

23. THE TRANSITION PROCESS: THE EARLY YEARS OF BEING A TEACHER

Becoming a teacher involves a transition from pre-service training into the profession of teaching. This transition brings about a shift in role orientation and an epistemological move from knowing about teaching through formal study to knowing how to teach by confronting the daily challenges of the school and classroom (Feiman-Nemser, 2000). According to Feiman-Nemser, becoming a teacher requires the development of a professional identity and the construction of professional practice. However, for the majority of *beginning teachers*, also referred to as *newly-qualified teachers* (NQTs), this shift is seldom smooth. They experience difficulties beyond their control that affect their professional performance at the workplace, especially during their first year of service. Consequently, beginning teachers often have a hard time determining their success, especially during their first year of teaching. Wolfe and Smith (1996, citing Feiman-Nemser, 1983) and Michael *et al.* (2002) pointed out that the first year is critical in determining whether newly-qualified teachers will stay in the teaching profession and what type of teachers they will become and in shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and practices.

The first year of teaching, especially places many demands on NQTs and has been variously described as:

- critical in beginning teachers' decision to make a commitment to teaching and to remain in the profession (Gold, 1996; Hope, 1999);
- critical in developing novice teachers' confidence in themselves as maturing professionals (Weasmer and Woods, 1998);
- a period during which NQTs shape their attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Michael *et al.*, 2002);
- a ritual bridge that NQTs have to cross to enter the teachers' world (Britzman, 1986; Roy *et al.*, 1998);
- most challenging, exhilarating, and often most traumatic to beginning teachers (Cole *et al.*, 1995; Kottler *et al.*, 1998);
- trickiest on the NQTs' job (Bartell, 2005); and
- a period during which NQTs face unique problems (Huling-Austin *et al.*, 1989).

It is during the early years that teachers are most likely to become disillusioned and leave their initial teaching positions or even the profession (Bartell, 2005). The transition from pre-service training into the classroom has been described as a period of chance, a ritual bridge that beginning teachers have to cross to enter the world of teaching, and the most dramatic transition in beginning teachers' learning to teach (Britzman, 1986; Morine-Dershimer, 1992; Roy *et al.*, 1998). As Martinez (1994) noted, stakeholders such as researchers, policy makers, teachers, teacher educators,

and beginning teachers themselves, generally agree that entry into teachers' work is difficult and, as a result, beginning teachers need special support.

To address the unique challenges beginning teachers experience at the workplace, to improve their practice, to facilitate a sense of collective responsibility for student success, and to reduce the loss of promising teachers, we need to rethink beginning teachers' success during the transition from pre-service education to practice. As Dixon (1989) concluded, "we see assisting beginners as one of the most productive ways to ensure that new members of the [teaching] profession will succeed" (p. vii).

This chapter discusses the challenges experienced by beginning teachers during their transition into the teaching profession and the strategies to facilitate their success. It is organized into the following seven major parts. Part one examines the initial experiences of beginning teachers. Part two discusses the challenges of beginning teachers. Part three looks at the pitfalls in the pre-service training programs of intending teachers. In part four the responses of beginning teachers to frustrations in the workplace are explored. Part five addresses the needs of beginning teachers. Part six explores the strategies to facilitate beginning teacher success. It also highlights the major considerations in the provision of assistance to beginning teachers. The final part concludes that the key to successful transition of beginning teachers into the teaching profession lies in the effectiveness of school-university partnerships and the administrative support at the workplace.

Throughout the chapter, the terms *beginning teachers* and *newly-qualified teachers* (NQTs) will be used interchangeably to refer to those individuals who have not taught before; novices, usually ones who have just completed training to become teachers (Huling-Austin et al., 1989; Moran et al., 1999).

INITIAL EXPERIENCES OF BEGINNING TEACHERS

In considering how to facilitate smooth transition of beginning teachers from pre-service training into the teaching profession, it is important to recognize some important aspects of beginning teachers' initial experiences in entering the profession. Initial experiences include perceptions and behaviors regarding teaching, students, the school environment, and their roles as teachers (Gold, 1996). It is generally expected that beginning teachers should enter their first year of teaching already equipped with the following experiences (Reynolds, 1992; Danielson, 1999; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 1999):

- some understanding about pedagogy appropriate for the content they are expected to teach which they acquired during their pre-service education;
- knowledge of the subject matter they are expected to teach;
- knowledge of strategies, techniques, and tools for creating and sustaining a learning community, and the skills and abilities to employ these strategies;
- the disposition to find out about their students and school, and the ethnographical skills to do so;
- the disposition to reflect on their own actions and students' responses in order to improve their teaching and strategies and tools for doing so; and