

**Working with Beginning Teachers:
What Effective Strategies Do Principals Use?**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine principals' perception on what beginning teachers can do to ensure success in schools and what principals can do to assist them. Principals claimed that they assisted beginning teachers in mentoring, supervision, and performance evaluation. They advised beginning teachers for successful practices in effective teaching strategies, working with diverse learners, interacting with parents and guardians, handling disciplinary issues, confidentiality of student information, and continuing professional development.

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Introduction

Beginning teachers serve as a powerful workforce to support future development of a school. As they are new to the teaching profession and the school, mentoring and professional development are effective ways to integrate the beginning teachers to the learning community and its culture. Providing an accommodating environment to beginning teachers will help retain the best teachers in school. Principals assume a significant role in working with beginning teachers to facilitate their entry to the teaching profession.

Conceptual Framework

Literature on the relationship between principals and beginning teachers is abundant. Hopkins' study (2003) concluded that passion for teaching was the top qualification principals required of new teachers. Studies by Alliance for Excellent Education (2004), Angelle (2002), Boss (2006), Kardos (2004), Walker-Wied (2005), and Ubben and Hughes (1997) confirmed that principals vitally contributed to the induction and socialization of beginning teachers. In their daily duties, principals provided necessary supports for beginning teachers (Gurule-Gonzales, 1995; King, 2004; Southeast Center for Teacher Quality, 2005; Stuart, 2002; and Tyson, 1999). Principals' role in implementing successful new teacher mentoring programs was well documented (Colley, 2002; Gurule-Gonzales, 1995; Mueller, 2000; Powell, 1992; Starr, 2004). Serving as instructional leaders, principals could grant more released time to beginning teachers for lesson planning (Angelle, 2002; Colley, 2002; Stansbury, 2001). As school culture builders, principals can initiate beginning teachers into the school educational community (Boss, 2006; Colley, 2002; Moss, 1985; Stansbury, 2001). Principals advised beginning teachers in the following areas: learning from experienced teachers (Starr, 2002), observing effective classrooms (Boss, 2006), upholding discipline (McCullough, 1992), and engaging in professional development (Gurule-Gonzales, 1995). Studying principals and new teachers, Stansbury (2001) and Tyson (1999) cautioned that principals should hold high regard to new teacher assessment. Additionally, Green, Potts, Henderson, and Whitelaw (2004), Peter Harris Research Group, Inc. (2004), Ingersoll and Smith (2004), and Millet (2005) found that principals' involvement in working with new teachers was a significant factor in retaining new teachers.

Though most literature has indicated a positive relationship between principals and beginning teachers, the findings of some studies disagree. In examining first-year teachers' competence, Stonner (1998) found that the impact of principal on new teacher competence was minimal. Mentor teachers did not perceive school principal's contribution to teacher mentoring programs (Powell, 1992). McCullough (1992) summarized principals' beliefs that new teachers' success was largely determined by pre-service preparation.

Purpose of the Study

Principals' advice is important to beginning teachers as they start their teaching career and strive for success. Research on beginning teachers has focused on teachers' responses and encounters. Few studies actually explored principals' effort in assisting beginning teachers from the principals' perspectives. The purpose of this study was to examine principals' perception of what beginning teachers needed to do to ensure success in schools and how they assisted beginning teachers.

Research Questions

The major question in this study is:

What strategies do principals use to work effectively with beginning teachers?

The sub-questions are:

1. What qualifications do principals look for in hiring beginning teachers?
2. What kind of assistance do principals provide to beginning teachers?
3. What are principals' perspectives of successful practices for beginning teachers?

Methodology

Design: The study follows a descriptive design of qualitative nature. A qualitative design in this case provides ample opportunities for principals to elaborate freely on their perspectives in working with beginning teachers.

Participants: This study involved 104 randomly selected school principals from eight school districts in north Georgia. Of the 104 survey questionnaires mailed, 54 (approximately 52%) were returned (9 from high schools, 6 from middle schools and 39 from elementary schools). Participants' demographic information is displayed in the following table:

Table 1
Demographic Information of School Principals

Categories	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Years as principal (average)	1.67	6	9
Years as teacher (average)	2.10	14	14
Highest degree earned: M.Ed.	25.6%	17%	50%
Ed.S.	41.2%	66%	50%
Ph.D./Ed.D.	30.8%	17%	0%
Gender: Male	16%	42.8%	60%
Female	84%	57.2%	40%
Ethnicity: African American	36%	17%	29%
Caucasian	64%	83%	71%

Research Instrument: The research instrument is a 13-item open-ended questionnaire designed by the researchers. It begins with demographic questions related to years of experience as a principal and as a teacher, highest degree earned, gender, and ethnicity. The 13 open-ended questions were derived from current literature relating to principals' practices in working with beginning teachers, their advice in teaching and learning, and qualifications they look for when hiring beginning teachers. The instrument was professionally examined in contents, format and language by experienced principals and educational leadership faculty in higher education. It was then piloted with 12 principals to ensure its validity. All constructive recommendations were incorporated in revising the instrument.

Data Analysis: Data collected were coded under each of the main themes:

- 1) Principals' criteria in selecting beginning teachers: knowledge and disposition.
- 2) Principals' assistance to beginning teachers: mentoring, supervising and performance evaluation.

3) Principals' perception of successful practices for beginning teachers: teaching strategies, diversity issues, parental relationship, disciplinary problems, professional development, student information, and interacting with principals.

All data were analyzed and tabulated by electronic spreadsheets. Consistencies and patterns of principals' responses were closely observed and monitored.

Research Findings

Findings of this study are reported by order of the research questions in the following sections:

1. What qualifications do principals look for in hiring beginning teachers?

Most school principals focused on commitment, enthusiasm, passion for education and high qualification in their respective fields in hiring new teachers. They looked for people who were “committed to and passionate about teaching kids and willing to be flexible to learn effective strategies”, and “highly qualified and certified in their fields”. Effective instructional strategies, flexibility, communication skills, openness and willingness to collaborate with others were also qualifications some principals considered important in hiring new teachers. Middle school principals focused particularly on “classroom behavior management skills” and “familiarity with middle school children”.

2. What kind of assistance do principals provide to beginning teachers?

Principals assisted beginning teachers mainly in mentoring, supervision, and performance evaluation.

Principals assigned mentors to beginning teachers “to provide guidance and share successes/failures, lesson plans, and materials”. They recommended mentors to “meet the new teachers weekly to target problems or concerns”, “encourage new teachers to observe their mentors and the mentors to observe the teachers. They should become cubical friends”.

In supervision, principals observed beginning teachers regularly and provided feedback on teaching performance. A high school principal reported: “Not too much presence to smother or intimidate, but to show support and care.” He also asked his leading veteran teachers to help supervise new teachers. Middle school principals also included “drop-in with focus walks” as an approach to supervision.

Preparing beginning teachers for performance evaluation, principals provided orientation to the evaluation process so that the expectations were clear to everyone. They also conducted “pre-evaluation conference” and practiced “visits and feedback before the official evaluation”. One high school principal simply responded: “We discuss it

everyday. Don't be scared. You won't get fired or embarrassed. The best show (is) solid teaching and we understand everything else”.

Specific assistance to beginning teachers included providing “proper orientation resources”, and “time to organize and plan with peer teachers”. Other activities to assist beginning teachers included departmental collaboration, beginning teachers’ forum, referencing books and resources, and available professional development.

3. What are principals’ perspectives regarding successful practices for beginning teachers?

Principals advised beginning teachers for successful practices in the following areas: effective teaching strategies, working with diverse learners, interacting with parents and guardians, handling disciplinary issues, confidentiality of student information, interacting with principals, and continuing professional development.

All school principals emphasized the importance of effective teaching by learning from master teachers, implementing the learning-focused school model, and updating research based strategies to guide their instructional practice. Elementary school principals asked beginning teachers to seek knowledge of latest research on best practices. Middle school principals’ advice was leaning toward “using assessment data to drive instruction”. High school principals encouraged beginning teachers to “try new ways”, “learn from others and create a strategy to set their styles and the style of the class”.

In working with diversity learners, principals’ common advice was to “teach to all learning styles with differentiated instruction” and “present information in a variety of methods”. One principal recommended using the successful classroom model of Ruby Payne's work. Another principal cautioned beginning teachers “that students have many learning levels each day”. Pairing beginning teachers with veteran teachers of different teaching strategies was also recommended. Elementary school principals advised beginning teachers to use a variety of resources on campus including special education and ESOL teachers support and guidance. Middle school principals urged beginning teachers to understand their students first, use multiple resources and collaborate with other teachers of the same students. High school principals emphasized the importance of working closely with parents to understand the needs of each student.

In communicating with parents, beginning teachers were advised to proceed in a professional, respectful and timely manner while keeping documentation of the communication. Additionally, teachers were advised to “make sure parents have a clear understanding of the (teachers’) expectations”, to “call parents not only on problems, but also on positives”, and to “use positive language in describing student performance.”

In managing classroom discipline, principals advised beginning teachers to “begin year with clear expectations and follow through with discipline procedures”, “plan for bell to bell instruction”, “involve parents prior to asking the administration to step in”, and “be consistent and fair in the delivery of consequences”. Other advice included

“knowing and following the school’s policy and procedures, disciplining students with respect and dignity, and being objective in the process. In one principal’s words, “avoid emotions and deal calmly with the behavior. Be the adult in the situation.”

Confidentiality issues and procedures were addressed by principals during pre-planning staff sessions. Principals gave the following list of advice to beginning teachers: “all student information should be treated as confidential from the start”; “never talk about student information with another parent or in a public setting”; “be cautious of sharing with other staff”; “do not disclose anything that you would not want disclosed about your child” and “model and communicate this expectation on a consistent basis”. Middle school principals especially mentioned reviewing code of ethics with beginning teachers.

Regarding advice on occasions to see principals, most school principals offered open-door policy so that their beginning teachers could come “any time” to “talk about experiences” and to “discuss instruction or improvement ideas”. One principal wrote: “Whenever they have a question. I advise them not to be afraid to ask for help.” One high school principal made it very clear: “When they encounter a situation they don't feel they can handle or anytime they feel a student's safety and/or wellbeing is jeopardized”. Some elementary principals simply said they wanted to see them and personally compliment them on their achievement.

Principals considered professional development an essential aspect of the beginning teachers’ professional endeavor. However, elementary school principals advised beginning teachers not to enroll in a graduate school program until the second year. Middle school principals advised beginning teachers to never stop learning and to align their professional development activities with the school’s expectations as well as personal needs. High school principals advised beginning teachers to “participate in professional learning communities”, to “involve in an articulated staff endorsement plan”, and to “observe veteran teachers for techniques and practices”.

When asked for any additional advice for beginning teachers, elementary school principals’ advice included the following:

Be open to suggestions. Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate. Communicate with your students’ parents.

Strive to be the kind of teacher you would want your own child to have.

Ask questions; ask for support, lots of resources and people to help.

Good management and a positive attitude and a willingness to learn will solve 98% of any problems that arise.

Understand the first year can be uncertain. Work with teams and remain clam even if thing seems difficult.

Be a good team player.

Be willing to change and adapt.

Middle school principals added the following recommendations:

- Be patient with the students yourself.
- Kids don't care about what you know until they know you care.
- Be strong and courageous.
- Treat middle school with respect and you will get respect in return.

High school principals' additional advice appeared to be relatively specific:

- Be a reflective practitioner.
- Keep high expectations for yourself and your students.
- Be a collaborative team member.
- The first semester is very hard! Hang in there.
- Forget everything taught in college, because it has little to do with the real world.
- Planning prevents problems. Think of scenarios in the classroom

Discussion

The findings of this study have generated some interesting points worthy of discussion in the practical perspectives:

First, all the principals in this study unanimously expressed that passion for education was the primary quality they were looking for in hiring new teachers. This is in total agreement with the literature reviewed by Hopkins (2003). Principals need to continue working with beginning teachers to inspire that passion that keeps teachers from dropping out.

Second, findings in this study strongly supported that principals made a difference in inducting new teachers. Thus, the findings of studies by Angelle (2002), Boss (2006), Johnson and Kardos (2002), Walker-Wied (2005), and Ubben and Hughes (1997) were confirmed. However, the findings of this study did not agree with McCullough (1992) who concluded that new teachers' success was determined by pre-service preparation, not by mentoring principals. McCullough's study seemed to have undermined the principal's impact on beginning teachers. It is hard to believe that a passionate principal cannot touch the heart of a passionate teacher.

Third, principals in this study reported that they assisted beginning teachers by mentoring and supervising their performance. They also helped them to prepare for their annual evaluation, and other specific fields. These kinds of professional supports were also expressed by principals in the studies of Gurule-Gonzales (1995), King (2004), Southeast Center for Teacher Quality (2005), Stuart (2002), and Tyson (1999). Only responsible principals act professionally to ensure the success of their beginning teachers by working closely with them as collaborating partners.

Fourth, most current literature confirmed the successful role that principals played in beginning teachers' mentoring program (Colley, 2002; Gurule-Gonzales, 1995; Mueller, 2000; Powell, 1992; and Starr, 2002) except in the study conducted by Powell (1992). The findings of this study were in strong support of the majority of current literature. Principals in this study even took the initiative to show teacher mentors how to mentor new teachers.

Fifth, the findings of this study also indicated that granting released time to beginning teachers really helped their initiation into the school learning community. Studies by Angelle (2002), Colley (2002), and Stansbury (2001) also advocated the same idea. Granting released time proved to work.

Sixth, principals in this study advised beginning teachers to learn from veteran teachers, to uphold class discipline, and to continue with their professional development. Similar advice to learn from experienced teachers was also given by principals in Starr's study (2002), and Boss's study (2006). Principals in McCullough's study (1992) emphasized that class discipline should be made clear to both students and parents. Principals in Gurule-Gonzales's study (1995) urged new teachers to plan their career by engaging in professional development.

Seventh, principals in this study expressed great concern of the performance evaluation of beginning teachers. Extensive information, supervision, practice, and pre-conference activities were offered to beginning teachers to prepare them for the first year evaluation. This was to ensure that beginning teachers undergo guided experiences to attain confidence in their first year of teaching. Stansbury (2001) and Tyson (1999) also cautioned that principals should hold high regard to new teacher assessment.

Other unique findings of this study deserve special attention as follows:

- (1) Principals in this study expressed their special interest in assisting beginning teachers. Their enthusiasm was indicated by the various kinds of assistance they offered to beginning teachers. Assistance started with orientation activities followed by opportunities of support on campus. Then, mentoring programs and close supervision of teaching behaviors ensured beginning teachers' first year success. Finally, the process of acquainting beginning teachers with performance evaluation was thoroughly conducted. Principals in this study took the initiative to organize induction programs to plan the details of many aspects of school life beginning teachers would encounter.
- (2) Principals' responses to this survey threw new light into the study of principals and beginning teachers. Unique ideas generated in this study, such as teacher forum, department collaboration, learning focused school model, confidentiality of student information, parental relationship, and frequency of meeting school principal, will stimulate interests for further research.

- (3) Middle school principals in this study responded somewhat differently from elementary and high school principals with special emphasis on the uniqueness of the middle school program and the physical, physiological, mental, and psychological growth of adolescents. Middle school principals simply wanted to draw the attention of new teachers to the special characteristics of the middle school program.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are significant to research on the relationship between Principals and beginning teachers. They are concisely summarized in the following: (1) Principals looked for passion in hiring new teachers. (2) Principals assisted beginning teachers in orientation, mentoring, supervision, and performance evaluation. (3) Principals advised on successful teaching practices such as learning from veteran teachers, upholding class discipline, engaging in professional development, keeping student information confidential, enhancing parental relations, and preparing to work with diverse learners.

Supporting the roles principals play in the beginning teacher induction process, this study confirms the belief that principals build the school culture that positively impacts beginning teachers. This study also contributes to the knowledge of the field by drawing principals' attention to the value of induction programs for beginning teachers. By focusing on unique successful practices of beginning teachers, this study presents ideas of a thorough induction program to include orientation, support, mentoring, supervision, and evaluation of beginning teachers. These practical ideas carry special meaning in retaining quality teachers particularly in a time of great shortage. Future studies of this topic could focus on beginning teachers' reaction to the principals' induction plan and how an effective induction program can be built through collaboration of principals, veteran teachers and beginning teachers.

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