

# Beginning Teacher Successes and Struggles: An Elementary Teacher's Reflections on the First Year of Teaching

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## **Abstract**

*An in-depth examination of an elementary beginning teacher's successes and struggles was conducted to provide insight into the demands placed upon her from teacher responsibilities, her school, the students in her classroom and their parents, as well as the pressures from personal goals and setbacks. Monthly open-ended interviews and a questionnaire distributed three times during the academic year provided insight into the successes and struggles she was experiencing and the types of knowledge, expertise, and resources that were available or needed for effective teaching experiences. The beginning teacher identified a total of 58 successes and struggles throughout her initial year, with an equal number of each type by the end of the investigation. An analysis of the categories of successes and struggles, how they occurred over time, and reports of what assistance might have been beneficial, was conducted from the perspective of providing assistance for future beginning teachers.*

*"Veteran teachers often confront problems that they have not seen before; Beginning teachers are almost always encountering problems they have never seen before."*

(Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996, page 84)

When teachers encounter problems in their practice, they engage in a process of reflection and inquiry to impose a frame on the problem, draw on familiar repertoire, and formulate and test new hypotheses (Schon, 1983). However, since the beginning teacher's repertoire is less elaborate than those with more experience, these problematic instances in teaching can be a greater source of stress and one reason for dissatisfaction with the profession in general. Reports indicate 20% of teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching, 9.3% of them leave before completing their first year (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1999). Understanding the issues beginning teachers face and how we might support them during the initial years of teaching might be a proactive measure for maintaining those new to the profession (Ingersoll, 2003). Teachers who feel successful with students and whose schools are organized to support them in their teaching are more likely to stay in the schools and the profession in general (Bobbitt, Leich, Whitener, & Lynch, 1994; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Since the pivotal work on beginning teacher concerns by Veenman (1984), little has been done to further investigate what novice teachers are experiencing for the purposes of understanding how their concerns might be met during the first year. However, it is apparent that effective beginning teacher support must address the developmental needs of these teachers in this particular phase of their careers (Gold, 1996). Insights into what beginning teachers face in the classroom might be gained as well as insights into their concerns about how the school works as an organization (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). These needs also must be examined over time as beginning teacher concerns will naturally fluctuate throughout the year (Wilkinson, 1994). Such efforts hold promise for understanding how teacher educators might better prepare their prospective teachers for the work of teaching as there is currently little connection made across the different phases of learning to teach (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Encouraging beginning teacher reflection during and as a result of teaching practice holds potential for understanding how novices come to make sense of their new learning experiences. Through identification and description of the issues and concerns presented during their first year of teaching, beginning teachers can identify patterns, call on their previous knowledge, and determine what they might need to improve their practice. This process unveils their practical knowledge as embedded in practice and in their reflections on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Further, insights can be gained about their 'knowledge base for teaching' as described within the unique context of a particular classroom (Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001). Thus, uncovering and examining the beginning teacher's reflective process when faced with issues in practice holds promise for understanding how that teacher comes to 'know' in the context of teaching practice.

Making reflections on practice explicit to the beginning teacher is essential as reflection is a knowing response to an immediate situation or issue presented in practice. Reflective teaching requires the ability of teachers to stand back from their teaching and look upon their actions objectively (Calderhead, 1989). However, the moment and the accompanying reflections often disappear when absorbed into their effective result (Bamberger, 1991). Thus, if novices are to truly learn from the experience, these reflections and related learning experiences must be made overt. Conversation and storytelling hold promise for sustaining teacher learning and inquiry during the act of teaching (Rust, 1999). Engaging in this type of reflective practice is instrumental to the growth of a novice teacher.

The following study is an in-depth examination of a beginning teacher's successes and struggles as identified through further reflection on her teaching practice. Focusing on an individual teacher provides a deep understanding of her teaching practice in the context of the complex environment in which it occurs (Connelly, Clandinin & He, 1997). Insights were gained into the specific concerns of this beginning teacher including those stemming from her teacher responsibilities, the school where she worked, the students in her classroom, and their parents. The identification of successes and struggles is similar to earlier investigations of concerns and issues in that both seek to discover what the beginning teacher is experiencing during the first year of practice. In this manner, issues and concerns are synonymous with an identified struggle in teaching. However, in the present study teacher successes are also sought for the purpose of determining the ways in which the teacher felt prepared and competent in her practice, which would have implications for what we might be doing well in teacher education. This approach also avoids an emphasis on the negative aspects of the first year of teaching, which has been overly documented in the literature (Hebert & Worthy, 2001).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this particular investigation:

- 1) When asked to reflect on her teaching practice, what types of successes and struggles did this particular teacher tend to identify in her first year of teaching?
- 2) How did those successes and struggles change or remain the same over time?
- 3) With further reflection on the successes in her teaching, what knowledge, expertise, and resources did this teacher report as available and necessary for her successful teaching?
- 4) With further reflection on the struggles in her teaching, what knowledge, expertise, and resources did this teacher report would have been beneficial to assist with her struggles?

### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

This particular study is part of a larger investigation examining the successes and struggles of six beginning teacher participants in the same school district. A case study analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Stake, 2003) was conducted for one of these participants, a female elementary school teacher of first grade students with an extended school year calendar that began July 10 and ended May 25. This teacher, Maria, was 22 years old when she began her first year of teaching after graduating from the local elementary teacher preparation program at a large university in the southwestern United States. She student taught in a second grade classroom in another district within the city. Her other previous

classroom experiences included volunteering as a monitor and teacher's aide for three months in grades K-5, working in a parks and recreation program for three years, and volunteering for three years in a first and second grade classroom in which her mother served as a teaching assistant.

An instrumental case study (Stake, 2003) was conducted as this one beginning teacher was examined to provide insight into the possible needs and concerns of the larger group of novice teachers entering the workforce. This particular type of case study was chosen in an attempt to understand the nature of one teacher's behavior through descriptive data and inductive analysis. Internal sampling was employed as this particular subject fit the desired profile of a beginning teacher who had graduated from the local university teacher preparation program and gained employment in a local school district the following semester. Monthly open-ended interviews (Seidman, 1991) were conducted with the beginning teacher commencing August 2 and continuing until May 17, approximately one week before school ended. Due to the extended year schedule, students were on break in December and March, and thus interviews were not conducted. This resulted in a total of eight interviews with the beginning teacher across the school year.

In the time that transpired between interviews, Maria was asked to reflect on her teaching practice and make note of the successes and struggles she was experiencing. She was provided a notebook, and she was asked to record the positive and negative incidents that may have contributed to the reported successes and struggles. She was then asked to bring that notebook to each interview to use as a springboard for discussion. During the interview, the beginning teacher was asked to look over her notes and engage in reflection to determine patterns in successes and struggles that she might discuss further. Once a particular success or struggle was identified, she was asked to describe what might have contributed to the success or struggle, where she gained the knowledge or expertise that allowed for a successful experience, or what knowledge or expertise she might have needed to assist with this type of struggle. A final question was asked regarding specific resources that were available and/or might have been helpful. The same process was repeated for each subsequent success and struggle, or group thereof, identified.

The first year teacher also completed an open-ended questionnaire at the beginning of the year and at the end of each trimester for a total of three times throughout the school year. Three specific questions were used for this investigation. First, she was asked to report her strengths as a teacher by describing the areas in which she felt particularly strong at this time. She was then asked to identify the areas in which she did not feel as strong. Finally, she was asked to identify her greatest needs and concerns at this particular point in her first year of teaching. This qualitative questionnaire data was examined in conjunction with the interview data to provide a more complete view of the beginning teacher's successes and struggles.

Modified analytic induction was applied to analyze the data collected through the interviews and open-ended questionnaire. This method of analysis was employed to develop a descriptive model that encompassed all themes that emerged from the data collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Thus, formal analysis and theory development did not occur until data collection was complete. To answer the first research question regarding the types of successes and struggles this particular teacher tended to identify in her first year of teaching practice, the individual interviews were examined and a comprehensive list of the successes and struggles described over the length of the study was compiled. Regularities and patterns were coded as themes emerged from the interviews using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2003). Categories of the beginning teacher's successes and struggles were then created, allowing for an assessment of each success and struggle and how it fit within the larger groupings. Questionnaire data was then added to the analysis and coded in a similar manner. The areas of concern, as indicated on the questionnaire, were grouped with the successes as reported in the interviews. Similarly, the areas in which she reported less strength were coded and grouped with the struggles.

The second research question investigating how those successes and struggles changed or remained the same over time was addressed in two ways. First, an analysis was conducted to look at the overall successes and struggles and when they occurred throughout the study. Second, assessing when and how different categories of successes and struggles appeared over time allowed for a closer look into the types of issues the beginning teacher was facing during each semester of her teaching practice. The results of the questionnaire were added to this analysis to confirm the findings from the interview and bring to light any other issues that may surface as a result of this separate data collection method.

The beginning teacher's knowledge, expertise, and resources (for research questions three and four) were examined separately according to her successes and struggles through modified analytic induction. For example, the types of knowledge, expertise, and resources Maria reported having for a successful teaching experience were coded separately from those that she wished to have to assist with her struggles. Questionnaire data, in the form of her responses to questions about her needs at this point, were grouped with those identified in the interviews to provide a comprehensive look at the teacher's needs and desires throughout the academic year.

## Results

### *Types of Successes and Struggles*

An initial analysis was conducted to determine the number of individual successes and struggles the beginning teacher reported during each interview. Maria identified a total of 58 successes and struggles, with an equal number of each type by the end of the investigation. The way these successes and struggles were distributed over time will be discussed in a subsequent section. However, it is interesting to note that Maria was able to recall more successes in her teaching practice when she remembered to bring her notebook to the interview, which only occurred for half of the interviews. On the other hand, Maria seemed to have relatively little difficulty recalling the struggles in her teaching practice as there were no significant differences in the amount of struggles reported on interview dates with or without her notes.

The successes and struggles reported in the interviews were then categorized by the central issue presented in each. This resulted in a total of seven different categories of successes and struggles for this particular beginning teacher as follows:

1. **External Policy**—External factors that the teacher had no control over which governed the operation of the school, district, or educational system in general;
2. **Inclusion and Special Needs Student(s)**—Issues concerning students with special needs in the classroom who were full participants due to full inclusion policies;
3. **Classroom Management**—Issues related to overall student behavior in the classroom and techniques used to gain participation in classroom activities and instruction;
4. **Personal Issues**—Teacher concerns or accomplishments that were highly personal in nature, and thus separate from actual teaching episodes;
5. **Content and Pedagogy**—Issues related to having command of a particular content area and knowing how to teach it effectively to a specific group of students;
6. **Parents**—Incidents involving the parents of the students in a particular teacher's classroom;
7. **Teacher Evaluation**—Issues involving a mandated or spontaneous evaluation of a teacher, usually conducted by the school administrator.

For each particular category, there were a number of successes and struggles reported over the length of the study. Not a single category exclusively consisted of successes or struggles, and thus one category could have an equal number of successes and struggles within the larger grouping. An analysis of the successes and struggles by category for this particular teacher follows.

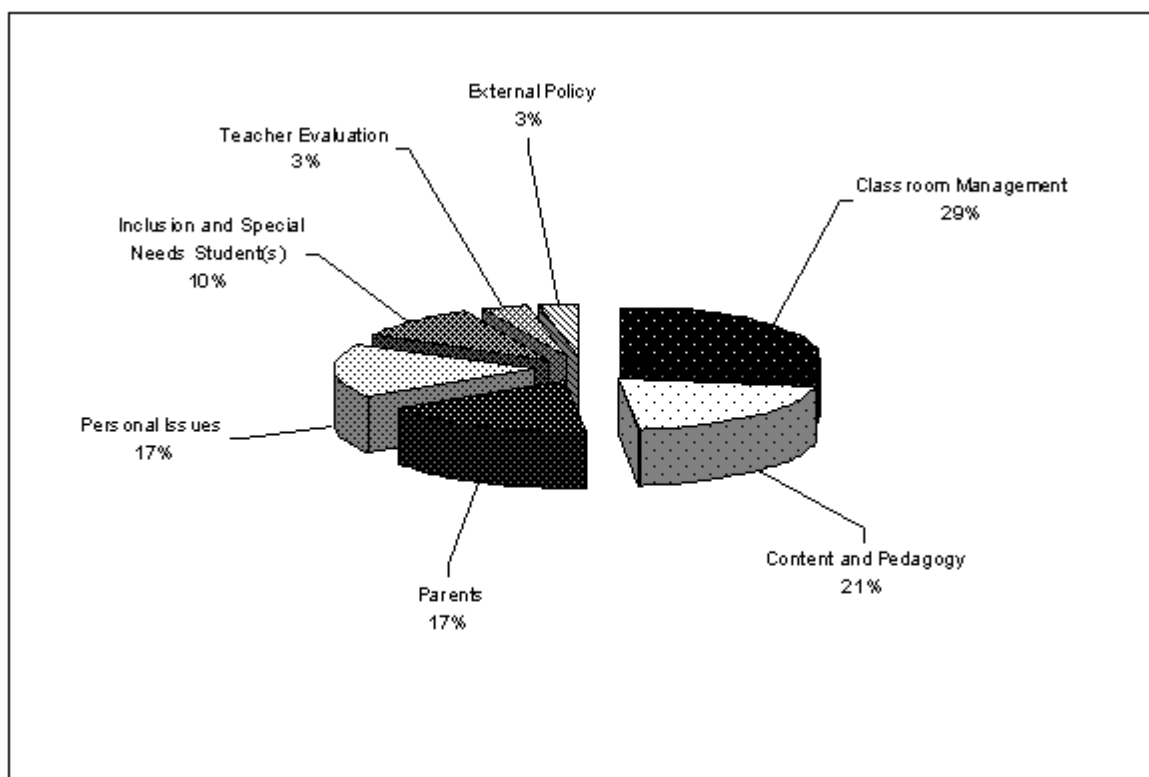


Figure 1. Beginning Teacher Successes by Category

The largest category of successes was Classroom Management with eight successes total. Maria identified four of these successes during each semester of her teaching practice. She described two successes in her first interview. For the initial success reported, Maria explained how her first grade students seemed to be learning the procedures and routines that she had set forth in the classroom. The other success during this interview was Maria's implementation of a specific management strategy, as described below:

My kids would do a lot of things on the rug and I was having a lot of trouble because all the low kids and the talkers would go in the back. All of the kids who were very good and wanted to learn were in the front. So I put a seating chart on the rug. I put them in rows and they have tape on the floor with their numbers and they have to sit on their tape. It has really helped them a lot. I switched all the talkers and put all the ones who were having trouble in the front so I could keep my eyes on them better. And I spaced them out boy- girl, boy- girl. And so it worked out perfectly.

During the second interview Maria described another strategy, in this case having a Teacher Lunch with students exhibiting positive behavior, which also helped her classroom to run smoothly.

Also in that second interview, her only two struggles in classroom management surfaced. However, by the fourth interview she was back to describing successes. At this time, Maria was struggling with a broken foot that led to her restriction to a wheelchair and to missing many days of school (see Personal Issues in the struggles section). However, she maintained that student behavior had been consistently good during this time, indicating this success in interview four and again during the fifth interview when the students responded positively to substitute teachers in the classroom. Also in interview five, Maria described how a holiday party went well due to effective classroom

management and efficiently planned activities. Again, in interview six, Maria mentioned overall student behavior as a group of successes in her teaching practice at this time. In the seventh interview Maria explained how effective management and positive student behavior led to a successful field trip. This was the final success mentioned in this category.

The second largest group of successes fit into the Content and Pedagogy category with six separate successes. Maria did not mention a success in this area until interview two, in which she described a specific strategy used to teach her students how to do addition and subtraction as follows:

Before we were learning addition and subtraction and a lot of the students were using their fingers or counters, but the counters were too disruptive. So one of the teachers was saying that we should use number lines...So I made one on the computer and I wrote out step-by-step what the parents had to do and they drew a number line for each step and showed them how to point and circle the biggest number, and the other number tells you how many 'bunny hops' and that sort of thing. And it has worked really well with my kids. They all have done really well and know how to do addition and subtraction super fast.

This was the only success in this category that she mentioned during the first semester. However, during the first meeting of the second semester, Maria shared her success in attending a professional development seminar. She was excited about all that she had learned and was making plans for implementing this new knowledge into her teaching practice. She identified four successes in this area in the final two interviews of the school year. In interview seven, Maria discussed how her first grade students performed well on the standardized test they had taken earlier in the year. She also mentioned a class project that was highly successful. The final two successes, mentioned in the last interview, were related to her students' progress in reading and writing. As the final two successes or struggles to be mentioned for the entire study, it was clear that Maria was looking back on her success in those two content areas.

Positive experiences with the parents of her first grade students constituted 5 out of 29 successes. Maria mentioned during her first interview how she had called parents on the first day of school. She felt that this set the tone for positive communication with benefits for the remainder of the school year. Maria described two successes in the second interview, based on her perception that the parent-teacher conferences went well and on compliments from several parents about her teaching practice and her interactions with their children, which also affected her feelings of confidence. Maria did not mention parents again until the fifth interview, when a holiday gift activity had gained appreciation from the parents. Finally, in interview seven, Maria described another set of highly successful parent-teacher conferences and why she believed those conferences went well:

I think it is because I have built a really good relationship with my parents. I feel like at the beginning [the parent teacher conferences] went fine, but it was a lot more tense because I did not know them. And now I know my parents where I can tell if they like to joke around or if they're real serious or if they just like to get to the point. I have learned how they are. I feel like I know their kids now, way better than when I did [parent conferences] the first time. Things that I see they see at home too. So I felt like I was a lot more prepared this time in terms of knowing their kids and knowing them.

Although spread sporadically throughout the school year, Maria tended to mention these types of successes frequently, indicating this was one way in which she measured her effectiveness as a teacher.

Personal Issues were represented by five separate successes, yet they were mentioned in only three interviews. During the initial interview, Maria described three personal successes that included being able to organize efficiently, not having to come in and work on the weekends anymore, and receiving a compliment from another teacher. She also described a struggle at this time that will be discussed in

the next section. Mentioning those issues early in the semester and not again until struggles persisted with her broken foot confirms that, like many novice teachers, Maria was preoccupied with survival issues during the onset of her teaching practice. Her final two personal successes came in interviews five and six in which she indicated her foot injury was improving and her excitement at being assigned to the same school the following year.

Two of the three successes from the Inclusion and Special Needs Student(s) category occurred in the second semester of teaching. Maria's only success in this area from the first semester came in interview two when she was able to get some support, in the form of personnel services and attention, for one of her students with special needs. Successes in this category did not appear again until interviews five and six, in which Maria shared identical successes. Both times she discussed how her inclusion student was making consistent improvements, although she felt he still had a long way to go.

Maria's final two successes fit within the External Policy and Teacher Evaluation categories with one success each. Both of these successes came late in the school year. During the February interview, Maria described how her teacher evaluation went well after she had struggled with earlier issues. This will be discussed further in the following section. Her only success with External Policy did not appear until the final interview, at which time Maria had been told that she would not have to move classrooms next year as she had been required to this year.

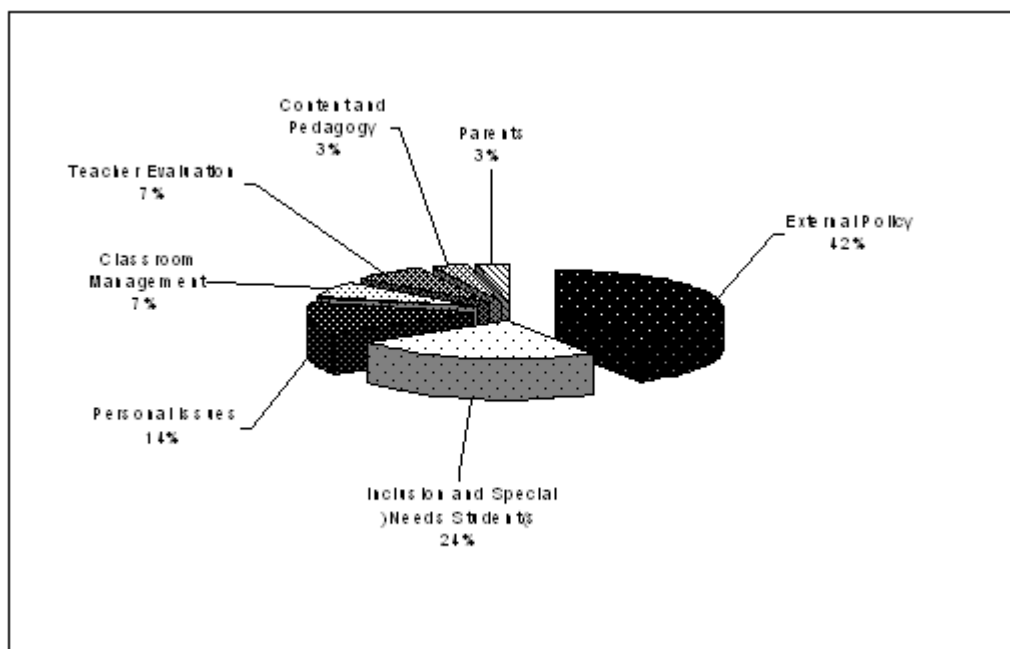


Figure 2. Beginning Teacher Struggles by Category

The largest category of struggles, with 12 of 29 struggles identified, dealt with External Policy issues. These struggles persisted throughout the school year and were mentioned in seven of the eight interviews. The first struggle occurred when Maria's first grade schedule was set without her input, and she had persistent problems with the times her students were assigned to go to specialist classes. There were three struggles in this category mentioned during the second interview. First, Maria struggled with the school policy to complete grades on the computer. Faulty equipment and lack of training made it difficult to complete this procedure. Maria also struggled with the designated half days of school for the parent-teacher conferences, and she indicated that her first grade students did not respond well to this change in their routine. Also in this interview, Maria described how part of the

school was going on break due to a track system in the district, and this affected her students as the schedule of specialists changed yet again. No struggles or successes with External Policy were mentioned in the third interview.

During the fourth interview Maria struggled with a communication error, claiming that she had no knowledge that progress reports were due, as described below:

We had our team meeting, and we didn't know until last week that [progress reports] were due... With this being my first year, you don't think about those things. I knew we did them the first trimester, but I totally forgot that I had to do them the second trimester [laughs]. I spaced it out I guess. So knowing ahead of time would've made it easier instead of feeling like, 'Bam!'

At the time of the fifth interview, Maria described two additional struggles in this category. First, her class was expected to participate in a holiday music performance that included much practice time. Having other classes involved in the performance also affected her students' behavior. The second struggle from this interview was the amount of fundraisers and paperwork that Maria had to keep up with during this time of year. She felt that too much information was going home that was not related to academic matters. During the sixth interview, Maria struggled with what she simply called "so much to do." At this particular time she was overwhelmed with paperwork, student reports, and other distractions from her attention to teaching. Also in this interview, Maria expressed a frustration that this was the first year in which students of this age were being asked to complete a standardized test. Maria struggled with preparing her students for a task that she felt would be overwhelmingly difficult for them to complete.

The final three struggles in this category came up during the last two interviews. During interview seven, Maria discussed how moving classrooms was a stressful activity. Because another class was using her new classroom, she was not allowed to move until the afternoon before she had to greet her students in that classroom. Many of the teachers at this school had to move classrooms once or twice during the school year due to the district track system, but this was Maria's first experience doing so. Also at this time, midterm reports were due, causing an additional struggle for Maria to complete them in time. The final struggle was presented during the last interview and concerned the multitude of end of the year procedures that needed to be accomplished. Maria attended a faculty meeting towards the end of the semester and was told that everything on the list needed to be completed within a week. Maria felt that there was a lot to accomplish in any case, but it would have been more helpful if she had been notified earlier about what needed to be done.

Seven of Maria's 29 struggles pertained to Inclusion and Special Needs Student(s) in her classroom. The district in which she worked had a uniform full inclusion practice in which any student was allowed to participate fully in a regular classroom regardless of the student's disability. Maria had one student in particular with severe needs, whom she referred to as her 'inclusion student.' Incidents with this student constituted five of the seven struggles in this area. Similar struggles with this particular student were identified in interviews one, two, three, and four. Although Maria reported several issues with this student, one particular incident as described in the November interview is included here as an illustrative example:

I was feeling pretty frustrated on Friday... I had two parents in here helping and my inclusion student is on the floor [with his hand down his pants]. And I was told to ignore it by the inclusion teacher who was with him... And I had the mom just standing there looking at it and I could feel her wondering why I wasn't doing anything about it... It was obvious that the bat project was inappropriate for this student. The first graders couldn't even do it, let alone my inclusion student. Probably 99% of the activities we do in here he can't do so they're always modified. So I felt no need for him to be in here when he started yelling and pounding on the desk... I was told by my principal in the meeting that when it is affecting me, and it is affecting the students, I have a signal



to tell my para-pro to take him out. So she took him out. Not even a minute later, his para-pro and the inclusion teacher are bringing him back into the room... I felt like I was being tested at that moment, like "What are you going to do about it?"

Additionally during interview four, Maria described how interactions between the inclusion student's aide and the rest of her students were problematic. She struggled when this aide would help the other first graders with assignments when they were expected to work independently. The stress of having another adult in the room, watching her teach and interacting with her students, was a constant theme with these struggles.

Although her inclusion student began to improve slowly by the end of the first semester, there were two other struggles in dealing with other students with special needs. In the first interview, Maria describes how the full inclusion policy was often disruptive to her instructional time. Students with special needs left the room at various times to receive individualized services and would return at different times. This constant movement in and out of the room, plus the need for Maria to keep up with the schedules, was at the heart of this struggle. Her final struggle came during interview seven in which she described the process of trying to refer new students for special services. Teaching an age group in which students do not typically qualify, combined with the amount of paperwork and documentation required, created problematic issues for seeking additional help for these students.

Four of Maria's struggles pertained to Personal Issues. After describing a personal frustration that she wasn't getting enough sleep, as reported in interview one, the other three struggles in this category were a result of falling and breaking her foot during the first semester of school. The incident surfaced in her third interview, at which time she described the fall from standing on a table to hang a poster on the classroom wall. Her foot was put in a cast, and she was given a wheelchair until the swelling went down. Doctor's recommendations also included that she work less, and, at the time of this interview, Maria was only working three days a week. Maria identified two related struggles during the fourth interview. First, Maria was frustrated at being confined to a wheelchair, being unable to reach her students resulting in rearranging the classroom, having access problems at the school, and her own concern about the healing process. The district assisted her by providing a teacher's aide to walk places with her students and take her to the bathroom, but those services ended once Maria was fitted with a walking cast. During the same interview, Maria identified a second related struggle involving taking days off for her injury as follows:

I only have seven sick days. Well, in order for it to kick in you have to use six of them. So all these days that I am taking now are my own sick days. And then on the seventh day, then Workman's Compensation will kick in but it's only 66% of what I would normally make. So I could take off a lot of time but I don't make what I would normally make and I will get all behind. That's kind of sad because then all my sick days are gone and what happens if I get sick in January or something and all my days are gone?

However, by the second semester her injury had improved significantly and Maria ceased identifying it as a struggle.

Maria tended to identify few Classroom Management issues as struggles as they constituted only 2 of her 29 struggles. The first of the two struggles appeared during the second interview. The students were having their pictures taken for yearbook photographs, which led to some classroom management incidents for which Maria was unprepared. The only other struggle was identified during the third interview at which time Maria described several factors leading to less positive student behavior, which included returning from a four week vacation, the new classroom arrangement due to her wheelchair, special events at the school, and having a multitude of substitutes lately. After this time,

however, Maria failed to identify a single classroom management struggle during the entire second semester of teaching.

The two struggles that pertained to Teacher Evaluation also occurred during the first semester. During the second interview, Maria described how preparing for her first cognitive coaching lesson was stressful and time-consuming. The following interview, Maria had her first formal evaluation from her administrator. At that time she had to have certain things in place to show him, like substitute plans and an emergency evacuation plan, which took time to create. Although Maria reported that both teacher evaluation issues turned out positively, she described her struggle as follows:

Before we went off track I was kind of worried about the evaluation thing. That was like a big stress... The whole week before that evaluation and the weekend before, it was all I could think about. I was up there teaching and I was just thinking about it. And talking with all the new teachers, too, it is the same thing. That is all that is on your mind and that is all you would spend after school doing. It just took so much focus away from teaching... I was so glad when it was over with and it went well.

Maria's final two struggles were issues in Content and Pedagogy and Parents, which were identified in the first interview. During that first interview, Maria struggled as she felt she was unprepared to teach writing to her students. The school had a mandated writing sample requirement, and she felt that she lacked the skills to help her students at this time. Her only struggle with parents was noted during this same interview. A parent of one of her students tried to take the child home although he did not have custody. Maria felt that the incident could have been avoided if the parent with custody had made her aware of this possibility. Issues in these two areas did not surface again during the remainder of the school year.

### **Successes and Struggles Over Time**

#### **Overall Successes and Struggles Throughout Study**

To gain an initial understanding of this particular beginning teacher's successes and struggles, an analysis was conducted of how each type was reported throughout the study regardless of the issues or categories. As shown in Figure 3, the number of successes described by Maria markedly decreased towards the end of the first semester (after the fourth interview) but then increased again during the second semester, remaining consistently high towards the end of the year. Although there were a few peaks in the number of struggles reported, there was a steady decline in the reported number of struggles as the school year continued. Thus, for the most part, a decline in successes reported was marked by an increase in struggles and vice-versa. Only at the beginning of the study and once during the seventh interview were the number of successes and struggles reported during a single interview fairly even.

Examination of the categories of successes and struggles by semester revealed that Maria consistently mentioned issues in the categories of Classroom Management, Parents, and Teacher Evaluation throughout the study. However, there were some differences in how the other four categories appeared across the semesters. First, successes and struggles relating to External Policy, although strongly present in the first semester with five total, increased to eight successes and struggles during the second semester. This indicates a mounting concern about these types of issues, and in only one case was the reported incident a success. On the questionnaires Maria completed mid-year and at the end of the year, she listed being open to new ideas and being able to adapt to change as areas where she felt particularly strong, while those were not mentioned in her questionnaire at the beginning of the year. On the other hand, successes and struggles with Inclusion and Special Needs Student(s) were more apparent during the first semester of teaching than the second. On the mid-year questionnaire, Maria discussed special needs students for the first time and said that she needed to learn patience in dealing with those issues. Although her ending questionnaire indicated that she still

did not feel strong in the area of inclusion, she was far less likely to discuss these issues during the second semester interviews.

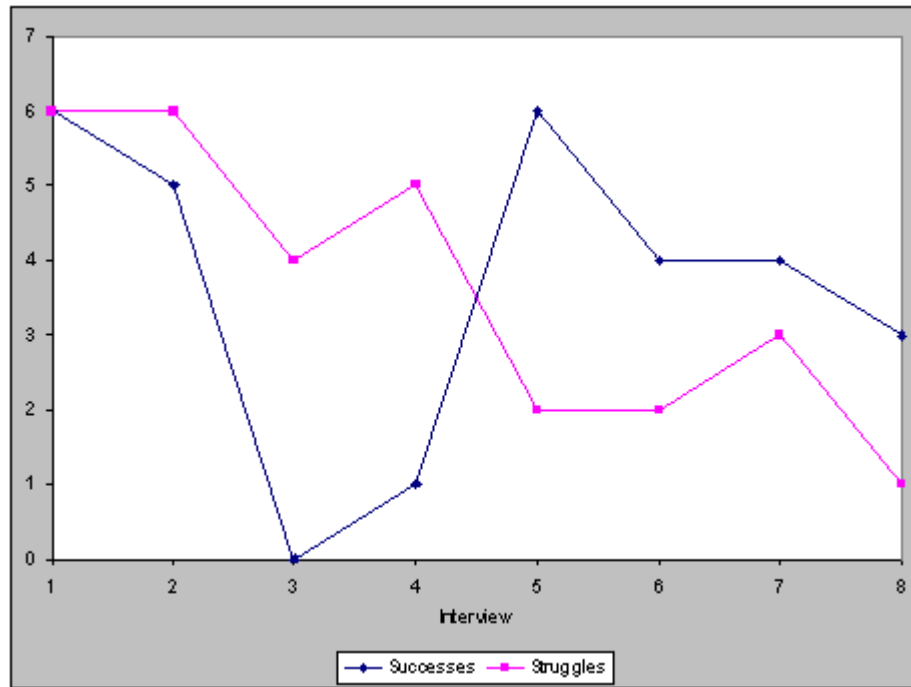


Figure 3. Patterns in Number of Successes and Struggles Mentioned

Successes and struggles concerning Personal Issues and those of Content and Pedagogy were completely opposite in terms of when they were most likely to be reported during the school year. Personal Issues began high with seven successes or struggles reported during the first semester, while Maria only discussed two such issues during the entire second semester. Conversely, Maria only mentioned two successes or struggles with Content and Pedagogy during the first semester as opposed to five during the second semester. Thus there seems to be a relationship between the two in such a manner that as the school year continued, Maria tended to focus less on her personal concerns and more on the task of instruction with her students. The novice teacher in this case tended to be more concerned with personal issues at first, and later described issues that tended to be student-related. Although these patterns are evidenced in the interview data, there is little questionnaire data to support this conclusion, as Maria tended to focus on other issues when asked about her strengths and concerns.

#### Knowledge, Expertise, and Resources Available for Successes

The beginning teacher in this investigation reported having six different types of knowledge and expertise available for her successful teaching experiences, which are listed below. The number of times that Maria mentioned each type of knowledge and expertise is noted as some were mentioned more than once across the eight interviews and three questionnaires.

- Knowledge gained from university teacher training program (7 times)
- Personal organization skills (5 times)
- Student teaching experiences and ideas from cooperating teacher (5 times)

- Experiencing things first hand with students (4 times)
- Ability to adapt to change (3 times)
- Knowledge of students (1 time)

Of the six types of knowledge and expertise Maria mentioned during the school year, two of them included her university and practicum experiences during her initial teacher preparation program. Two of the other types of knowledge and expertise, organization and ability to adapt to change, are considered to be personal attributes that teachers may or may not possess at the onset of their teaching career. However, Maria was fairly certain of her abilities in these two areas as mentioned in both her interviews and questionnaires. The final two types of knowledge and expertise are truly learned through teaching experience. Maria recognized that experiencing things first hand with students furthered her teaching development and in turn helped her gain knowledge of her students.

The first year teacher also mentioned 12 separate resources that were available to her for successful teaching as follows:

- Other teachers at the school site (11 times)
- School administration (9 times)
- Her mother (4 times)
- Books (4 times)
- District teacher induction (3 times)
- Volunteer parent helpers (3 times)
- Inclusion teacher at school (2 times)
- Resource teacher at school (2 times)
- Cognitive coach at school (2 times)
- Testing support and materials (2 times)
- District curriculum guide (1 time)
- District-funded professional development opportunity (1 time)

Nine of the 12 resources mentioned were types of school or district assistance available to Maria during her first year of teaching. Several personnel were specifically assigned to assist this teacher (such as the school administration, cognitive coach, resource teacher, and inclusion teacher) and other teachers frequently offered ideas and advice as well. The parents of Maria's students were also a great help to her.

The district provided the beginning teacher with induction activities, professional development opportunities, and a curriculum guide. These findings suggest that a school and district can have a direct impact on a beginning teacher's success and that other novices might benefit from having a similar support system.

### **Knowledge, Expertise, and Resources Needed for Struggles**

Throughout the academic year, Maria reported during the interviews and on the questionnaires that she needed the following seven types of knowledge and expertise for her struggles in teaching:

- Increased communication of school events and expectations (9 times)
- More/improved university training about students with special needs (3 times)
- Time management skills (2 times)
- More teaching experience (2 times)
- More/improved training for inclusion in school district (1 time)
- More/improved training in writing at the university (1 time)
- Patience with special needs students (1 time)

Increased communication of school events and expectations, the largest category of knowledge and expertise needed, often surfaced when Maria wasn't notified of upcoming deadlines. She proposed a master calendar that might provide advanced knowledge of upcoming events, expectations, and assessments. For the most part, Maria felt that the related struggles would have been easier to handle if she had the proper time to prepare for them. Three other types of resources and knowledge involved increased or additional training for handling her struggles. Maria wished that she was more prepared to work with students with special needs and suggested more training in her district and at the university. Further, she mentioned one content area in which she would have liked additional instruction in her teacher education program. Two of the remaining knowledge and expertise needs were more personal (time management skills and patience with special needs students). Maria's final wish was for more teaching experience, which would help her when faced with struggles in her practice.

Maria also identified six types of resources that she needed for her teaching struggles as follows:

- Help with special needs students (6 times)
- Additional time to plan for instruction (3 times)
- More appropriate mentor assigned (1 time)
- Time to move classrooms (1 time)
- Training and assistance with computer grading program (1 time)
- Better communication with one parent (1 time)

Three of the six resource needs involve direct assistance from school personnel. In those cases, Maria wished for help with her special needs students, assistance with the computer grading program, and a mentor who was a more appropriate match. A more meaningful mentoring relationship might have helped Maria acquire the professional and personal skills necessary for succeeding in this new environment. Time was also considered to be a needed resource, as additional planning time and adequate time to move classrooms were two of Maria's wishes. These needs might all be met at the school level with appropriate resources. The final resource, better communication with one parent, was specific to one of her struggles and not considered to be a high-priority need throughout the school year.

### **Implications**

Examination of this particular beginning teacher's successes and struggles provides insight into the issues a novice teacher might typically experience during her first year of practice. Findings have implications for teacher education and the professional development of teachers in the induction phase of practice. When asked what knowledge or expertise this beginning teacher had during successful experiences, her teacher education program was mentioned most frequently. Further, nine of the twelve resources reported as beneficial to her practice were types of school or district assistance available during the first year of teaching. These findings suggest that these teacher education and professional development programs, in their present form, provide valuable assistance to beginning teachers. However, suggestions can also be made for further improvement of these two enterprises based on the reports of this beginning teacher.

The seven categories of successes and struggles, as found with this beginning teacher, might be utilized in teacher preparation programs as one way to expose novice teachers to the complexities of practice. Stories of actual successes and struggles in teaching might be used to encourage reflection among preservice teachers and help to prepare them for the realities of their first year of practice (Carter, 1993). Also, introducing novices to these categories presents a balanced view of the initial year as no category was comprised of only successes or struggles. Thus the emphasis can be placed on

understanding the types of issues one might encounter during the first year of practice rather than overemphasizing the negative aspects of the experience.

Some of the beginning teacher's identified desires for resources and knowledge might be addressed more adequately in teacher preparation programs. Although it cannot be generalized that all teacher education programs need improvement in one or more of these areas, individual programs might wish to assess if and how they are preparing their future teachers to meet the challenges presented with each issue. First, this particular teacher's greatest need was for more and improved training for working with students with special needs. Increased concentration and the infusion of special needs issues throughout the teacher education program might be necessary. The novice teacher also wished she had more teaching experience. Although some things can only be learned when teachers have their own classrooms, additional teaching experiences during the preparation program could be provided to better prepare the preservice teachers for practice. The beginning teacher in this particular investigation was not typical in that her classroom management moments were largely successes rather than struggles. While teacher education training and experience may have contributed to this particular teacher's successes in classroom management, it remains an important area of focus for teacher education programs in general. Finally, having command of a particular content area and knowing how to teach it effectively to a specific group of students is a critical skill for successful teaching. Teacher education programs can always strive to enhance their programs to ensure their preservice teachers have the skills necessary for the most effective teaching practice.

Results of this study also have implications for the professional development of teachers in the induction phase of practice. Several of the resources and needs for knowledge as reported by this beginning teacher could possibly be provided through an enhanced district teacher induction program. Although help with students with special needs was available to a great extent, this beginning teacher desired additional training for working with her particular inclusion student. In districts like hers with unilateral policies for inclusion, special assistance could be provided to novices who lack the skills or knowledge to work effectively with these students. External policy issues may be controlled to some degree at the school-level as this novice would have benefited from increased communication and a school-wide calendar with important deadlines. Simply making sure that beginning teachers know what is expected with advance notice would help tremendously. Similarly, teacher evaluation issues could have also been improved if the teacher had adequate time to prepare for those observations. It is presumed that most novice teachers will be faced with these issues; therefore, schools and districts must find ways in which to support their teachers in this learning process. In the successful teaching experiences, this beginning teacher mentioned several individuals who were available to her during the first year of teaching. This underscores the importance of support provided through school personnel and other teachers during the induction phase of teaching.

Concerns for survival in the classroom are common to novice teachers (Borich & Tonibari, 1997; Fuller, 1969). This particular novice's case was unique in that she suffered an injury that made her teaching responsibilities difficult to accomplish. Although another beginning teacher is not likely to have a duplicate, it does call to mind the notion that a novice teacher may have personal concerns that have to be addressed before the highest level of professionalism and attention to teaching practice might be achieved. Patterns in successes and struggles mentioned during the monthly interviews and three questionnaires indicated that the beginning teacher's concern for self-survival decreased as she experienced success in her teaching efforts over time. The number of successes reported increased in the second semester of teaching, and the struggles steadily decreased as the year progressed. Replicating this finding with other novices would lend assurance to future beginning teachers who feel overwhelmed with initial struggles in their teaching practice. Simply recognizing that some issues will likely improve with time might provide a certain amount of comfort for handling those early struggles. Also, assistance may be provided at key times in the initial year of teaching to help beginning teachers work through struggles and gain more success with their teaching practice.

The process of engaging a beginning teacher in recollection of the successes and struggles in her teaching practice seems to hold promise for assessing how we might improve beginning teachers' experiences during this critical time in their development. In this process, beginning teachers can also be encouraged to engage in reflection on their own practice and determine patterns in what they might need and how they might further enhance their teaching skills. This particular novice teacher seemed to need assistance with remembering her successes as she recalled more positive experiences when her notebook was present. Thus, beginning teachers might need to be introduced to mechanisms to celebrate their teaching successes so that they are not overshadowed by the struggles. Although it seems reasonable that struggles might be on the forefront of beginning teachers' concerns, recognizing what they are doing well might be a key to maintaining a healthy outlook on their initial year experience. Findings from this particular study, and future studies of this nature, might allow teacher educators and professional development personnel to find additional ways to assist novice teachers as they strive to succeed during their first year of practice.

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