Secondary School Teachers’ Perceptions of the Practical and Emotional Challenges They Encountered during Their Second Year in the Teaching Profession

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Introduction

Beginning professionals have many theories about teaching and about students when they arrive in their very first classrooms. However, putting these technical theories into practice requires adaptation in many areas. The perceptions of the beginning teachers change as they proceed through their years in teaching. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the perceptions of secondary teachers about their experiences as full-time second-year teachers, teaching in urban public schools. The purposes of the research were: to explore perceptions of full-time second-year secondary teachers as they compared their first and second years in the classroom and to discover factors that caused these perceptual changes from the first to the second year. The study sought to reveal commonalities amongst the participants regarding their experiences of the first two years of teaching. Further, the study considered areas of change that would assist beginning teachers with their practice and improve the quality of their experience.

Literature review

The rationale for this qualitative study was based on a review of both the practical and theoretical literature. I discovered that the practical literature focussed on second year is not as broad in quantity, quality or scope as articles related to first year teaching. Articles which relate to 2nd year teachers fell into 5 categories:

- Teacher retention and training studies
- Advice from second-year to first-year teachers
Personal anecdotes of the second year of teaching

Survey research and studies on needs

Attitudes of second-year teachers

There were but 5 researchers who studied second-year teachers in-depth but the participant base and reason for the studies were different than mine.

1) Applegate and Lasley (1979) was the closest study to mine. The changes they mention in second-year teachers dealt with their instructional skills level and attitudes toward teaching.

2) Barnes (1993) study of elementary teachers mentioned concerns about classroom management, curriculum emphasis and pressure to conform.

3) Loughran (1994) studied elementary science teachers only, and how they transition from university to a career. The major issues he found for his second-year teachers were time, self-confidence, and collegial support.

4) Britt (1997) noted 4 categories of perceptions of concerns for elementary second-year teachers including: time management, discipline, parental involvement and university preparation.

5) Smeltzer Erb (2002) studied positive and negative emotions felt by second-year teachers and these included joy, elation, satisfaction, encouragement, interest and relief as well as negative emotions, to a lesser degree, of disappointment, frustration, anger, confusion, impatience and exhaustion.
The results of the research proposed in this thesis relate to the theoretical literature that dealt with developmental stages theories. The theorists that follow advanced the developmental theories and this study helps to strengthen their beliefs.

Fuller and Bown (1975) propose a developmental sequence of teacher concerns.

- During the pre-service student teacher training years, there is the ‘fantasy’ stage where the teachers identify with the pupils as pupils.
- In the second stage of development, the ‘survival’ stage, the new teachers are more grounded in the realities of the classroom and are concerned about their survival as teachers.
- The next stage, the ‘mastery’ stage, includes concerns that center around the teachers’ overall teaching performance and the inherent frustrations with their personal teaching situation.
- In the fourth stage, the ‘impact’ stage, the beginning teachers focus on the needs of their students, both learning and social-emotional, and their abilities to meet these needs.

Rowley and Hart’s (2000) “Stages of Concern,” which is based on the Fuller and Bown (1975) work, is used as a basis for mentoring new teachers. In this theory, developing teachers pass through three stages of concern.

- The first stage is the survival stage where the major concern is with ‘self’ and if the teacher will survive in the classroom.
- The second stage is the task stage where issues of time to accomplish things and being on task and getting the work done are of utmost importance.
The final stage is the impact stage where teachers become concerned with engaging students in the learning process. Teachers are child-centered and dedicated to helping students find success in school.

Rowley and Hart (2000) suggested appropriate mentoring behaviours for mentoring teachers at each level of concern but, as with Fuller and Bown (1975), there was no indication at what point in the teachers’ experience the shift from one stage to the next occurs.

McDonald (1982) suggested four stages in the development of a teacher.

- The transition stage: Here there is little efficacy as the teacher is only beginning to learn the basic skills of organization and management. The teaching is elemental at best. The teacher has some insight into students, but it is not a complex view.
- The exploring stage: The teacher gains a sense of efficacy in using basic skills and manages instructions effectively.
- The invention and experimenting stage: The teacher tries or invents new strategies, looks actively for professional development opportunities and develops critical judgment.
- The professional teaching stage: The teacher has the problem-solving skills and is able to teach other teachers to teach creatively.

Berliner (1988) conceptualized the stages of teacher development across a spectrum using the stages named novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. What happens in each of these stages is listed below:
In the novice stage, the teacher is rational, inflexible and busy concentrating on learning and categorizing classroom tasks.

He claims that in the second or third year, teachers begin to act as advanced beginners, based on previous knowledge and experiences. They can then form generalizations and become more strategic about when to follow or break the rules.

The competency stage is where the teacher makes conscious choices about his/her actions. The teacher can judge what is and isn’t important to focus on. The teacher may still be somewhat inflexible in terms of performance.

In the fifth year, the proficient stage, that teachers use intuition to guide performance.

The final stage, expert, is characterized by an intuitive grasp of situations and a keen sense of appropriate behaviour in the classroom setting. Teaching performance seems effortless. At this stage, teachers operate on automatic pilot, and, because of this familiarity with the task and the boundless experience of lesson delivery, they have trouble cognitively describing their performance characteristics if questioned as to what makes them excellent teachers. Unfortunately, some teachers never reach this ‘utopian’ stage.

Huberman (1989) identifies teacher development based on his model of career phases of secondary-school teaching.

The first three years of teaching are known as the survival and discovery phase.
Years four to six, the teachers are in the stabilization phase.

The experimentation and reassessment stages occur in years seven through eighteen. Teachers pass and re-pass through these stages.

The nineteenth through thirtieth years allow the teacher to be in the serenity and conservatism phase.

The final phase of the career of a teacher is the disengagement (either serene or bitter) phase in years thirty-one to forty.

At first glance, these theories may seem very different. Despite the differences in developmental stage names, however, the actions and reactions of the beginning teachers in each stage are similar. All of the theories of developmental stages through which new professionals are said to pass, therefore, are useful in examining the data from this study.

**Study Method and Data Collection**

This is a qualitative study. A phenomenological approach, where perception and experience are the primary sources of knowledge, was used to try to understand the nature and meaning of experience for the second-year teacher. Further research techniques included exploratory inductive analysis to see how perceptions of the participants developed over time from each unique person’s perspective and to analyse the perspectives by creating estimations and decisions from data initially presented. I also used constant comparative processing to look for relationships in the data in order to categorize them.

Participants for this study were chosen on a random basis as a result of an email sent to all eighteen full-time second-year teachers in one school division; those who volunteered became the participants. The mix of participants was balanced in terms of
gender and level (both middle and high school). In total, five teachers, three women and two men, became part of the research group. All were teaching in the same secondary public school in which they began their careers.

Data collection relied on an initial one-on-one interview of 1 to 2 hours in duration, followed by a focus group discussion of approximately 2 hours in duration three months later, and after another three month interval, a final individual interview session of 1/2 to 1 hour. All of the individual interviews were audio-taped. When data from all of the sessions were coded, synthesized and analyzed, recurring themes were revealed. I also asked the participants to fill in a demographic survey which requested a list of the courses taught in first year and then second year. The survey also asked for school demographics and reasons for becoming a teacher. I thought it might be helpful in data analysis but this information only helped understand the background of the participants; it did not further the data discovered in the study. Recalling Patton (1990) I realize that the participants expressed a diversity of perspectives, although this group, like any other purposefully sampled group, might not be representative of all second-year teachers, and therefore, I took caution to avoid over-generalization of the data. The small random sample provided credibility, rather than representativeness. It does not permit statistical generalizations. However, generalizations of the data from what the participants conveyed during the study are useful. These generalizations allow readers to see similarities in the perceptions of the second-year professionals which could possibly be reflective of other people in their second-year in a profession. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) note, this sample may “contribute to an understanding of similar cases in the reasonable hope of bringing something grander than the case to the attention of others” (p. 148).
Standards of Rigor

I used four standards of rigor for my data. The first standard was “respondent validation.” I shared each individual transcription with the person to whom it belonged. Participants all said that they checked the content; two of the participants elaborated on and clarified what was typed. The second standard used was “disconfirming evidence.” I interpreted the “data in the context in which they were collected” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 157). Naturally, what I have reported here is based on my perspective, my values, my logic and my views. I tried to examine the findings based on my previous knowledge, in the hope of challenging some of my previously held theories or beliefs. As in most qualitative research, critical self-reflection was an important aspect in order to assure that I was not interpreting the data based on my pre-formed bias. I relied on “Focus Group Session Agreements and Consensus.” I knew that researcher bias was a potential limitation of this study. I was careful to maintain a “constant alertness” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 116) to the potential of subjective interpretation of the data based on my twenty years of knowledge of the division and the politics that existed therein. The focus group session was helpful in this regard as it allowed the participants to make comparisons and to affirm commonalities so that it was not just me who was making these interpretations and judgments. Finally, after creating a graphic representative of the four major themes in the data, I presented the graphic to the participants for their interpretation of what I thought I saw. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) refer to this procedure as “Offering Interpretations or Testing Propositions on Informants” (p. 81) where the researcher shows his/her interpretation of the data to the participants for their commentary.
Data Analysis

I transcribed the data from the audio-tapes. I studied the transcribed data in order to find themes, patterns, differences and commonalities amongst the participants’ answers. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) noted that working with data in a qualitative study is not a technical or mechanical process. The process entails the use of intuition, inductive reasoning and ongoing theorizing. I reflected upon the data and the research literature many times before beginning the writing of the thesis. I was sure to pay attention to the three distinct activities of working with qualitative data: ongoing discovery, coding the data, and discounting the findings.

Ongoing discovery occurred during the processes of data collection and analysis. I consistently reviewed the transcripts in an effort to become intimately familiar with the data. Before the focus group session, I tried to identify emerging themes and concepts. Having transcribed each participant’s responses from the first in-depth interview process, I was able to read and reread what the participants had said. During this process, I could see that some ideas emerged more often than others. I created a global list with all the ideas that came to light as I was reviewing the transcripts. I noted which participant had which idea. If an idea was repeated by a different participant, I recorded that participant’s number on the list beside the original participant. I categorized all of these ideas into sub-lists in an effort to see some similarities and differences. I attempted to construct classification schemes in order to identify relationships in the data but discovered that there were far too many ideas on my list. In the end, I chose nine ideas that were held by all five participants during the initial interview as a basis for my focus group questions. From analysis of the discussion during the focus group, I was able to
see more clearly which propositions and themes were uppermost in the participants’ minds. From this session, I chose the four major areas that arose over and over again, even when the focus group question did not directly pertain to that area. The intertwining nature of the four areas became much more apparent due to the focus group answers. I was careful to follow “the cardinal rule of coding in qualitative analysis [which] is to make the codes fit the data and not vice versa” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 152). My coding process changed from the initial interview to the end of the process. The coding at the beginning was somewhat broad, but the coding became much more focused on certain propositions as the research progressed. Thus, the specific method of coding and comparison emerged and developed as the research proceeded. As I worked with the data, I realized that perhaps the four recurring themes had relationships to each other. I sat down to map out the possible relationships and, thus, I created a graphic which became an integral part of my thought formation processes.

**Findings/Interpretations of the Data**

The four common themes that emerged from the data analysis as being important changes from the first to the second year in the teaching profession were: organizational ability, available time, level of frustration and level of confidence/comfort. Each theme penetrated many sub-categories of the role of a teacher. The four participants in this study confirmed that these were indeed four of the most important comparisons they could make from first to second year.

*Organizational ability*

This capacity was seen as a critical component and a much sought-after necessity for successful teaching that improved from year one to year two. Participants agreed that organization ability improved greatly in the following areas:
- Paperwork issues
- Organization of physical space
- Classroom rules and procedures
- Classroom management
- Lesson design and planning
- Marking strategies
- Parental contact issues
- Extra-curricular involvement

Proof of this theme being one of the most crucial can be seen in the comments provided by the participants. One of the participants noted: “Organizational skills .. I didn’t know they would have to be as strong as they need to be. (laughs out loud) Yeah, that would definitely be one perception so going in I didn’t think it would be as hard as it has been.” The improvement is evident when a different participant states: “It’s just procedures, so I knew what to expect and knew which forms had to be done, which ones had to be handed back and I could keep up on the kids a little bit more because it was the second time round for me.” In terms of classroom management strategies, one participant said “it’s the little things that help” now that she is more organized. For instance, “things like standing at the door at the beginning of class. Doing that, I mean last year I wasn’t organized so it was more like “OK, where’s my lesson and what am I going to do? Where’s the overhead? Get all that stuff ready. Now, it’s there and I can just leave and set aside” those organizational worries. In both years, contacting parents is a challenge. However, in the second year, the teachers discovered that conversations with parents can be shorter if thoughts are organized in advance and they write down notes of exactly what
message needs to be relayed. One participant states, “I can say that I love the theory of my job – of going in and teaching. I love that. I hate everything that comes with it. I hate phoning the parents and I hate having the same conversation that takes an hour a night.” Thus, organization in this respect has helped with the phone calls home.

_Available Time_

Lack of time available to accomplish teaching tasks was a significant problem for the group of teachers in this study. Balancing school work and ‘having a life’ were major issues for these participants. Available time was seen as a critical factor in the following ways:

- Time use during the school day
- Gaining time during the school day
- Use of time outside the school day for job-related tasks
- Parental contact time
- Extra-curricular commitments
- Free time for personal interests
- Balance of time for life in general

Comments about time abound in the research. One participant notes: “It’s wayyyyy more time than I thought it was going to be when I first started teaching. Way more time-consuming than I thought with regards to marking and preparing and all that.” Another one states: “I knew it would be busy, and I’m a driven person, but ‘oh my goodness, every minute of the day!’ It takes a lot of time!” “Gaining time during the school day” was mentioned repeatedly. According to the participants, this arose because of having only one new course to prepare not five, because of knowing there is ‘down time’ when students are working and there is a possibility to multi-task, because of
knowing the curriculum and moving faster through it and because of an ability to mark papers more quickly and efficiently. Balance of time for life in general was one of the most ‘negative’ aspects of the first and second years. One participant admitted that finding personal time and balance with a husband was a huge challenge. She said, “I think there will always be a struggle in finding time for myself. I don’t know if you ever achieve that balance, but I’m sure that is already a challenge for me in third year. And I know it was definitely a challenge for me last year to find time between school, school-life, and personal life because work is NOT my life.”

**Level of Frustration**

This theme became more evident in the focus group session than in the individual interviews was the participants played off each other’s comments. The body language was a key indicator when the participants talked about frustrations. They admitted that some frustrations remained from the first to second year but some were resolved. The participants also revealed that sometimes increased knowledge caused more frustration in the second year than in the first. Frustrations were evident for these participants when they worked with:

- Students
- Parents
- Administration
- Student teachers/Teacher candidates
- Daily requirements of the school setting (marking, planning, paperwork)
- General school system policies, procedures and politics (social promotion, divisional exams)
Self-preservation and personal relationship issues

In general, frustrations were high regarding students’ negative attitudes toward learning and their apathy for learning causing a lack of assignment completion. Lack of parental response, support, understanding was a key to causing undue frustration.

One participant explained it this way:

“I hate it. I hate having to go through the motions because that’s essentially what it comes down to. …You can’t be mean. You can’t tell it the way it is because you’re the teacher. But will we [the parents] help you? Will we support you? Will we actually kick our kid in the ass? No! … Well, what happened today? It was kind of like every other day this week; he’s rude to others, he’s disrespectful to others, he’s destructive to property, he doesn’t do any of his work. We could go through the list every single day if you’d like, I’ll just check it off. We’ll make a checklist for him. But you know what? He can’t serve his detention today because he has hockey. And as much as I’m for extra-curricular and the kids need it because it will keep them out of trouble and everything else; what reinforcement are you getting? The child thinks, ‘Dad’s going to bust me out of DT because I have hockey’.

Problems with administrators included: wrong course assignments that don’t match the teachers’ training, the administrators’ lack of backing up attendance policies and school rules, the administrators’ lack of communication about extra-curricular involvement expectations, and confusion about the budget process.

Level of Confidence/Comfort

This theme was confirmed by all participants as having improved greatly from first to second year. The participants used the terms interchangeably and when questioned as to whether there was a difference, no participant made a distinction. Other words that these participants used to indicate more confidence and comfort both inside
and outside the classroom were: relaxed, less anxious, less nervous, less scared/fearful, and less tense. Confidence/comfort improved in the following areas:

- Relationships with students
- Relationships with staff
- Relationships with parents
- Classroom management
- Teaching ability (lesson design and delivery)
- General teacher tasks (knowledge of curricular, marking strategies, finding resources)
- Extra-curricular participation

One participant summarized this confidence and comfort area saying the following:

I think there’s a big difference [between first and second year]. I think I’m less worried all the time, a little bit more relaxed, and whatever happens, happens. Before I was always thinking, “Oh, if I do this wrong, what’s going to happen?” I was kind of anxious in that way … Now I’m accepted by the science department; I get along with everybody; I’ve built relationships on staff. And now, I know a little bit more. I know the administrative staff better, and I know what they want and their expectations. … I know what they think of me too. … I just feel a little bit more relaxed and comfortable.”

**Graphic representation of the themes**

I created a graphic to visually represent the four themes. The participants were given the graphic, without any explanation of how I had created it or what my interpretation was, and they were asked to explain the graphic based on their perceptions of being a second-year teacher. I was hoping that the graphic would help confirm my data, as per Schatzman and Strauss, 1973.
The graphic is separated into 2 areas: the practical and the emotional domains. The graphic shows, through the use of arrows, the relationships between the two halves of the diagram as well as the relationships amongst the themes. There were two purposes for the graphic. The first purpose was to show that the four common themes come from these two different domains and to show the interconnected relationship that existed between the themes. During the second individual interview, all of the participants told me that the factors in the graphic were indeed well chosen as symbolic of the second year of teaching. However, some of the participants’ answers refuted the unidirectional
arrows (which they would have preferred to be bi-directional) in the graphic. They gave me examples of how they saw the interrelationship between factors that I had not considered. This feedback, in turn, challenged my understanding and forced me to reflect on the graphic’s validity.

Two participants believed that the arrow should have been bi-directional from “available time” to “level of confidence”. Both believed that there was more time when the teacher was more confident. One participant’s example was that, in his interpretation, “as I gain more comfort and confidence, I think I’m doing more in the classroom so I like the arrow going the other way as well.” The second participant stated, “It can be as basic as how comfortable you are, you’ll spend less time planning and preparing the things … so in that sense I have more available time.” The two participants’ interpretations required me to reflect on the unidirectional nature of the arrows. I counter these two points with the fact that it is my belief that these participants can do more in the classroom because they are more organized and their lessons are better planned, which, in turn, affects their confidence. It is the increase in organizational skills that allows them to gain time. The increase in available time is an indirect result of comfort and confidence level.

There was complete disagreement with my interpretation of the relationship between “level of frustration” and “level of comfort/confidence”, and, thus the unidirectional arrow I have inserted. The participants disputed this part of my graphic the most. All the participants believed that the arrow should have been bi-directional because they could deal with the frustration better now that they were more confident. One participant stated, “As I become more comfortable with my age group, I become a
little less frustrated, so I would put an arrow back that way.” He did admit, however, “It
probably goes round about, goes through organizational ability so I’m comfortable, but as
organization improves my frustration goes down.” I am inclined to believe that, as the
participant saw when he commented about the ‘round about nature’, that the intertwining
nature of the four factors led the participants to think that there is a direct link between
the level of comfort and confidence and level of frustration when, in reality, this link was
due to a more circuitous route through other factors in the teaching and learning process.
Given that the participants are the experts on their perceptions though, it is important that
I put my beliefs aside and make the arrow bi-directional. As Schatzman and Strauss
(1973) contend, my participants’ “critiques and evidence bear upon [my] proposition …
to ‘force’ a decisive change in” (p. 82) the formulation of my graphic.

Conclusion

The data from my interviews offered revelations concerning the perceptions of
second-year secondary teachers in the classroom. The participants saw many
improvements and gains between the first and second years in the classroom. One year
of experience had an effect on these second-year teachers in both the practical and
emotional domains. These teachers saw improvements in their organizational ability,
their time management, their frustration level and their level of comfort and confidence in
the classroom.

This study is significant because it alerts educators to areas where they can make
improvements to the benefit of young professionals.

- The literature shows that, if educators do not pay attention to the perceptions of
  second-year teachers, the new teachers may choose other professions. One-fifth of
beginning teachers are expected to leave the profession. It is wise to support second-year teachers and help them deal with the frustrations that they have.

- Knowing the four factors in this study that second-year teachers perceive to be in the forefront could allow educators to make changes at the pre-service as well as the beginning service level for these teachers. The information that beginning teachers need better organizational strategies, not only to assist in classroom management but to be able to reduce the amount of time spent on teacher tasks, could lead to the creation of a course during the university education program where the professor could foster these skills within each pre-service teacher.

- The university could sponsor more intense internship programs where the pre-service teacher works a partial teaching load in the final year in the faculty under the guidance of a veteran teacher. School divisions could help in the transition to first and second year by reducing the workload of these teachers. A teacher could begin, in first year, with a six out of eight course load, and it could be increased to seven out of eight in the second year. This approach would alleviate the frustrations of paperwork overload and the lack of available time to do the paperwork but allow more time during the school day to complete this task. This approach would also allow the second-year teacher some time to visit other veteran teachers’ classrooms.

- The results of this study invite a review of policy or practices to ensure that working conditions are not adding to the second-year teachers’ frustrations. Superintendents and school-based administrators need to revisit the policy of having teachers teach outside their area of expertise as this assignment not only
adds to discomfort for second-year teacher but to the frustration level as well. Ultimately, if the administration does not change the policy and practices, the second-year teachers in this study may become part of the ‘one in five’ statistic of those who leave the profession.

- This knowledge of second-year teachers’ perceptions may assist administrators in dealing not only with second-year teachers, but first-year teachers as well. Administrators can provide direct assistance to second-year teachers to ensure that they are comfortable.

- This study supports the establishment of effective mentoring programs for beginning teachers. Scaffolding the second-year teachers’ development will enhance their experiences in the school. On-site mentors, off-site consultants that act as mentors and other support personnel can be integral to the success of second-year teachers.

None of these supportive techniques, however, will completely take the place of hands-on experience in the classroom. Experience is a great teacher! It lessens the organizational issues, the level of frustration and it adds to the comfort/confidence level of these second-year teachers. It gives the second-year teacher a basis to go on in terms of time allotted for specific curriculum delivery and marking. Paying attention to the concerns raised by the second-year teachers in this study and by supporting the teachers in as many ways as possible may help strengthen the resolve of these teachers become ‘career’ teachers.
References


