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'It didn't have to be so hard': the first years of teaching in an urban school

Jo Worthy
University of Texas at Austin, USA

This article presents a case study of Mark Westin from his first to his fifth year of teaching fifth grade in an urban public school. Despite extreme management challenges and limited administrative support in a school with unusually high turnover, Mark persevered through his difficult novice years to become among the most respected and dedicated teachers in his school. Through classroom observations and interviews with Mark, I first present a snapshot of Mark's first year of teaching, followed by a longitudinal study of Mark's perceptions of his early years of teaching, gathered through observations, field notes and interviews during the succeeding four years. As Mark's confidence, experience and teaching competence grew, he became increasingly reflective and critical of his teacher preparation and his early teaching experiences, especially the lack of support he received from the school administration. A high proportion of teachers in similar situations leave teaching in the first several years. Mark's story helps to put a human face on the exceptions and offers his perspectives on improving teacher preparation and support.

> That year was pure hell. It really affected my life outside of school. I would go home and just crash and my friends would tell me, 'Mark, get a grip. This can't be worth it.' It was a total mess.

Mark Westin made these comments as he reflected on his first year of teaching fifth grade in a high-poverty community in a large city. Even considering the challenges faced by most new teachers, Mark's first year was extraordinarily difficult. He had many students with extreme learning and behavior challenges and felt unsupported by most of his colleagues and his principal. Like the growing number of teachers who leave teaching early in their careers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll, 2001), there were times during the year that Mark considered finding a new profession.

Despite his 'hellish' beginnings, Mark stayed. Now in his fifth year in the same grade at the same school, Mark is highly regarded by colleagues, students, parents

Corresponding author. The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, English Language Art Education Center, 1 University Station D5703, Austin, TX 78712, USA. Email: Worthy@mail.utexas.edu

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and administrators. Although he continues to find teaching challenging and frustrating at times, Mark says he 'can't imagine doing anything else.' He continues:

> I do love it. I do, I like it. And it's been great to me. I've learned a lot about myself. You just change…. I don't think I knew or understood how important this job is when I first started. After the first year I thought, 'This is really important. I have an incredible responsibility on my hands.' … And I think I'm more idealistic now than I was even when I first started teaching.

In the study reported in this paper, I examined Mark's longitudinal perspectives of teaching, teacher preparation and support. Paralleling his growing confidence, experience and competence, Mark's increasingly reflective and critical stance toward his preparation and early experiences is a stinging but constructive indictment of the limited support offered to new teachers as well as the literal and figurative distance between the front lines and the ivory tower. Through the story of Mark's experiences, teacher educators and school personnel may find ways to ease the path for new teachers. This study adds to research in that it presents one teacher's changing perspectives on teaching as he moved through the difficult first years of teaching in an unusually challenging situation.

Preparing and supporting teachers for challenging work

New teachers often start their first year with hope and idealism only to be faced with a reality far different and far more difficult than their expectations (Veenman, 1984). In other fields, such as law and medicine, novices have many opportunities to observe and to work with more experienced professionals, thus taking on responsibility gradually. The first-year teacher, in contrast, is expected from the first day of the job to assume the full duties of an experienced teacher, including instructing, managing and caring for a full contingent of students, along with a multitude of attendant responsibilities. Further, this new educator must be accepted by and gain the trust of parents, fellow teachers and school administrators. Considering the demands of the first years of teaching, it is no wonder education has been called the profession that 'eats its young' (Halford, 1988, p. 33).

Teacher education programs are often blamed for the fact that many teachers are unprepared for their roles. In a traditional model of teacher education, 'the university provides the theory, skills, and knowledge about teaching through coursework; the school provides the field setting where such knowledge is applied and practiced; and the beginning teacher provides the individual effort that integrates it all' (Wideen *et al.*, 1998, p. 133). The 'two separate worlds [of the school and university] exist side by side' (Beck & Kosnick, 2001, p. 7) and rarely if ever come into close contact. Thus, despite the recent movement toward professional development schools and field-based instruction, as most preservice and new teachers soon discover, there is often a chasm between what they learn in teacher-preparation programs and what faces novice teachers when they enter the classroom (Association of Teacher Educators, 1986; Evans, 1995). In the vast majority of situations,

when teacher preparation is over, the university steps completely out of the picture. Novices are told by their new colleagues to 'forget what you learned in college' and step full force into 'the real world.' Too often there is no one there to help new teachers make sense of this transition, leaving them to sort out competing theories and differing views of best practice on their own (Ben-Peretz, 2001). According to Feiman-Nemser (2001):

> New teachers really have two jobs to do—they have to teach, and they have to learn to teach. No matter what kind of preparation a teacher receives, some aspects of teaching can only be learned on the job. No college course can teach a new teacher how to blend knowledge of particular students and knowledge of particular content in decisions about what to do in specific situations. (p. 18)

Indeed, many researchers have found that teachers learn their job in stages, and that their concerns and needs change as they gain experience in the classroom (Katz, 1972; Ryan, 1986). During the first year, teachers are typically working just to survive; they are constantly questioning their competence and need encouragement and support with managerial concerns if they are to stay afloat (Stroot *et al.*, 1999). According to Knowles (1988):

> It is during the survival stage that the beginning teacher faces major challenges and crises. For some teachers the period is indeed a 'fight for life' where personal beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies are thoroughly tested, and where all educational matters besides those of the immediate classroom environment become superfluous. Often the survival stage causes notions of disenchantment about education and teaching to surface. (p. 702)

Fuller *et al.* (1967) found that new teachers move from focusing on their personal needs to becoming more concerned with their students' progress and whether or not they are meeting their students' needs: 'One finding which kept reappearing in the research with prospective teachers was that until teachers' own security needs had been satisfied, they did not involve themselves deeply with the needs of their pupils' (p. 17). Katz (1972) calls this stage 'consolidation,' when teachers begin to focus on students' instructional needs *and* personal needs. In Katz's 'renewal' stage, which usually begins in the third or fourth year of teaching, teachers gain competence and want to learn about and try new ideas.

Assistance in handling the everyday pressures of a difficult job is essential; emotional support is also critical in helping new teachers deal with the inevitable stress, fatigue and personal insecurity that accompany learning to teach in the first years. In Gold's words, 'Lack of self-confidence, conflicts between personal life and professional requirements, and inability to handle stress have undermined many otherwise promising teachers' (1996, p. 562). Teachers who stay in teaching improve dramatically during their first few years. However, largely because of low job satisfaction, too many leave before this point. Thus, 'it is critical to retain new teachers for at least five or six years so they can reach their full potential' (Olson, 2000, p. 7). Research in mentoring is beginning to consider the needs of novice teachers as they progress through different stages of competence and confidence. Stroot and colleagues argue: 'A mentor's knowledge of these stages and each teacher's place in

the model may help determine the type of interaction that will best facilitate the mentoring process' (1999, p. 29). The mentor teachers in the Stroot *et al.* study were master teachers released from classroom responsibilities for up to three years to work with entry-level teachers in the school district. The mentors observed, assessed, coached and supported the new teachers. Mentors were assisted through a collaborative relationship with university faculty. Stroot *et al.*'s findings support a stage-model approach, but suggest that novice teachers can move more rapidly through the initial stages 'to be successful managers and instructors during their first year of teaching' (p. 38) when given adequate support.

Teaching is a demanding job even with the best preparation and mentoring. Add a challenging context and the difficulties multiply. In addition to the limited funding and poverty found in many urban schools, such schools almost always include a disproportionate number of students who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds from their teachers. Middle- class, European American teachers typically have limited experiences with students whose backgrounds differ from their own, and they often enter their teacher preparation programs and teaching with negative views of such students, which can create and/or compound management challenges. Providing teachers with carefully structured experiences in the communities and schools in which they will teach (Weiner, 1990; Haberman, 1995), explicit attention to culturally relevant teaching (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and opportunities to develop personal relationships with students and families are promising trends in teacher preparation (Worthy & Patterson, 2001; Cruz, 1997).

Mark, a young, European American in a high-poverty urban school fits the profile of teachers who are likely to leave the profession in their first few years (Ingersoll, 2001). Yet, Mark has continued in teaching for five years and plans to remain in the classroom indefinitely. This examination of his teaching and thoughts over multiple years using a variety of data sources provides an in-depth look at the challenges and triumphs of an individual who has both persevered and succeeded despite the odds. I present a snapshot of Mark's first year of teaching, followed by a longitudinal study of Mark's perceptions of his early years, with data gathered through observations, field notes and interviews throughout almost five years.

The first year of teaching

Setting and participants

Chavez Elementary is a public school located in a large city. Chavez includes students in prekindergarten through sixth grade and serves a small community of predominantly Mexican American families, most living in poverty (96% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch). The ethnic make-up of Chavez is 89% Latino/a American, 8% African-American and 3% European American.

The author, a European American female, is a professor of literacy working in preservice and inservice teacher preparation at a major university. Prior to this, I was an elementary and middle school classroom teacher in a high-poverty, predominantly

African-American community in the southeast. For the past several years, I have been teaching undergraduate and graduate practicum classes in literacy instruction on the campus of Chavez school, where Mark teaches. The major focus of the practicum classes is tutoring children in literacy under my supervision. Four of Mark's students participated in the tutoring program, including James, a boy I personally tutored.

Mark Westin (a pseudonym), a European American male in his mid-twenties, graduated from a teacher education program in my university. After a year of substitute teaching and traveling, he was hired to teach fifth grade at Chavez Elementary. I met Mark in early fall 1997 when four of his students began participating in the tutoring program, and we regularly chatted about the progress of his students. Late in the fall semester, he began to talk candidly about his classroom, telling me that his principal had observed his class and had told him she was concerned about his teaching and classroom management. My brief observations when picking up students supported the principal's concerns. Mark was clearly having an incredibly difficult year, and he often stopped into my small office in the school 'to vent.' Mark and I agreed that I would observe his class as often as my schedule allowed (this turned out to be a total of six times over three months) and meet with him to discuss my observations and suggestions for his classroom. As this study turned into a longitudinal examination of Mark's perspectives on his first years of teaching, we became collaborators. Although I invited him to be an official co-author, Mark chose to protect the confidentiality of his school and students.

During Mark's first year, there were 40 fifth graders and two fifth-grade teachers at Chavez. Mark taught language arts and social studies while his partner taught science and mathematics. The classes were grouped by achievement for both math and language arts. Mark's major challenges were with the 'low' achieving language arts group; most of these students had not passed the state's basic skills competence tests the previous year. There were 18 students (10 boys and eight girls) in this group. Two of the boys were African-American; the remaining students were of Mexican descent. Over the years, many of the students in this class had gained reputations among the faculty, administration and students as extreme behavior challenges.

Sources of data

Because of our shared interest, I focused on the 75-minute language arts period with the most challenging class. I observed the class a total of six times, focusing on Mark's instruction, his interactions with the students, their interactions with each other and the materials used. Although I knew some of the students, and they greeted me as I entered the classroom to observe, I did not interact with them during the class. My field notes captured teacher and student talk about instruction, informal student talk and detailed descriptions of the entire period. After each observation, I wrote reflections on what I had observed, and then met with Mark over lunch the same day to discuss the observation. During our many talks, Mark shared his teaching experiences and his views about his preservice preparation.

Data analysis

In attempting to describe Mark's first year of teaching, I analyzed the observations and talks with Mark. After analyzing the initial observations and identifying patterns I decided that presenting a representative observation, consisting of running description and commentary, would best illustrate the challenges that Mark faced and how he initially dealt with them. More description of the analytical process can be seen in the second section of the paper. Verbatim field notes are blocked.

Snapshot of the first year: a classroom in crisis

A typical language arts period. The class lasted one hour and 15 minutes during which some students wrote a short journal entry and some copied the definitions for as many as six vocabulary words. Many did not do anything during the class period.

> The students enter the classroom at 10:35 for language arts. Ramón twirls around the room a few times before he sits down. Mr Westin reads the journal topic, which is to write about their favorite hobby or sport. Some students ask questions about the topic but James, Jason, Ramón and Jessica make rude comments about the topic and about Mr Westin (e.g. 'Mr Westin you have bad breath,' 'This is stupid.')….
>
> After 10 minutes, most kids are writing something but Ramón sits with his arms folded and keeps saying things under his breath about hating Mr Westin. Insults are shouted and whispered from all over the room (e.g. 'You pervert!' 'What are you looking at, stupid?'). Ramón calls out 'I don't want to do nothing. I want to go to sleep.' Mr Westin walks around the room, making positive comments to students who are writing and warning others that the time is almost up. I am surprised to see James, the boy I tutor, writing because he typically does not participate in class activities. He calls out angry comments under his breath to students who are talking (&';Shut up!') even though he mumbles almost nonstop. Jessica keeps saying 'I hate you Mr Westin. I hate you!'

After 30 minutes, Mr Westin asks for volunteers to read their journal entries:

> James is called on to read his piece about the comic book he is writing at home. He waits until everyone stops talking and then starts reading, but as soon as he opens his mouth, Jessica and other students begin laughing and calling out insults. No one in the room appears to be listening to what he says. This scene is repeated when the next two kids read. Mr Westin comments on each piece but no one listens. I can barely hear what the students are reading or what Mr Westin says because it is so noisy. Even when Mr Westin reads Nathan's entry out loud, no one comments except to insult or laugh at Nathan.

At 11:15, Mr. Westin introduces the next basal reader story and assigns students to look up six vocabulary words and write the definitions. During the next 35 minutes, a few students do the assignment amid the noise and confusion.

> Three girls at a table are laughing and talking but not writing anything. Ramón is a nonstop soundtrack of singing, noises, running commentary and insults. I'm trying to write his comments verbatim: 'It's me, Daffy Duck. Leave me alone, Chuckles. Bugs in my ear. It's too cool! Jessica, I have hermit crabs. Personal jinx, you owe me a 12-pack. I'm going to slap that bald head. It's me, higgie piggie….'

> Ramón and James, who are sitting across the room from each other, carry on a continuous barrage of insults and banter, telling each other to shut up and calling out insulting names and phrases. Mr Westin ignores the talking, shouting and inappropriate behavior, and points out students who are doing their working and sitting quietly. The approach seems to backfire, as students laugh at the positive comments and at the students who are doing their work.

The observations of Mark's classroom revealed a classroom in crisis, affirming Mark's description of his challenges with management, instruction and students with severe behavior problems. The common patterns found during observations were: (a) much wasted instructional time; (b) rude and disrespectful comments made by more than half of the students to each other or to Mark; (c) an atmosphere of boredom and contempt; (d) instruction that was not reaching students.

Students' and teacher's perspectives on the class. With the help of a research assistant, I spoke informally with 12 of Mark's 18 students to gather their perspectives on their classroom, Mr Westin as a teacher, and their ideas about the positives and negatives of the class. We also asked them to talk about their own and other students' behavior in the classroom, their reading and writing attitudes and preferences, and their suggestions for how they would change the class. More than half of the students admitted that they were frustrated with the way their class was going, saying things like: 'I don't like the class,' 'I don't like the noise,' 'I hate the class and the teacher,' 'I think the class is so boring,' and 'There are always fights.' Others were non-committal. Many students mentioned being bothered by the noise and attitudes of other students when they were trying to work, although several admitted that they caused some of the problems themselves. They seemed to cry out for a more structured atmosphere. Several of the students said they liked to read but not from the reading textbook; they had a wide range of preferences in reading material and wanted the opportunity to read books related to their personal interests. Students also mentioned that they would like more opportunities to use computers, do research, work on projects, draw, read with younger children and write about topics of their choice. All students said they would like their teacher to read to them more often. Although a handful of the students seemed resigned to the current state of the class, most seemed to genuinely want to change the classroom. With students' permission, I compiled the results of these talks and shared the information with Mark. He was encouraged by the students' suggestions and by their apparently sincere desire to be engaged in classroom instruction. Mark's desire to reach his students was clear in our talks, and he was hopeful about the potential for working with the students to improve the class.

Small steps toward change. Although this was not an intervention study, Mark and I did use the information from the observations and student interviews to formulate some ideas for him to try in the classroom. The most helpful, according to Mark, was

reorganizing the two fifth-grade classes from ability to heterogenous grouping. Mark also talked to students about his desire to make the class more interesting and asked students to write about how they would change the class. He used these suggestions and those from the student interviews. He began to read aloud every day. He gathered interesting, relevant materials for students' reading and research and organized a reading-buddies program with younger students. Mark found these activities motivating for students. Helpful organizational changes included keeping a folder for each student with work and assessments, posting a daily agenda of class activities, breaking the class into shorter, more focused instructional segments, and keeping a routine schedule. Mark saw improvements in many of the most challenging students' academics and behavior.

Although Mark was grateful for the help, his comments in later years made it clear that he needed more systematic and frequent assistance during that first year. Frankly, I was surprised that Mark continued to teach after his first year. My own first years of teaching were difficult, but I remarked often to Mark that I may not have continued in teaching if my experiences had even come close to his. Some of his students were verbally abusive and physically aggressive, and he felt unsupported by his principal in dealing with these and other challenges. Yet he remains in the same job five years later. In the second part of the paper, I examine his reasons for staying, his perceptions of that first year and subsequent years, and his suggestions for the improvement of teacher preparation and induction.

Looking back and moving forward

I have continued working in Mark's school, teaching university classes in the school library, directing the tutoring program, observing student teachers and, this year, conducting ethnographic research in the fifth-grade classroom of one of Mark's colleagues. I was in the school for 8–10 hours per week during the first four years and about 15 hours per week during the fifth (current) year. Thus, I have continued to see Mark several times a week at the school and to informally observe and talk with him in his classroom, in other areas of the building, on fieldtrips and during planning times. In his second year, Mark audited my graduate practicum class during which he voluntarily tutored a student from his own classroom, and we had some occasions to talk about the tutoring. In the fall semester of the current year, Mark was a cooperating teacher for one of my teacher preparation students. Through teaching the class, working with students, consulting with teachers and presenting workshops for the faculty, I have come to know many of the school's students and most of the teachers well. For the past four years, I have been an 'honorary' member of an informal network and support group of Chavez teachers which meets for planning and social gatherings, and of which Mark is currently a member. I have kept a journal of field notes and reflections throughout the five years I have worked in Mark's school (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993; Emerson *et al.*, 1995). The journal includes notes of three formal and numerous informal observations of and talks with Mark and his students.

Data and analysis

At the end of his third year (spring 2000), I asked Mark to reflect on his first years of teaching, the support he received and his recommendations for making the early years less stressful and more productive for new teachers. This open-ended interview took place over a two-hour informal dinner in which Mark talked approximately 70% of the time (the transcript totaled 66 double-spaced pages). The interview transcript, along with field notes from my journal, formed the core of data analyzed for the study of Mark's reflections on his first years of teaching. Analysis began with the start of data collection. Having read several methodology texts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Erlandson *et al.*, 1993), I made notes about how each source could inform the data analysis procedures. I also met formally and informally with Mark several times throughout the years to share the categories that were emerging from the data and to ask him how my analysis reflected his ideas and perceptions. In addition to countless informal talks with teachers and administrators in the school, I conducted interviews with two of the teachers in Mark's support group.

To begin more formal data analysis after the completion of data collection, I identified meaningful units of data (a segment of one or more sentences or a paragraph that focused on one topic), wrote unit summaries, comments and reactions to each unit, and made exhaustive lists of issues and topics to consider with Mark. During informal meetings with Mark, we discussed the issues and topics, noting recurring patterns in the topics, how they could be grouped into broader themes and categories, and how these categories could be defined (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993). Only at the end of nearly five years was the data set complete, yet I was constantly analyzing, discussing, and looking for patterns and variations among the data. As I analyzed, I wrote analytic memos, returning again and again to the data, shaping and refining categories in conjunction with previous theory and newly emerging themes (Emerson *et al.*, 1995). In comparing qualitative research to jazz, Oldfather and West (1994) explain, 'Through the improvisation of constant comparison, for example, new passages are played, one verse leading to the next, shaping and reshaping the music' (p. 24).

Finally, I wrote a draft of an article and asked Mark to read and to comment on it. We met after school for about an hour to discuss the paper and his current perspectives. By that time, the middle of his fifth year, Mark and I had known each other as colleagues and friends for more than four years, and his remarks made it clear that he felt free to be honest with me. There were several places in the paper in which Mark felt I had not captured his intentions. For example, when he said I had soft-pedaled his criticisms of my university's teacher preparation program and of teacher educators, I felt obliged to swallow my pride and attempt to represent his perceptions more accurately. I found new meaning in the words of Emerson *et al.*: 'The field researcher does not learn about the concerns and meanings of others all at once, but in a constant, continuous process…' (1995, p. 13). My current understandings of Mark's concerns and meanings are included in this paper.

Analysis of the interviews, along with field notes of informal communications and observations, resulted in three overlapping themes that characterized Mark's

thinking in his trajectory from a struggling first-year teacher to an effective, confident fifth-year teacher. They were: (a) Becoming a teacher versus a manager; (b) Challenges in finding support systems; (c) Criticisms of and suggestions for preservice teacher preparation and early induction experiences. I begin the presentation of findings with a description of Mark's current teaching, gathered from informal interviews with his colleagues, as well as formal and informal observations. Next, I present Mark's early thinking and evolving perspectives organized by the three themes. Finally, I discuss the findings and offer implications for preservice teacher preparation and early support, gleaned from Mark's suggestions as well as from research in these areas.

Mark as an effective, highly-regarded teacher

By the end of his second year of teaching, Mark had gained self-confidence, a unique teaching style, a clear sense of direction, and respect from his colleagues, the principal, students and parents. Today Mark attends every community/school event and regularly spends after-school and weekend time going to sports practices and games, *quinceñearas*, confirmations and other meaningful events for students. He keeps up his own learning through professional reading, informal meetings with other teachers and professional development workshops. He has also mentored a student teacher and audited graduate literacy classes. Mark has served on several district committees for math and science education and curriculum development, and is the grade-level chair for mathematics. When students need extra help, he spends his planning period and after-school time working with them. He visits the homes of many of his students every year. Marla Jenner, a teacher and curriculum specialist with more than 30 years of experience in the same school, has observed Mark's trajectory from his difficult beginnings to the present. She talked about Mark as she beamed with pride: 'He is amazing. I have never seen anyone come so far in such a short time.' Her comment is representative of the sentiments expressed by other teachers. In contrast to the early years, Mark exudes confidence and commands respect from his students. Yet, the atmosphere is light and fun; Mark banters and jokes with the students and they with him respectfully. They work hard, knowing his expectations are high. In a school in which many students struggle academically, 100% of Mark's students have passed the state competence test for the past two years.

Themes

Becoming a teacher. Although he had initially been excited about having his 'own classroom,' Mark quickly felt overwhelmed by the demands of classroom management and the challenging behavior of many of his students: 'I was dealing with it on a day-to-day basis instead of looking at it long term…. It was putting out fires.' Having been a good student throughout his school career, Mark was for the first time feeling unsure of himself to the point that he was questioning his decision to become a teacher:

> I was worried. There were times when I didn't feel like going to work. There were nights when I would wake up in the middle of the night going 'What am I going to do about my reading groups? What can I do to make things better?' It would keep me up. It really would.

Mark said that his student teaching did not prepare him for the complexities of classroom life. During student teaching, his teacher, a strict disciplinarian, had 'made it look easy' and was always there to 'keep the kids in line' when Mark had a problem. From his university instructors, Mark said he learned something completely different, how to plan and teach 'creative, well-structured whole-class lessons' with little to no focus on organization or management. He soon discovered that neither the university nor the student teaching experience provided what he considered essential knowledge about setting up the classroom and the 'glue' that held the day together. As Mark said at the end of his first year: 'What I didn't know was: what is my everyday stuff going to look like? How am I going to set up reading and writing and science and how is it going to go down day to day?'

As the 'everyday stuff' became easier, Mark was able to shift his focus from getting through the day to thinking about students' learning. From the perspective of his additional years of teaching, Mark realized that the problem may not have been simply management and discipline, but also his approach to the students and to their learning:

> At first I threw up my hands. What do you do with students like that? How do you motivate people who don't want to learn? Now I know that in the beginning it was not really that fun for a kid who doesn't enjoy reading.... [Even though] those same kids have been discipline problems throughout their elementary career, that's no reason why they couldn't be different in my class.... Maybe it's because they've never had a really fun reading experience.

Haberman's (1995) descriptions of exemplary urban teachers who believe that it is their responsibility to reach students regardless of the challenges echo in Mark's words. In the third-year interview, Mark was not only focusing on the instructional and personal needs of individual children but had begun to read professional books, attend workshops and try new ideas to reach students (Katz, 1972):

> When I started to see things coming together in terms of the organization and what worked and what didn't work, that helped me a lot. I felt like I could keep one thing that was working for me and then maybe concentrate on another thing and I think that's what evolved into like the scheduling and the structure that I have now.

Yet, being a teacher, according to Mark, means never being satisfied: 'You know, there is still so much more that I need to learn and understand, and strategies that I need to develop, especially for working with the struggling learners. I mean there's tons more that I'd like to do.'

Mark also went beyond the call of duty. In his second year, he decided that his students, many of whom had never been more than a few miles from their homes, should have an opportunity to visit a theme park, an experience that middle-class children take for granted. When the administration discouraged his efforts ('they said,

"No way can you do this"') because of the expense, Mark took it as a personal challenge to raise the money. After countless phone calls and visits to area businesses, he raised enough money to 'take the kids in style' on chartered buses and to subsidize their admission fee. He has continued to organize this trip for the school's fifth graders every year. Mark also spoke of the importance of getting to know students as individuals and of building personal relationships with them, which is important for students' learning and attitudes (Worthy & Patterson, 2001). Mark enjoys skateboarding in his free time, as do many of his students. When he discovered that there were no places in the community for students to practice tricks, he planned an integrated mathematics and science lesson in which students learned and worked together to plan, to measure, to build and to install a skateboard ramp at school. Mark also designed an after-school class to teach students how to use the ramp and skateboarding equipment safely. As a fifth-year teacher, Mark stressed the importance of knowing and respecting students, focusing on their individual needs, and being more than a weekday teacher.

> People who aren't teachers don't have any idea what a commitment teaching is. I think with the profession comes more than just the teaching in the classroom, and … I do everything I can. If there's a special event going on, you can probably guarantee I'm one of the teachers that's there…. It goes back to knowing your children as opposed to 'I have no idea how you feel,' or 'I have no idea where you come from.'

Mark even spoke about his first-year students fondly. As he remarked, 'I don't blame them. They needed something more. At the time, they were the banes of my existence; now they're the loves of my life.' Even the students who gave him the most trouble that first year regularly come to visit after school, and he found an after-school job for Ramón, who was 'spending a lot of time on the streets.'

Finding a support system. In Mark's interview for the position at Chavez, he was told that he would have a mentor and a range of other support systems. However, when school began, he found himself 'flying solo,' and waiting for the support he had been promised. During his most vulnerable time, his early years of teaching, Mark felt unsupported on many levels. First, the 'sweet guy' principal who hired him was replaced by a principal who was 'negative and insensitive.' According to Mark, 'She came into my classroom and she wasn't pleased by what she saw.' The principal's 'micromanaging' style added to Mark's distress. While his principal was requiring him to turn in 'perfect lesson plans, no misplaced commas, no misspelled words,' Mark was undergoing a daily struggle to survive and fighting the urge to 'walk out the door and never come back.' He described his interactions with the principal:

> It was just like 'You're fucking up [Mark's words].' She was real direct. Real negative. Which was just not what you need when you're a first-year teacher and you really are under a lot of pressure and stress. You don't need to feel like the management is coming down on you, too…. We would have conversations that you wouldn't believe. And I'm pretty tough. But a couple of times she had me close if not on the cusp of tears. Several times. She would say just hurtful things to me. And some people would have been just like 'Forget it. I quit.' And people jumped ship the first two years like it was on fire.

Indeed, by the end of Mark's second year, many of the faculty and staff had transferred to other schools, and some had left the profession altogether. Mark also felt that the principal was not effective in helping him with the discipline problems he was experiencing in his classroom: 'I mean like Nathan should have been out of there. That kid was physically aggressive. He was verbally abusive to others and me.' Yet, Mark felt that sending Nathan or others to the principal's office was a 'waste of time.' He felt that no one could or would help him with students whose behavior he could not handle.

Mark's assigned mentor, another fifth-grade teacher, helped him with 'paperwork and getting things organized, but was not really helpful in terms of classroom ideas.' She also used a direct, 'coarse, militant' style of discipline, which Mark did not like. Late in his first year, Mark decided that he needed to be more proactive in finding a support system and he began to seek out teachers in the school whose teaching styles, philosophies and personalities seemed compatible with his own. By the third year, he had become a full-fledged member of a small network of like-minded teachers who socialized regularly, supported each other and shared their paperwork shortcuts. They also developed an effective system for helping each other with discipline challenges, bypassing the school administration. Mark described them as, 'like my family, my teaching family. These are the people that have taught me some of the things that I know and I've shared my situations with them. They're my team.' Through his 'team' and his own observations of the system, Mark learned how to 'play the game' while continuing to develop his own teaching style. For example, when the principal came to observe, he would plan the kind of lesson she expected, 'a whole class, direct-teach lesson,' and 'my evaluation went great.' He learned to write plans that the principal would accept and, before long, he found himself on the good side of the administration. Her visits became less frequent and lengthy, and he felt freer to focus on students and their learning. Mark mused that this was a 'sad commentary' on the state of teacher–principal relations in his school.

Perspectives on teacher preparation. When Mark graduated from the teacher education program at my university in the mid-1990s, professional development schools were a rarity. In an all-too-typical situation, Mark was left alone after graduation to navigate unusually choppy waters, and to sink or swim, and he was bitter about it:

> Everyone says you have to wait until you get your own class, forget what you learned in college, live through hell your first year, and then things get better or you quit. It's like a fraternity initiation. 'I did it, so you have to.' Well, okay, I did it and I lived through it and I'm still here. But really, it didn't have to be so hard.

In his early teaching years, Mark was probably too busy surviving to be reflective, and his thoughts about what he needed were typical of a novice teacher. His trajectory from barely surviving to being an effective, confident teacher paralleled his ability to reflect on and articulate some of the problems of his early years, and he offered several suggestions for preservice education. Prospective teachers, he insisted, should go into teaching with eyes wide open and should be prepared for the

challenges that they will face. It is important for preservice teachers to see a realistic picture of what teaching is really like, to see classrooms that are sometimes 'out of control,' like his was during his first year. He continued, 'That's what we need. Because you can't see anything when you observe someone who can manage their class effectively. Nothing is going to go down.'

Mark's most vehement criticism was of the disjunction between universities and schools. As his confidence and our friendship grew, he became increasingly honest. Simultaneously, perhaps, I grew more open to the messages about teacher preparation that he finally articulated in his fifth year of teaching.

> Here's the problem. We watch our CTs [cooperating teachers] manage the classroom and we listen to our professors telling us *how* to do it. So one *does* and the other *says* and they're usually so different. If you're going to tell us what to do you have to be willing and able to show us. The theories sound right, but if we don't have a model of them in action, if our CT does something different and we see it working, guess what we're going to do?

Mark often remarked on the irony that those who are teaching teachers often have limited or outdated experience in classrooms: 'I mean people with less than three years of experience? Does that seem right to you? And then there are professors who taught high school or junior high and here they are teaching elementary Ed.' Mark never saw any of his university professors model a lesson with students, and he wondered if they were willing or capable of doing what they expected their students to do: 'I don't know, they're real theoretical on their approaches to teaching certain topics, but it's like they forget that there's a whole system of management that goes along with teaching.'

While he acknowledged the impossibility of university faculty being fully responsible for a class of students, Mark suggested that those involved in teacher education, whether their home base is the university or the school, must 'be able to play the game as well as coach from the sidelines.' Following current trends, Mark *has* seen more university presence in his school, but most of it has consisted of short-term research projects and teaching classes on the campus; most professors do not work directly with students or even with teachers. A truer collaboration between university faculty and school faculty, which would include planning together and teaching side by side in university and school classrooms, would be invaluable for the learning of preservice and inservice teachers, according to Mark. In this spirit, Mark volunteered to help with university classes taught at his campus by collaborating with planning, speaking to the students, modeling lessons and giving preservice teachers opportunities to work with individual students and small groups in his classroom. His help has been invaluable.

Implications for education and future research

The first year of teaching is at least challenging and often overly frustrating for many new teachers. In a study of teachers who began their careers in the early 1990s, teacher attrition was especially high in the first few years, with 20% of new teachers

leaving the profession after three years. This percentage doubled when discipline problems were high or when teachers were dissatisfied with the school environment (Olson, 2000). Clearly, many current preparation and support models neither prepare teachers sufficiently nor sustain them through the difficult novice years. Not many people could have successfully played the hand that Mark was dealt in his first years of teaching. Although Mark stayed, he teetered on the brink of leaving, just as I have seen many similarly gifted and dedicated teachers leave this and other schools in their first years.

While some educators may believe that overcoming extreme challenges is a necessary part of learning to teach, current research supports the idea that more can be done to support novice teachers so that they do not leave the profession before experiencing the positives that teaching can offer. Mark's story gives us the opportunity to 'observe' an unusual situation—a teacher in extremely challenging circumstances in his trajectory from beginning to more experienced teacher. Mark's path was similar to that seen in stage models of teaching; he moved from dealing with personal survival to focusing on students' personal and academic needs and finally to becoming an innovative, highly effective teacher. In contrast to most research on stage models, however, I was able to closely observe Mark's development in the context of a long-term professional relationship. This situation might have encouraged more candid comments than might be found in a more common short-term research project where the principal players do not know each other well. Considering Mark's reflections on his first years of teaching in the light of current research and practice on teacher education, several conclusions and implications seem important. Mark's experiences and ideas suggest a multi-pronged approach to preservice, induction and inservice teacher development.

Realistic experiences may decrease attrition

Early in their college careers, and preferably sooner, prospective teachers need experiences that present a realistic view of teaching through multiple experiences in schools. As Mark and several researchers have suggested, in-school experiences should give prospective teachers a realistic picture of the demands of teaching. Teacher education programs need to 'consider the special problems of preparing students to teach in urban schools' (Weiner, 1990, p. 258) in order to help city schools attract and keep talented teachers. As Mark suggested, if teacher preparation does not explicitly address the challenges, the student-teaching experience 'may actually discourage youthful, dedicated, idealistic teachers from entering the schools where they are so desperately needed' (Weiner, 1990, p. 274). The first job is often in a challenging school; thus, these experiences should be available for all preservice teachers—making later success in these schools more likely.

Mark found that much of what he has learned, he learned while teaching in the classroom. Learning 'in school' while working with students has been recommended by many educators and researchers for both inservice and preservice teachers. As Liberman and Miller (1999) explain:

> Teachers must try out new ideas, collect data to see what happens when they use those ideas, craft ways of responding to this information about their students, talk about the process with their peers, and, most often, go back and try again using what they have learned. (p. 69)

When prospective teachers are given many opportunities to participate directly in the actual experience of teaching, they have a better chance of sorting out at least some of these uncertainties *before* they enter the classroom.

Many teacher preparation programs are increasing the number of field experiences required or offered. However more is not always better; rather, 'the crux of the problem lies in finding situations that provide students opportunities to apprentice in excellent practice accompanied by sufficient time and guidance to establish strong pedagogical knowledge foundations' (Donovan, 1999, p. 452). As a result of her own intensive work guiding preservice teachers in field-based learning, Donovan called for 'less "generic" and more focused field work' (1999, p. 464). Learning *how* to teach takes practice that is carefully structured and supervised by experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Evans, 1995). Studies in which preservice teachers (Roskos & Walker, 1994) and inservice teachers (Broaddus & Bloodgood, 1999) tutored struggling learners with constant supervision and feedback have demonstrated the value of helping participants to make connections between practice and theory. While preservice teachers often do have many hands-on experiences, what is often missing is systematic guided reflection to help prospective teachers make sense of what they see (Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Schön's concept of 'reflection-in-action' combines the components of hands-on practice and reflection. Through critical reflection on their own and others' teaching, teachers engage in a continuing process of professional development and move forward in their thinking and practice (Schön, 1982).

Mentoring is more than assigning a buddy

Mentoring is a complex process, yet most districts approach mentoring in a haphazard way in regard to assignment and direction for mentors and novice teachers. Even 'model' mentoring programs, such as those described in the literature review, require funds that most districts don't have. The mentor in Feiman-Nemser's case study (2001) did not just observe, evaluate and support. He co-taught, modeled his thinking and reflective processes, and kept a focus on student learning. Unfortunately, such mentoring programs are rare. Indeed, Feiman-Nemser (2001) admits that her case study 'provides a vision of the possible rather than a view of the probable' (p. 28). However, assigning regular classroom teachers as mentors without providing support, training or compensation rarely works. Mark's ideas and experiences also cast doubt even on the idea of providing one mentor to work with one or more preservice teachers, as virtually all models do. Perhaps a team approach is a possibility for cash-strapped districts; teachers who might feel unable to handle the responsibility of being the sole mentor might be more inclined to share the responsibility with a group of like-minded teachers. Support for Mark came in the form of a group of teachers that he had to seek out. They were his 'salvation,' but he had to 'let it be known that he

was sinking,' putting himself in what he considered an uncomfortable, vulnerable position. He is sure he would not have made it without this group, and he believes prospective teachers need to know how important it is to swallow their pride and establish such connections early. Mark's team was what made all the difference for him, but if he had become a part of this group earlier, his path might have been easier. Bridges agrees that prospective teachers need to learn not just how and what to teach, but also how to communicate and network with colleagues (Bridges, 1999 cited in Ben-Peretz, 2001).

Administrative support is essential

A discussion of mentoring cannot be complete without including the principal, whom Mark saw as part of the problem rather than the solution. Since the current principal's first year, more than 65% of the teachers who were there in Mark's first year have left the school. Although several left for personal reasons, Mark, along with other teachers, feel his principal bears the major responsibility for this attrition. Mark still talks about the emotional beating he and other new teachers took from the principal in his first year. In fact, with the exception of Mark, every single new teacher who began when he did, and the majority of those who started later, has left the school.

Research implies that Mark's experience of being at odds with the principal in terms of philosophical, instructional and management issues is not unusual. In a large-scale study of teacher turnover that included data from teachers across the United States, Ingersoll (2001) reported that, along with discipline problems and limited opportunities to participate in school decisions, inadequate principal support was one of the primary reasons public school teachers gave for leaving the job. These are likely issues of both principal selection and education. Rather than being a barrier to 'get around,' principals should be taught to find ways to share leadership with teachers by 'articulating goals, entrusting and relinquishing authority, involving teachers in decision-making, assigning responsibilities wisely, sharing responsibility for both success and failure, believing in teachers, and admitting ignorance' (Barth, 1988, p. 639), and creating 'environments that enable teachers to discover their own skills and talents' (ibid., p. 639). Barth's suggestions were written more than 14 years ago yet are still germane to today's situations. Indeed, Ingersoll's recent research (2001) supports Barth's views of the centrality of principal support in matters of teacher satisfaction. It seems crucial that leadership training, then, should include a major focus on supporting teachers. Mentoring new teachers is not a responsibility to be delegated and forgotten.

What does it really mean for university faculty to be involved in schools?

Mark spoke often of challenges that he perceived as stemming from the literal and figurative distance between teacher preparation and schools. For teacher educators, this study is an invitation to consider what it really means for university faculty to be involved in schools. Many educators believe that universities need to increase their

presence in schools, and many are. Beck and Kosnick (2001) studied the effects of a model in which tenured and tenure-track faculty supervised preservice teachers in collaboration with cooperating teachers. The researchers concluded that there were many positive effects, including a stronger school–university partnership, a better practicum experience for preservice teachers, improved education of students, and increasing understanding of schooling by university faculty. Negative effects were reported only by the university faculty, who found the field-based job more challenging and time consuming than their university-based teaching assignments. They also felt that spending time at schools was not highly regarded and that their university colleagues treated them like 'second-class citizens.' Similarly, in a meta-ethnography of 20 case studies of collaboration in Professional Development Schools, Rice (2001) concluded that university faculty working in schools felt that such work diminished their status in academe. As a participant in one case study observed: 'Some College of Education faculty entered the professoriate in order to escape the public schools' (Berry & Catoe, 1974 cited in Rice, 2001). Nevertheless, while acknowledging the rarity of such situations, Beck and Kosnik (2001) believe that faculty, rather than graduate students or non-research faculty, should be responsible for supervising preservice teachers in their field experiences.

> We believe this approach to practicum supervision is inherent in the approach to teaching that most schools of education explicitly advocate: respect for practice; a close theory–practice connection; teachers as researchers, an integrated curriculum; and a caring, supportive, teacher–student relationship…. So long as we proclaim one approach to teaching and learning but practice another, our students will simply be confused and little will be accomplished. (2001, p. 17)

Perhaps teacher educators will need to make a choice between being school-based and university-based. Certainly, schools of education will need to consider the differential needs of those scholars who choose to work mainly in schools or to straddle both worlds.

Conclusion

The nation is experiencing a serious teacher shortage that is due more to attrition than to lack of certified teachers, and the current focus on teacher recruitment will not adequately address the shortage (Ingersoll, 2001). According to Ingersoll, 'Rather than insufficient supply, the data indicate that school staffing problems are primarily due to excess demand, resulting from a "revolving door"—where large numbers of teachers depart their jobs for reasons other than retirement' (2001, p. 501). Mark's story is one of a teacher who defied the statistics and continued teaching, despite challenging circumstances in a school with unusually high turnover. The proportion of new teachers in schools is ever growing, and we must take seriously the need for supporting them in the crucial first years (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 1999). Teacher turnover threatens school reform, which requires years of sustained staff effort. Even for teachers who remain in the classroom, difficulties in the formative professional years can have a continuing negative effect. When we don't ease the way for new

teachers, it is a sign that they are not valued. Ultimately, the students suffer the consequences due to the lack of support for beginning teachers.

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Notes on contributor

Jo Worthy is an Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas. Her research interests are in teacher preparation and professional development, as well as in reading preferences and interests of elementary and middle school students.

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