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## **BEGINNING TEACHERS' NEEDS AND CONCERNS, AND THE FORMS OF ASSISTANCE THEY REQUIRE: AS PERCEIVED BY BEGINNING TEACHERS**

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Abstract: Experts say that most beginning teachers spend their first year of teaching in survival mode. The new and inexperienced have definite areas of needs and concerns – both professional and personal – and they will gain much from the support of successful, veteran teachers. For such help to be effective, a better understanding of the forms of assistance required will be necessary. This paper presents the findings of surveys on both beginning and mentoring teachers regarding BT needs and concerns, and the kinds of support to be provided. It also includes an outline of the kind of mentoring programme that can be introduced to help BTs in the school.

### **Introduction**

Beginning teaching is a critical period in the development of a teacher. Many studies have found this to be a period of great anxiety and even of trauma for many beginning teachers (Ryan et al, 1980; Hidalgo, 1987; Austin & Murphy, 1987). Lortie (1975) described the first year of teaching as an ordeal for beginning teachers who feel inadequate, unprepared, and unready. Many seem to experience “reality shock” (Dreeben, 1970). This arises from their suddenly being placed in charge of a full class, made responsible for their learning and, at the same time, expected to perform many other roles and tasks of a teacher both in school and the school’s community (Turney et al., 1985). All this may result in the inability of beginning teachers to apply what they have mastered during teacher training to the classroom. Unless adequate and timely support is given to these novice teachers, many may not “survive the shock of transition” (Corcoran, 1981) and leave teaching. Recent studies in the United States show that a staggering 30% of teachers leave in the first five years. And often it is the most talented new teachers who are most likely to do so (Gonzales and Sosa, 1993).

In Singapore, MOE statistics show that the attrition rate is approximately 25%. Even for those who remain in the classroom, difficulties in the formative professional years can have a continuing negative effect. Teacher turnover may also threaten education reforms which require years of sustained school effort to succeed (Halford, 1998).

As increasing numbers of new teachers enter the schools the challenge of providing them effective support and enabling them to develop staying power has become a critical issue. In the United States the provision of a teacher mentor for every new teacher has been made mandatory. In Singapore schools are required to conduct teacher induction programmes for new teachers, and young teachers are given closer guidance and supervision by senior and more experienced staff who may or may not be official teacher mentors. To complement these efforts the Singapore MOE has set up Teachers’ Network which facilitates networking among teachers and the sharing of teaching experiences and ideas, and provides teacher support groups, teacher counselling services etc.

Education leaders will be more effective in helping these novices if they understand the typical realities of new teachers and the kinds of assistance required. The support to be rendered will have to address the difficulties encountered by beginning teachers, and their needs and concerns. This paper presents the findings of two simple surveys among Singapore beginning teachers. *What are*

*their needs? What kind of assistance would beginning teachers like to have from their educational leaders?*

## Survey I

### *The Sample*

A total of 160 beginning teachers (102 primary and 58 secondary) each with less than three years of teaching were surveyed. Altogether, 71 primary schools and 42 secondary schools were represented in the sample.

### *Needs experienced by beginning teachers*

To get a picture of the kinds of needs experienced, the beginning teachers were asked to indicate on a given list of 20 items the level of need for assistance in those areas. The level of need was rated on a 5-point scale from "Little or no need" (1) to "Very high need" (5). The instrument used was adapted from one designed by Gordon (1991).

Table 1 shows the ranking of the 20 needs items by their mean score. The areas with the highest level of need for assistance include obtaining instructional resources, grouping for effective instruction, and maintaining student discipline.

**Table 1: Needs Assessment of Beginning Teachers – Results (N= 160)**

Rank order	Area of Need for Assistance	Mean (max:5)
1	Obtaining instructional resources and materials	3.02
2	Grouping for effective instruction	3.00
3	Maintaining student discipline	2.95
4	Understanding the school systems' teacher evaluation process	2.90
5	Motivating students	2.85
6	Diagnosing student needs	2.77
7	Using a variety of teaching methods	2.75
8	Completing administrative paperwork	2.73
9	Dealing with individual differences among students	2.68
10	Organising and managing my classroom	2.65
11	Evaluating student progress	2.63
12	Communicating with parents	2.63
13	Finding out what is expected of me as a teacher	2.55
14	Dealing with stress	2.53
15	Facilitating group discussions	2.44
16	Planning for instruction	2.35
17	Managing my time and work	2.31
18	Understanding the curriculum	2.20
19	Communicating with the principal	2.13
20	Communicating with other teachers	1.94

Scale: 5 – Very high need for assistance; 4 – High need for assistance; 3 – Moderate need; 2 – Some need for assistance; 1 – Little or no need

### *Discussion*

The findings show that the group of 160 primary and secondary beginning teachers surveyed do not seem to experience high levels of need in any of the major areas listed. It does appear that they have been fairly well supported and guided by their schools. This is probably a result of efforts that have been made, particularly in the last five years, by MOE and the schools in helping beginning teachers and promoting their growth.

As seen in Table 1 the help most needed by teachers in their first two to three years of teaching is certainly in the area of instructional resources and teaching materials. This is something that their more experienced colleagues would have fewer problems with, given that they have had the years to build up and develop their resource banks.

It is interesting to note that the main concerns of these novices indicate that they are at the *teaching tasks stage* (Fuller, 1969) in their professional development, a time when they are concerned mainly with their teaching responsibilities. It is also clear that these beginning teachers are progressing towards the *teaching impact stage* of professional development – as their next lot of concerns on the list are issues related to student learning and well-being.

The beginning teachers in this study appear to have been successfully socialised into their workplace as they experience little difficulty in communicating with their principals and colleagues. And although it is common knowledge that teachers in Singapore schools often feel stressed, these novices seem to be coping with their lot as they experience only some need for assistance in this area.

The findings, in general, reveal that the needs experienced by novices in our schools are not very different from that seen in beginning teacher literature. The picture presented in the result shows that while there are needs for assistance, the actual level of need experienced is only moderate. It does suggest that the beginning teachers are receiving at least some support in the areas listed. They are not left entirely helpless. What the study has done is identifying the specific needs of beginning teachers which can do with more support from the help givers – schools and the MOE. These are in the areas of teaching resources, grouping for effective instruction, and classroom management.

The results of this simple study are in congruence with a separate study on primary school beginning teachers conducted recently by Ms Isabella Tan as part of her doctoral studies investigation. The focus of her survey was on the *kinds of assistance* beginning teachers would like to have which will enable them to be more effective teachers.

## **Survey II**

### *The Sample*

The sample consisted of 90 beginning primary school teachers (representing 90 primary schools) with up to three years of service.

### *Kinds of assistance preferred by beginning teachers*

The beginning teachers were asked to indicate the kinds of professional assistance that would be useful to them. The instrument used for the study was an adaptation of one designed by Boccia (1989). It comprised a list of 20 topics, and an open-ended question that allowed respondents to

include information not reflected in the list. The level of helpfulness of each kind of assistance was rated on a 4-point scale from "Least helpful" (1) to "Most helpful" (4).

Table 2 shows the ranking of the 20 kinds of assistance by their mean score. The kinds of assistance most preferred by beginning teachers include obtaining instructional resources, and having a mentor in the school for support and guidance.

**Table 2: Kinds of Assistance Preferred by Beginning Teachers (Primary Schools) (N= 90)**

Rank order	Kind of Assistance	Mean (max: 4)
1	More resources for teaching	3.56
2	Mentor teacher in building	3.53
3	Release time for lesson preparation and planning	3.52
4	Fewer duties in the initial period	3.46
5	Fewer classes	3.41
6	Opportunity to observe other classes	3.33
7	Workshops for in classroom management and discipline	3.20
8	Workshops in content areas	3.19
9	Graduate courses in teaching strategies	3.11
10	Workshops on teaching special needs students	3.02
11	Observation and feedback from peer and other teachers	2.97
12	Handbook on administrative procedures	2.92
13	No extracurricular assignments	2.90
14	Training in how to relate to parents	2.88
15	Opportunities to share experiences with other BTs	2.83
16	More opportunities to conference with specialists (e.g. school psychologists, speech therapists)	2.76
18	Computer or mail link to university and other BTs	2.62
19	Beginning Teachers Newsletter support	2.50
20	Observation & feedback from supervisors/HODs/Principals	2.27
21	Telephone to university faculty for specific questions	2.19

### *Discussion*

As the study suggests, our new teachers have a definite need for professional assistance in their initial years of service. They are interested in professional development, and are specific about the kinds of help they need for their growth. Beginning teachers are interested in the kinds of professional assistance that will enable them to be more effective in their teaching, such as having more resources for teaching, and having the guidance and support of a mentor teacher in the school. Being given a lighter workload initially, and finding opportunities to observe master teachers and to attend workshops will all be helpful.

The beginning teachers have also indicated an interest in further training in courses such as classroom management, teaching strategies, and even in content areas. It could be that these beginners are more aware now of their lack of preparation for some of the demands and difficulties of the real world of teaching.

The findings also show that new teachers value highly the opportunities of working with their peers. It suggests that beginning teachers regard the support and cooperation of their colleagues to be important. Such results are congruent with the literature on teacher socialisation and development which has consistently shown that interpersonal support is one of the best modes of assistance that

can be given to beginning teachers. This can take the form of peer coaching, or mentoring by more experienced colleagues. Beginning teachers are socialised into the profession by their relationships with colleagues who provide the single greatest influence (Jordell, 1987). It is not only skill support that they need, but also beginning teachers most value the emotional support they receive from colleagues (Odell & Ferraro, 1992).

Release time, fewer duties, and fewer classes are another collective group of highly valued forms of assistance. While this is generally acknowledged to be the immediate and most direct form of assistance schools can provide beginning teachers, whether it can be made available will depend on an overall improvement in the staffing situation of the education service. Until this bigger issue is resolved, beginning teachers may still have to learn to cope with almost the same workload and responsibilities as their more experienced colleagues.

## **Survey I and Survey II**

### *Implications*

Beginning teachers need support throughout their early years of teaching. The initial assistance provided beginners is an important part of the foundation upon which their careers will be set (Gordon, 1991). For this assistance to be helpful it is necessary to determine what the professional and personal needs of the novices are so that they can be addressed. Findings from the two studies reveal several major needs of beginning teachers and the kinds of assistance they perceive to be useful. These will have implications for educators who are responsible for inducting beginning teachers or providing initial assistance.

- Both studies have shown that the major concern of novices is that of having adequate teaching resources. Ensuring that beginners have the necessary resources for effective teaching will enable them to grow in confidence, as they will experience greater success in their teaching. However many may hesitate to seek help as they consider this to be an admission of incompetence. Schools can help to facilitate this process by making teaching resources readily available and offering useful guidance on how these can be obtained. Networking among novices and experienced teachers can be encouraged so that resources can be shared. Networking across schools for the same purpose can also be considered.
- Beginning teachers appreciate the need to have a mentor. They see this to be one very useful form of assistance that a school can provide. There is overwhelming evidence in literature that shows “the assignment of a support teacher may well be the most powerful ... induction practice available..” (Huling-Austin & Murphy, 1987). Many studies on teacher induction programs agree that the mentor is the key person in the success of induction programs. According to Hoffman et al (1986) mentors are valued by beginning teachers primarily as sources of practical information and secondarily as sources of psychological support. While many schools in Singapore have support teacher arrangements for their beginning teachers these are often on an ad hoc basis. What is needed in each school is a systematic and structured program of induction that has teacher mentoring as its key element.
- The studies have also shown that beginning teachers are aware of the need for continual professional development. They are interested in further training in areas that will make them better classroom teachers: classroom management, content areas, teaching strategies. In-service courses can be offered on these areas and beginning teachers can be given time-off to attend whenever they see the need to. Timeliness of the assistance to be given is important for it to be useful.

- Beginning teachers see the need to work and share with their peers and learn from observing other teachers. Again, schools can facilitate the process by encouraging peer coaching and learning activities. A collaborative and co-operative school culture will provide a nurturing environment for the beginners. Encouraging the teachers to network, not only among colleagues in the same school but also with those from other schools will go a long way in helping beginning teachers develop and grow. Introducing the novices to the many services provided by MOE and the Teachers' Network will give them more avenues to seek help from whenever it is needed.

### Conclusion

Beginning teacher assistance is crucial if novices are to survive their induction years. Beginning teachers have specific needs and difficulties, and if these are not addressed, negative emotional, physical, attitudinal, and behavioral problems may result. The ultimate effect of the negative experiences of many beginning teachers is an exit from the profession. (Gordon, 1991). Educators charged with helping beginning teachers have a responsibility to provide relevant and timely assistance. They need to know therefore what some of the major needs are. To that end, the findings presented here may be of use.

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