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Kelly Harding
University of Alberta

Jim Parsons
University of Alberta, jim.parsons@ualberta.ca

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Improving Teacher Education Programs

Kelly Harding

Jim Parsons

University of Alberta, Canada

jim.parsons@ualberta.ca

Abstract: In this paper, the authors review current practices in pre-service teacher education. They suggest that radical improvements are possible and that, if practiced, would help mediate many of the pressures young teachers face. To do so, the authors: 1) outline the experiences of young teachers to consider how teachers might thrive in a difficult vocation; 2) share recent research in the area of in-service teacher professional learning (including their own) as a way to inform teacher education programs; and 3) to use these research findings to suggest possible changes and improvements to pre-service teacher education programs. Synthesizing the research, the authors generate a “To Do List” of activities they believe should become part of pre-service education programs. They believe such instruction can become essential career foundations for teachers that would help build Master Teachers, would help stem the exodus from teaching, and would help our teacher education programs begin to educate teachers for the wellness of long and healthy careers.

Introduction

Teaching has never been an easy career choice or job. The curriculum for any subject is *dense*; and, given the tendency of most schools to give new teachers a dog’s breakfast of odds and ends, beginning teachers are expected to become curriculum experts for numerous subjects and grade levels. Still, some teachers become “Master Teachers” and enjoy a long and fulfilled teaching career. We believe more can.

Our primary purpose as teacher educators is to help young teachers become Master Teachers. Our purposes in this paper are: 1) to outline the experiences of young teachers and consider how teachers might thrive in a difficult vocation; 2) to share our recent research in the area of in-service teacher professional learning as a way to inform teacher education programs;

and 3) to use these findings to suggest possible changes and improvements to pre-service teacher education programs.

The Experience of Teachers

There are many definitions of a “master teacher,” but we define *master teachers* as sharing three characteristics:

1. They know how to communicate and build relationships with children.
2. They teach both children and curriculum.
3. They love learning and share that love in their teaching.

To work efficiently, master teachers quickly learn to back-map curriculum and become skilled at matching instructional strategies with assessing outcomes. They learn what is essential, how students will get there, and what *acceptable* looks like. They take advantage of resources – the most crucial being time and experience. They learn a variety of pedagogical practices to engage learners. They learn how to mediate, negotiate, and invite students to actively participate in their own learning. They hone their philosophies of teaching, come to value formative assessment, and learn to make research-informed interventions. They understand the importance of relationships, collaboration, community, and the influence they can have with the children they teach. They learn that content is merely a vehicle; knowing how to learn and how to think critically are the essential outcomes of education. We are not alone in believing these things: meta-analysis, effect size research by John Hattie (2003) has supported these points exceedingly well.

In our experience teaching pre-service teacher education courses at Canada’s University of Alberta, most teacher candidates believe that, when they enter a school, they will be judged on their content skill and instructional capacity. Most worry about two issues: classroom management and content knowledge. Young teachers believe they are expected to hit the ground running and to somehow intuitively read school culture. Moreover, their feet feel the flames of expectation – students will be engaged, behaved, and *enjoy* their courses. Students who require differentiated instruction, learning support, or individualized programming – these too are a teacher’s responsibility. Practical questions of setting up classrooms, managing grade-books, establishing parental communication, and keeping classrooms managed are often learned on the job – often with little help. Throughout Alberta, few schools have formal mentor programs for new staff and few districts engage new staff in induction programs. Our young teachers tend to work alone, under great stress.

Pressures on beginning teachers are high. Often two things determine whether new teachers will be offered continuing contracts: (1) Do students reach an *acceptable standard* of achievement? (2) How often are students sent to the office? Not being recognized as *good*, *strong*, and *capable* during one’s first year of teaching seems a certain kiss of death. If the statistics are true, and 50% of teachers quit teaching in the first five years of their careers (e.g., Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Mumane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991), we wonder how our schools’ cultures and the institutions that prepare teachers are culpable in this trend.

Becoming a Master Teacher

Becoming a master teacher usually takes *years*. But it needn't. For twelve years, we have worked formally in the area of school improvement (Jim has been Director of the Faculty of Education (University of Alberta) Alberta Initiative for School Improvement since 1999. Kelly is currently the Associate Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement). But, in the conversations we have had about school improvement, little is said and less is done to address huge gaps between teacher education and actual teaching. Perhaps our own experiences and those of our colleagues are an aberration, but we recall nothing explicit, standard, or mandated in the schools where we started teaching to specifically engage, support, and help new teachers develop the skills of mastery teaching. And, perhaps the University of Alberta is a lonely backwater of educational insight; but, as teacher educators, we continue to be confused about the ad hoc, random, and significantly non-uniform pre-service education our young teachers receive. Our teacher education courses fit logical program sequences; but, within courses, little seems consistent in teaching philosophy, or pedagogy, or quality. Even within the standard courses teacher candidates experience during their undergraduate education, little seems standard about the topics they cover or the instructors they meet.

Practicum is more of the same. Because pre-service students have different supervising teachers, a range of biases and teaching philosophies pop to the surface. In our experiences, the biases and philosophies found in both university courses and practicum experiences are seldom examined by new teachers as choices among choices; instead, new teachers are often expected to share back to professors and supervisors a clarity of doctrine through conversations about their teaching actions on exams or in course papers. Often this clarity is feigned for purposes of short-term evaluation, but seldom engages long-term growth. Such actions seem little more than “whistling a happy tune,” while the unexamined fear remains unexamined.

Growing as a Teacher

Here's what we have learned from our recent research (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011; Parsons & Harding, 2011; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). The biggest impact on student achievement is teacher quality and the most important teacher qualities are the ability and willingness to engage students. We are not alone in finding the importance of quality teachers: Wright, Horn, & Sanders (1997) note that more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor. Hattie's (2003) meta-analysis also supports the influence of teachers on learning.

John Hattie's extensive review of literature argues that teachers make the difference for students and that teaching excellence is the most powerful influence on achievement. Hattie found that student-teacher interactions were overwhelmingly crucial. Hattie named this *directed teaching*, which focuses upon formative assessment directed by teachers' professional knowledge about *what should happen next* when students are learning. In simple terms, Hattie encouraged feedback and monitoring that both informs teachers about the success of students' learning but also informs teachers about their own success teaching. Such actions make learning transparent to everyone.

Hattie found that helping students articulate to teachers exactly how they were doing and

what else they needed to know and do was crucial. This meant, for Hattie, that building trust relationships between teachers and students where either teachers or students could honestly share what was or was not being learned was a key. Ergo, the most effective teaching strategy was regular feedback and building an environment of trust. Teaching was an art, where pedagogical knowledge was more crucial than content knowledge. Expert teachers, Hattie found, respected their students as people who had their own ideas. They cared about teaching and learning and presented challenging opportunities for learning. They helped students integrate new learning with students' prior knowledge.

Such knowledge centers on capacity building. And, for us, the issue seems clear: if we continue to chase student success and learning without first building capacity in the teachers we hold accountable, we will never understand nor accept a genuine value for education in the young people we teach. Without radical change in teacher education, we will also probably continue to lose good young teachers to other careers. Before we can begin to form authentic, skillful teaching identities, there is much to unpack and examine. And, this examining and unpacking must occur both during teaching and prior to it. Yet, we find little space for continual growth for beginning teachers as a common and expected standard in the profession.

No body of research provides a straightforward answer about why teachers leave the profession early in the careers. Recent research in Alberta suggests that, "The particulars of how and why new teachers leave are not well researched" (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2010, p. 19). Instead, we participate in a long-standing practice of initiating new teachers by overwhelming them – a 'sink or swim' model of building capacity. Plus, it isn't getting easier: there is a growing emphasis on young teachers' abilities to differentiate wide ranges of learning styles – including special needs and English language learners (ELL) inclusion. These new *skills* further stress new teachers' practice.

Furthermore, Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) researchers conclude that, although induction and mentorship programs for newcomers reduce turnover (Glassford and Salintrini, 2007; Kardos and Johnson, 2007; Whisnant, Elliot and Pynchon, 2005), there is no expectation that these programs exist or are standard in every district or school. When we consider how and why new teachers leave, given how discouraged, embarrassed, incompetent, or disillusioned one might feel during the dawning awareness one might have chosen the wrong career, expecting young teachers to also shoulder the blame (ill-prepared, naïve, disinterested, lazy) leaves researchers never fully able to get a clear picture.

In the five-year ATA research study, "The Early Years of Teaching – Progress Report on a Five-Year Longitudinal Study of Beginning Teachers in Alberta" in *The Courage to Choose* (2010), researchers acknowledged their concern that high attrition rates when veteran teachers retire means a "lost investment in the future of Alberta public education; the exodus of trained young professionals is a loss for parents, students and veteran colleagues, all of whom benefit from the enthusiasm, energy and knowledge that new teachers have to offer" (2010, The Alberta Teachers' Association, p. 19). There was no Hawthorne Effect during the ATA study. The study began in 2008 with an initial sample of 135 teachers; but, by the end of the first year, the group was reduced to 117.

First-year teachers identified stresses as: "no collegial collaboration at grade or subject levels, large classes and/or large numbers of special needs students, [and a] large number or range of different subjects to prepare for" (p. 20). During the second year, young teachers increased their teaching skills and senses of belonging to a community as they moved from year one to year two. Those whose assignment changed in year two indicated discouragement and

considered alternative work and career routes. By the end of year two, “approximately 70% of the respondents were happy and engaged members of the profession and their school community and the remaining [30%] plan on or are at risk of leaving the profession” (p. 26).

The ATA report identifies three key sources of support – (1) mentorship, (2) professional learning, and (3) a sense of community – as integral to ‘teacher satisfaction’ (p. 20-1). But, these sources of support seem hard to find. In reality, not all districts or schools have formal, structured mentorship or induction programs; structured and endorsed professional learning opportunities; or even inclusive, friendly school cultures. These failings leave a void into which newcomers might go missing and suggest that explicit, self-directed career advocacy plans might be a valuable part of pre-service curriculum. Young teachers must find mentors, have conversations, foster collegial friendships, and actively engage in self-initiated professional learning activities.

For example, Meister’s (2010) research focused on the choices experienced educators made in establishing their professional identities. His findings suggest that successful educators owned their own growth and learning: they described their “self-journey” and rejected the general belief that “everyone can grow under the same roof” (p. 889). Debunking the *one house for everyone* theory is powerfully liberating because, implicitly, the belief enables top-down, administrative-mandated professional development – a process that leaves many teachers empty, disengaged, and frustrated. Meister (2010) also notes the explicit decisions young teachers make to be involved with school groups, students, and colleagues. This decision to foster relationships and position people ahead of skills and knowledge was a choice supported by all his participants. One subject explained, “this profession allows you to stay in touch with humanity” (p. 892).

The focus on humans, rather than content, reflects Lindley’s description (in Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2001) of a ‘third stage of teaching,’ where novice teachers move after they acquire classroom management and content delivery skills. Lindley states that educators seldom acquire this third level where they “bring their own identity to their work and thoroughly enjoy their interactions with their students” (Meister, 2009). Lindley notes that even fewer reach a fourth stage, “the art of letting go,” described as a teacher’s ability to give “without any expectation of anything in return” (p. 893). Reaching these stages occurs when people and relationships become priorities. When asked about the pressures of external forces, particularly in regard to administration, participants shared their beliefs that change was constant and “administration, as part of the organizational structure, had little impact on their daily workings” (p. 889). Meister’s research clearly correlates teachers’ abilities to remain committed to a belief in people and their successful longevity.

Culture and Teachers

Newcomers to the teaching profession must deal with a highly individualistic, self-centered ethos that has developed over the past decade. Young adults, prior to becoming teachers, have been raised in a stunningly shallow, superficial, me-oriented culture. But the teaching culture they face is hardly me-centered. Suddenly, formerly-me-centered young teachers must transform and adapt to the me-orientation of their students, who bring demands and require attention – then seldom acknowledge or thank teachers for making sacrifices. Teaching can be a job without extrinsic rewards made especially difficult with young people who themselves have high personal expectations.

Working without external rewards is hardly new to teachers. Lortie's (1975) seminal study of teacher identity noted that the rewards of teaching were "elusive and difficult to quantify" (Cohen, 2009, p. 472). Thirty-five years ago, self-sacrifice was more "in vogue." Today, we're left to wonder how a youth culture that esteems the self, immediate gratification, and external positive recognition will acclimate to a profession whose ethos clings to the myth that teaching brings its own intrinsic rewards – a sense of purposefulness when one is engaged in other-centered, meaningful work. We also wonder if, in our era of Facebook, Twitter, celebrity worship, parasocial relationships (*Parasocial interaction is a term used by social scientists to describe one-sided, "parasocial" interpersonal relationships in which one party knows a great deal about the other, but the other does not. The most common forms of such relationships are one-sided relations between celebrities and audience or fans. Parasocial interaction has become an increasingly common phenomenon during the latter half of the 20th century, as it is coupled with the growth in popularity of television, film and media. They involve a real person on one end, but on the other end can have a real celebrity, an organization (sports team) and/or an entirely fictional character*), and status-seeking consumerism, the necessary characteristics for new teachers to survive and prosper in a demanding career are being explicitly identified and fostered in education institutions.

In her case study of long career (+ 25 years) urban high school teachers, Cohen (2009) notes that participants seem to possess "genetic defenses against burnout" (p. 472). One seldom sees 'hardiness' described on new teacher's resumes; yet, for Maddi et al. (2002, 2006), individual hardiness correlated with an ability to withstand difficult, adverse conditions over extended periods of time. Maddi's work revealed three key insights: the most 'hardy' teachers tended to be (1) highly committed, (2) felt they could control their environments, and (3) felt comfortable with challenge (Maddi, et al, 2006, p. 577, in Cohen, p. 474). Essential characteristics included:

acknowledgement that it is not easy to improve student learning and performance coupled with a refusal to give up on their students; inherent flexibility; a willingness to modify practice to improve student learning; a concern with aligning instruction to standards and assessments; a willingness to change their practices to ensure that students are learning concepts and skills articulated in [the curriculum]. Good [teachers] are also described as willing to work with other teachers and administrators; as believing in professional [learning]; as patient and empathetic (Stotko, Ingram, & Beaty-O'Ferrall, 2007, in Cohen, 2009).

Cohen's work suggested that teachers with endurance possessed a strong sense of their value and worth deeply rooted in their teacher identity. The strength of their personalities created "an invisible rein" (Cohen, 1991, in Cohen, 2009). Teachers who endured also shared "an uncommon ability to forget bad experiences ... to transcend difficulty, to literally shake it off and keep going" (p. 481). Cohen also noted the importance of 'love of subject,' which became a "sustaining force," an "incentive to keep going," and an "antidote to the difficulties of the profession" (p. 482).

Finally, Cohen found that, for teachers who remained in the profession, race was a "non-issue." These teachers were indifferent to skin color. Because race is often a source of stress for white teachers in predominantly non-white schools, teachers not influenced by stereotype or bias see students as individuals capable of success. Theologian Caroline Simon (1997) calls this a "narrative imagination" – the honest ability to see others as stories of possibility as yet unwritten. We believe that supporting these stories without

micromanaging them is a key teaching act. We believe good teachers support without directing. And, seeing young people as possibilities helped teachers treat them with humor, honesty, and with high expectations for hard work. Thus, race did not become an excuse for co-dependence and teachers were able to help students transcend racial issues to “help re-imagine a future for themselves” (p. 485).

Connecting Our Research on In-service Teachers

How do the insights of successful veteran teachers align with our own research (Parsons & Harding, 2011)? First, we have learned that relationships and critical friendships with colleagues are essential. In the beginning, the newness and needs of teaching cause many novice teachers to isolate themselves. They withdraw into the immediate needs of work: planning, marking, making tests, and mediating problem students. Being on top of things is crucial. We recall it well: as young teachers, every day was a litmus test of our career choice. Asking others for help carried an impression one is not capable.

Our research suggests that what young teachers don't yet know is that they can and should use the demands and issues of teaching as vehicles for collaborative opportunities with more experienced teachers and with each other – not to whine, but to shine. Our research found that teachers who collectively engaged in communities of practice also engaged in powerful teacher professional learning. These collaborations can help young teachers avoid a second creeping issue – self-doubt, that sense of powerlessness and hopelessness that can leave them feeling overwhelmed and stewing in self-imposed ennui. Self-doubt can literally make a teacher sick. Communities of practice, our research found, both help solve real problems and provide a social experience that mediates a tendency towards isolation.

Seeking relationships to ameliorate stress, confusion, and anxiety is a powerful form of self-advocacy, efficacy, and identity building. It is also characteristic of emerging leaders. In his article “Teacher Leader” (2001), Roland Barth concludes that the sooner teachers involve themselves in taking on school-wide responsibilities, the greater the benefits for their own identities and their students. Barth tells us that teachers who become leaders experience professional satisfaction, reduce isolation, and gain new knowledge: all these spill into their teaching. They become school based-reformers and owners and investors in the school, rather than mere tenants. Barth's insights match our own research insights that suggest that, when teachers become engaged, their students become engaged, begin to learn, and then produce measurable achievement.

Building a Teacher “To Do List”

What does all this mean for teacher education programs? How do we make sense of these research insights to create a data-informed “To Do List?” Foremost on our “To Do List” is to encourage a radical shift in how we conceive teacher education. But we are experienced teacher educators. New teachers have their own “To Do Lists.”

Before new teachers take control of their first classrooms and build their teaching identity, what should be on their “To Do List?” Our research (Parsons & Harding, 2011) suggests that any good “To Do List” should ask teachers to (1) initiate positive, collaborative relationships with other teachers and students; (2) engage in self-directed professional learning; (3) get involved in school-wide initiatives; (4) ask for help; (5) come to see challenges and problems as opportunities to grow; and (6) conduct classroom action research with students.

What would it mean to actually build this list into a teacher education program? Providing a list during the first day's introductory lecture or a motivational speech during the final day certainly won't do it. How might we build activities into our teacher education programs that would, indeed, help our young teachers begin to build identities as "Master Teachers?" Below we offer a number of suggestions, based upon research we have conducted over the past twelve years (Parsons & Harding, 2011; Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

- 1) During our coursework, instruct and engage students in action research processes, ethics, and methods. Field experience can provide a lens through which pre-service teachers can focus on specific and relevant issues they will be challenged to address after they attain their degree and find themselves in their own classrooms. In research conducted with first year teachers, one common theme emerges – they do not feel prepared to deal with many of the realities in contemporary classrooms. Knowing and feeling confident in the processes of identifying and tackling context specific problems empowers beginning educators and ensures a substantially effective learning space for students. Create and engage in real-to-classroom research – exploring issues of diverse learner abilities, language delays or deficiencies, multi-cultural populations, mixed socio-economic communities, or external pressures of high stakes testing, for example. Empower pre-service teachers to seek information they can use to mitigate these realities; assign presentations of findings both within the classrooms and outside. Position education students as 'idea leaders.' Support processes for critical thinking: identify challenges; research the field; make informed decisions; engage ideas and solutions; try them out; keep track of the data; come back to discuss what you saw; what worked? What didn't work? What can be changed? In other words, do action research.
- 2) Engage young teachers in collaborative work. Working together to explain ideas, agree on a problem's root causes, determine a plan of action, agree on resources and task responsibilities, inspire colleagues, take learning risks, negotiate different personalities, build peer capacities, overcome barriers or unforeseen complications – such collaboration matches work taking place in successful schools. Much of this work reflects the core beliefs and philosophies of the school's teachers and its culture. Teacher education activities should explicate the processes of translating teaching philosophies into actual classroom activities. Teachers often use pedagogies based upon their own learning experiences. If we want classrooms to become collaborative, innovative, and creative spaces where critical thinking and thoughtful reflection are the norm, then pre-service teachers must learn and practice collaboratively in creative spaces where innovation, critical thinking, and thoughtful reflection are the norm – modeled and expected by their professors.
- 3) Build classroom cultures that support community, agency, and service. (*Community centered on working together. Agency simply meant the belief that one could make a difference. Service centered upon doing "good things" for others. In our experience speaking to young teachers, these three characteristics are what encouraged teachers to become teachers in the first place*). Our research synthesized these three characteristics as motivators for teacher engagement. Supporting community, agency, and service might mean engaging in community-based projects outside of the university classroom that help young teacher candidates grow to believe they are capable of making a difference.

Knowing that one's actions can make a difference encourages one to take these actions.

- 4) Work on real classroom issues, and do this work transparently. Allow students to become part of the classroom planning. Openly discuss issues about teaching and assessment. We believe a pre-service teacher education course can be a space where young teachers work with experienced teachers to think openly about all aspects of teaching – including the goals and assignments of the course being taken.
- 5) Work to allow and increase individual skills and interests. Celebrate diversity. Not all teachers need similar skills, so encourage young teachers to be more “at home” with their own abilities and give them opportunities to employ these skills within the classroom. This might mean allowing differentiated instruction and different major assignments. As young teachers learn to accept their own diversity, they gain insights into how to accept their students' differences.
- 6) Allow young teachers to actively consider and discuss the kinds of cultures they hope to build in their classrooms and schools and practical ways those cultures might be built. Openly discuss how they will relate with their students in an age of social networking.

Our experience in teacher education and the research we have engaged and read suggest that these activities can and should become explicit choices available in pre-service education programs. Such instruction can become essential career foundations. Instead of attempting to explain the exodus – like an autopsy that attempts to explain the cause of an untimely demise, our teacher education programs can begin to celebrate the wellness of a long and healthy career.

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