save the teacher time. One noted that posting the day's homework on a class webpage would have saved 5 phone calls per night.

Many other comments focused on the students. One participant stated, "I know now that you're going to have every single kind of kid and every kind of level in your

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class, and you're going to have to do what you can with what you've been given. There are some kids that are going to annoy you all year long and their behaviours aren't going to change. You've just got to learn to live with it." Another said, "To treat every kid equally is to treat them unfairly. Every kid is absolutely different. They don't need a best friend. It is not your job to save them. Don't try to be their friend. They will respect you more if you can maintain a professional relationship. You should be relaxed, empathetic, and sympathetic, but you have to be professional."

Some new teachers were surprised by the level of engagement they had in the personal lives of students: "I didn't know I'd be so involved in the students' lives. I didn't know that I would know that much about their personal lives and home situations. I didn't know that I would be asked for my opinion about their personal issues. I found it hard because I grew up in a nice little bubble. I was affected emotionally. I didn't figure out a solution to how to keep from becoming emotionally involved." For another teacher, the issue was similar: "I didn't know the influence that I would have in my students' lives. They still come back in the second year and their parents do too. I knew that they would like me as a teacher but I didn't know that it would go deeper than that and last longer than the school year."

Accepting their own limitations as teachers was another key area of growth, as expressed by this participant who said, "I now know that I am going to fail at some things and some things aren't going to work but that is normal." A particularly overloaded teacher stated, "At one point I was able to focus on day by day things and accept the fact that I couldn't be the kind of teacher I wanted to be in this kind of setting, couldn't do the kinds of activities I wanted to do, and had to let go of trying that. I had to scale down my expectations. I was teaching 19 different curricula and found I had to choose a few things that I wanted to do well and work on those." Another said, "I learned that sometimes you have to "cop out". Sometimes you have to give them worksheets or a booklet and there's nothing wrong with that. You can't be Super-Teacher all of the time." Another expressed a sentiment common to the majority of respondents when she said, "I know that as a teacher I can not save every single "at risk" kid that walks through my classroom door – but I know I will always want to."

Implications for Schools and Faculties of Education

Workload was the primary issue for beginning teachers in this study. A significant portion of this workload was related to administrative functions within the school. An effective orientation program for teachers new to a school may help to attenuate this problem. Such a program might ideally focus on the following topics: routines for the start of the year, attendance systems and software, grading systems and software, student fee collections, book orders, school policies, emergency plans and procedures, reporting procedures, field trip policies and procedures, waiver forms, surplus procedures, code of professional conduct, photocopying, behaviour policies, the IEP process, extracurricular activities, and purchasing procedures. Faculties of Education may be best to leave this to the schools, since policies and procedures vary so much from division to division and school to school.

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Emotional stresses are unavoidable in the teaching profession. However, the support of others seems to be a strong resilience factor. Supportive administration is an essential, but beyond that, mentoring arrangements for new teachers may do much to provide the new teacher with an outlet for their emotional stresses. Mentors would ideally be selected for a combination of both maturity and optimism. A new teacher would then be able to bring stressful issues to the mentor and receive a response and support that would both normalize the situation for the new teacher and provide a positive rather than negative perspective on the teacher's role in these kinds of situations. Part of the role of mentor, beyond curricular and instructional support, would be to encourage and assist new teachers in promoting their own wellness, and creating a balanced professional and personal life. Faculties of Education may consider exploring how they might be able to provide undergraduate students with a better awareness of the importance of self-care and wellness strategies in reducing the risk of depression and burnout.

Behaviour and classroom management is also an unfortunate constant in teaching. As well as covering administrative issues, an orientation program for new teachers may also include training in non-violent crisis intervention, and a sharing of behaviour management strategies that have been found effective in that particular school's environment. Again, the role of a mentor teacher could be extremely helpful for the new teacher in offering advice on particular behaviour issues or incidents. About one quarter of new teachers felt that they were unsupported by their administrations in terms of behaviour. This points to the advantages of carefully selecting administrative personnel for, among other things, their abilities to support teachers in the area of discipline. Faculties of Education may also recognize the continually increasing importance of this area by providing more coursework concentration on behaviour management, dealing with diversity, and assisting at-risk students and families.

The area of assessment literacy presents some interesting challenges, in that the cohort of teachers graduating in the first decade of this century are coming through a transitional phase in school assessment theory and practice. With the new *Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Assessment For Learning* in place, these teachers will be expected to assess their students in ways that they themselves were not assessed when they were in school. Hence, many of the assessment ideas and strategies will be new to them, and will likely be going through an evolution as they begin their careers. Faculties of Education have a primary responsibility here to provide their graduates with the most up to date information on theory and practice in assessment. In schools, the mentoring approach may have mixed results in this area, depending upon whether the mentoring teacher has been trained in and believes in the new assessment paradigm. In these cases, it may be the new teacher that can assist some of the more experienced teachers in understanding the concepts and principles of assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning. School wide and division wide inservicing in this area may be the most effective strategy for schools to use in order to build and broaden assessment literacy with all of their teachers.

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At the same time, however, mentors can be invaluable in helping new teachers in acquiring strategies for information gathering, learning how to word statements in report cards, and gaining more confidence in reporting to parents in a conference setting. These kinds of streamlining strategies could be areas where mentors could offer excellent advice on how to assess students effectively without becoming buried in marking.

Classroom composition is an area in which school administrators can influence the effectiveness and well-being of beginning teachers in a meaningful way. It is not unheard of for new teachers to be given classes that have more than their share of exceptional students. While this kind of first year experience may serve as a good initiation or rite of passage, it can be like asking piano students to play sonatas while they are still learning the notes on the keyboard. Schools that hope to create a cadre of capable and confident teachers can take a developmental and sequential approach to their professional growth by allowing them to get their feet on the ground in the first year and develop their skills in the basics of instruction. In subsequent years, as their foundational skills become better developed, a broader range of exceptional learners can be assigned to them. Certainly there are pragmatic and political challenges to the idea of giving most of the more challenging students to the experienced teachers while the new teacher has less of this to deal with, but hopefully, experienced teachers could see this as an affirmation of their competence and skill, and of their roles as models of professionalism.

Faculties of Education clearly are called to expand their work on the dealing with the challenges of exceptional learners and at-risk students. The legislation requiring appropriate educational programming for all students highlights the need for increased preservice training in this area.

As mentioned earlier, the interpersonal skill of a school administrator seems to be one of the most significant factors for both risk and resilience in new teachers. Communication and interpersonal skills seem paramount among the characteristics of positive administrators, along with the ability and desire to support teachers in the area of discipline. Accessibility appears to be essential for administrative effectiveness. No teacher lamented the fact that a principal didn't go to enough meetings outside the school. Nor, did any teacher complain about an administrator's budgetary practices. However, teachers definitely remembered times when they needed assistance and their principal was absent, either physically or psychologically speaking. One other characteristic of supportive administrators seems to be an attitude of lifelong learning, in which teachers are encouraged to take risks and to experience failures without fear. Being able to openly acknowledge their shortcomings with their administrator allowed teachers to identify areas of professional growth and plan for learning opportunities in those areas.

The effect of the staff room, and of staff politics in general appears much larger than one might initially assume. With teachers spending most of their day in their classrooms away from colleagues, one might assume that staff effects would be minimal, yet approximately one third of new teachers described the staff room as a place best avoided if one cared for their own psychological well-being. The most discouraging of staff room discourse was that which revolved around talking about students. Arguing against this habit can present some real difficulties though, for the culture of teaching is

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one in which teachers should be able to share ideas and strategies, successes and frustrations with their fellow teachers. Information is power for good in the eyes of teachers. Teachers who may have found out in the staffroom about a student going through a family crisis or trauma, for example, will then be better able to respond appropriately if that student acts out in their class later that day. So, information on what is going on in student's lives is seen as essential for effective teaching. Unfortunately, though, there seems to be a thin and porous boundary between professional information sharing and negative and judgemental gossip. Sometimes the differences between the two can be so subtle that staff rooms may cross the boundary, often without individual teachers even realizing it. After a time, this then seems to become the cultural norm of the staffroom, and at this point, it becomes extremely difficult to change. Schools themselves may have to develop tools or definitions to help them recognize when staff room discourse devolves from professional to unprofessional or from therapeutic to toxic. Faculties of Education appear at first glance to be relatively powerless in this area, though increased attention in coursework, on the topics of professionalism and appropriate and inappropriate information sharing, may help students be better prepared to exert more positive influences upon the staff groups they will eventually join.

One final area bears mention, and that is the area of content background as it is related to one's teaching assignment. Two lines of thought seem to exist on this topic. On one hand, it can be argued that a person teaching science should have post secondary science background in order to teach effectively. According to this rationale, universities should prepare teachers as subject specialists with strong content background in their subject areas. At the same time, however, others will argue that the needs of schools are such that subject specialists are not able to serve a school as well as generalists. Few schools are able to offer a timetable in a single subject area, and in most schools teachers will be asked to teach subjects that may be outside of their university training. Thematic units that combine different curricula require these generalist types of skills. Multiage and multilevel classes also require teachers with broader subject backgrounds. The debate about which of these approaches is superior is conducted within Faculties of Education without a strong consensus emerging. Faculties that seek input from the field find that the suggestions from schools tend to be mixed as well. In this regard Faculties have some work to do. They must try to discern what kind of combination of depth and breadth in content background will best serve teachers and their students. They will need direction from employers in order to be able to do this.

While this five year study is yet at an early stage, it already seems evident that there may be useful information to be gained at this point. Further follow-up over the subsequent four years of professional practice will hopefully help to determine whether the risk and resiliency factors identified here will become more or less influential in affecting professional longevity.