Pathways to Burnout: Case Studies in Teacher Isolation and Alienation

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Published online: 07 Aug 2010.

To cite this article: Jacqueline Schlichte, Nina Yssel, John Merbler (2005) Pathways to Burnout: Case Studies in Teacher Isolation and Alienation, Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 50(1), 35-40, DOI: 10.3200/PSFL.50.1.35-40

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.50.1.35-40

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ABSTRACT: The attrition rate of 1st-year special education teachers is a mounting concern. Researchers have identified several factors that contribute to the stress that many novice teachers experience and their subsequent attrition. If necessary support from mentors, colleagues, and administrators is not in place, many 1st-year teachers opt to leave the profession. In this study, the authors interviewed 5 novice teachers about their 1st-year experience to determine whether there were any protective factors that might reverse attrition. A common thread in these teachers’ stories was the powerful impact of relationships.

KEY WORDS: mentoring, teacher attrition, teacher retention

The critical problems of first-year teachers leaving the profession are well documented in literature. Some of the causes for attrition include large caseloads, problems of behavior management (Busch, Pederson, Espin, & Weissenburger, 2001), and excessive paperwork (Frank & McKenzie, 1993; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). In addition, poor administrative support, the principal’s administrative style, and organizational structure of the school can have a negative impact on a novice teacher’s decision to leave the profession (Billingsley & Cross, 1992).

The difficulties that teachers face are undeniable. How do teachers cope with the realities of their profession? Are there any protective factors that would enable first-year teachers to manage better the demands of their new career instead of succumbing to its rigors? Questions such as these are indicative of issues that plague novice teachers. Veteran teachers attuned to those new in the field have the opportunity to befriend and aid first-year teachers as each need arises (Delgado, 1999). The first year of teaching is crucial in the process of teacher socialization, with school context specifically mentioned as having considerable influence (Kilgore & Griffin, 1998). Although education students frequently receive advice from their professors about becoming socially integrated in the school milieu, such as avoiding cliques and gossip (Kronowitz, 1992), this well-meant advice can add to the trepidation with which many first-year teachers embark on their teaching careers. Also,
the excitement of a first job, new classroom, and new community often lead to challenges once first-year teachers confront behavior and learning problems. A growing awareness of these less exciting realities of teaching can be followed by feelings of ineffectiveness, loneliness, and alienation from the profession.

Mentoring has been identified as a critical factor in eliminating feelings of isolation experienced by first-year special education teachers. Effective mentoring encourages the development of mentor–mentee relationships that address first-year challenges (Condeman & Stephens, 2000). In addition to providing instructional support and helping the novice teacher over the hurdles of paperwork and general school tasks, the mentor has to exude encouragement, empathy, and compassion (Delgado, 1999; Rowley, 1999). Ultimately, the effective mentor nurtures and acts as a role model who reflects the five mentoring functions of teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling, and befriending (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Ganser, 1999).

Another possible antidote to loneliness and alienation experienced by many beginning professionals is socialization and collegiality, especially for novice teachers who find themselves in a new job and new community and with new colleagues who have replaced their trusted college friends. What role does socialization and collegiality play in the first-year teaching experience? Collegiality is recognized in the professional literature as one of the important variables in the successful first-year experience. Collegial isolation relates to burnout (Kilgore & Griffin, 1998; Miller et al., 1999; Rosenberg, O’Shea, & O’Shea, 1998), and Miller et al. emphasized the importance of leadership and collegiality to reduce stress, build confidence, and reduce feelings of isolation. Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) argued that opportunities for collaboration and dialogue among professionals might mitigate collegial isolation. In addition to the obvious effects of feelings of isolation, novice teachers need a supportive community to grow professionally in the workplace (Kilgore & Griffin).

The question arises: How do these risk factors affect the first-year special educator? An argument could be made that the challenges could be even more daunting for them. A special educator in the Kilgore and Griffin (1998) study reported a lack of collegial interactions and support from general education teachers. In the same study, a novice teacher commented that she experienced a sense of isolation as a teacher of students identified as emotionally or behaviorally disordered, but she felt much less isolated when she changed to an inclusion program working with students with learning disabilities. In all, the challenges of teaching students with disabilities might be exacerbated by lack of collegial support, and a lack of administrative support for special education teachers could translate into fewer opportunities for collegiality and mutual problem solving (“CEC Launches,” 1998).

Our purpose in this study was (a) to examine the extent of collegial and administrative support and related stress factors perceived by first-year special education teachers and (b) to determine whether there were any protective factors that made the first year of teaching successful. Insights garnered from interviews of first-year teachers might contribute to improving the first-year teaching experience and, consequently, improving teacher retention.

### Method

We sent letters introducing the research study to three special education directors in a midwestern state. The special education directors sent copies of the letter to first-year special education teachers and (b) to determine factors perceived by first-year special educators in the field. In 24-year-old Ann’s case, it was a mentor. Surviving the first year in special education requires leadership and direction that comes from a trusted and valued mentor. The relationship between the first-year teacher and the veteran must be close enough that truth can be expressed without fear. As Ann said, the mentor teacher must have the freedom to “tell someone when it doesn’t fly” while maintaining realistic expectations of the novice teacher (Kyle, Moore, & Sanders, 1999). Although most school districts appoint a mentor to a first-year special education teacher, few select those mentors based on criteria that are proven to meet the emotional needs of first-year teachers.

Ann’s assigned mentor spoke to her on three occasions during her first year as a resource teacher in a rural high school. At their most significant meeting, one required by the state, Ann said that her mentor was “there, that’s pretty much it.”

### Case Studies With Analytic Commentary

#### Ann: Needing a True Mentor

“I’ve had it. I need more support.” Standing in her small classroom that can barely accommodate 6 students at a time, Ann finds herself contemplating leaving the profession. She has not yet completed her 7th month in the field. When asked what kind of support she needed, Ann laughed sadly and said, “A mentor, a true mentor who cared about me.” The fact that her room is less than adequate or that her caseload exceeds 30 students is not as serious as the lack of emotional support she is experiencing.

What does it take to keep new special educators in the field? In 24-year-old Ann’s case, it was a mentor. Surviving the first year in special education requires leadership and direction that comes from a trusted and valued mentor. The relationship between the first-year teacher and the veteran must be close enough that truth can be expressed without fear. As Ann said, the mentor teacher must have the freedom to “tell someone when it doesn’t fly” while maintaining realistic expectations of the novice teacher (Kyle, Moore, & Sanders, 1999). Although most school districts appoint a mentor to a first-year special education teacher, few select those mentors based on criteria that are proven to meet the emotional needs of first-year teachers.

Ann’s assigned mentor spoke to her on three occasions during her first year as a resource teacher in a rural high school. At their most significant meeting, one required by the state, Ann said that her mentor was “there, that’s pretty much it.”
She provided him with pencil and paper in case he wanted to take notes. As it turned out, Ann was the only person who “participated” in the state workshop. This hardly satisfied the characteristics that research indicates are qualities of successful mentors (Kyle et al., 1999). The mentor, according to current literature, models exemplary teaching, communicates well, and works on building a trusting relationship that is congenial and helpful (Stroble & Cooper, 2001). Every beginning teacher, including special educators, wants to find the mentor to be helpful, concerned, and the source of empathy and unconditional support. Emphasis in the relationship must be on the ability to collaborate, with humor and optimism as essential qualities (Kyle et al.). When these qualities are absent, the novice teacher can find the loneliness overwhelming. The chasm of separation created when no relationship is formed between mentor and mentee is destructive. As Ann so aptly stated, “I feel that if I had a true mentor who cared about me, my stress level would be down. In my building, I feel so doomed. It has gone so far, the whole situation; there is no way to fix it now. I have seriously considered quitting on a daily basis.”

Sinda: Administrative and Staff Relationships

“What possessed me to become a special education teacher? I’m still trying to answer that question.” Sinda has just completed her first year as a special education teacher. Hired with a limited license, Sinda serves 55 high school special needs students in her classroom, which she describes as a converted closet. Sinda says that she loves the students but finds her situation overwhelming. She reports that if she only had a good relationship with other staff members and administrators, the job would be, in her words, “do-able.”

Sinda’s story is not new and points to lack of administrative support as one of the primary factors in the inability to retain teachers in the special education field. Problematic interaction between principals and beginning educators has been cited as an ongoing issue that is both critical and unaddressed (Byrne, 1998; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998; Kirk, 1998). A lack of understanding and a narcissistic approach to education on the part of administrators reflect the root of the problem.

“Here’s the thing,” Sinda said, “last year, I had a caseload of some 40 students, and was provided an aide. Now I have no aide, and I will have 55 students. I don’t understand.” Sinda, 39 years old when she was appointed to her first teaching job, feels that the administration does not show enough support for her and her students and that dollars and cents seem to take precedence over people. Sinda expressed her concerns to the administration over the course of several meetings. Perceived administrative distance created a lack of understanding between Sinda and both the principal and superintendent. The silence of her administration in response to her needs offset any possibility of a supportive relationship.

Without administrative support, it is more likely that educators will turn to other professions (Billingsley, 2003). Breakdown caused by dysfunctional relationships between administrators and teachers project a negative tone for the school and its occupants (Gersten et al., 2001). A climate such as this is the precursor to burnout. It is almost certain that emotionally destructive feelings accompanied by negative thoughts will follow (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Sinda continues to try to remain positive. However, the silence of the central office increases her dissatisfaction.

The tie that binds—a look at student relationships. Another important variable that was identified from Sinda’s response was the tie that may bind special educators to the job. Relationships with students and families have motivated some special educators to “hang on by a thread.” Such is the case with Sinda. She recalled an at-risk student, Cole, who had become “her student” after school. Because of the tutoring relationship, Cole was able to graduate with full credits, allowing him to participate in commencement with his class. Sinda’s sacrifice of time and gift of concern to her student brought a reward that tentatively maintained her resolve to continue toward completed licensure. She reported with a smile, “I got a nice letter from Cole’s family, thanking me for caring about their son.” More significant than the paycheck, and off-setting the silence between Sinda and administration, the benefits of relationships that Sinda experienced with students and parents made the probability of her return for a second year more likely. “I am blessed with a wonderful student body,” said this special educator, who signed a contract placing her in the field for a second year.

Emotional support is perceived as very important to special educators (Billingsley, 2003). Experienced special educators state that trust, excitement, and confidence have come only when they have believed that they are known and recognized as a person (Ganser, 1999).

Even one extremely supportive relationship with a student can inspire a special educator to stay on the job. She told of another student named Daniel. Daniel should “by no means be in school.” Daniel credits his staying in school to feeling at home in Sinda’s special education department. So does Daniel’s father. “That is very encouraging,” remarked Sinda. Sinda cited the experience of this “emotional reward” as yet another factor in her retention. Without emotional support, special educators have reported feeling disempowered, immobile, and consumed with thoughts of failure. In this highly emotional field, the hopelessness can turn into exhaustion, frustration, and ultimately guilt, causing special educators, like Sinda, to say that they question their professional choice (Byrne, 1998; Dedrick & Raschke, 1990; Frank & McKenzie, 1993).

Jenna: Relationships and Connection to Attrition

“My most positive experience with a special needs child came from a writing I received from Ashley. She wrote a poem that made me absolutely bawl for half an hour. The poem came straight from her life experience. It showed me that more often than I realize, my kids’ lives are much harder than anything that I will ever have to know. I am both blessed to be someone in their lives, and I also feel extremely inadequate when I think about how to teach these kids. Writings like Ashley’s are my paycheck.”

Passion and a love for students were not missing characteristics in Jenna’s first-year experience. By her own admis-
sion, Jenna remarked that her student’s willingness to relate her personal experiences on paper was her “paycheck.” However, Jenna questioned whether it would be enough to override her feelings of despair.

When asked to describe her experience with colleagues and administrators, Jenna was quick to say, “I don’t feel like I had enough interaction. I don’t know what I expected, but I feel like we could have worked more as a team.” Jenna’s remarks confirmed the feelings of Sinda and Ann. Whereas collegial support has been determined to be linked to retention (Miller et al., 1999), it is especially first-year teachers’ sense of isolation that necessitates support and assistance (Whitaker, 2000). Jenna elaborated on her experience with other teachers in the building. She said, “They were friendly enough, and ‘said’ they were available if I needed anything. But I was so overwhelmed; I didn’t even know what to ask for. I wish that I had had a closer relationship with my colleagues. That would have been helpful.”

Early in her first year, Jenna experienced what research documents as the early signs of burnout (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). She became preoccupied with negative thoughts about her own effectiveness, began to have physical problems such as insomnia, and began to emotionally detach from those in her environment.

Jenna described her feelings about her situation: “To quote Dickens, ‘It was the best of times and the worst of times.’ One student I had in particular used his IEP as an excuse to earn a 14% in his English class. He did two assignments. And the thing is, nearly every time I saw him in class, he was reading a quality novel. His class, he was reading a quality novel. The best of times and the worst of times.”

The opportunity to develop peer relationships may have made a difference for Jenna. Lack of commitment on the part of the mentor certainly is known to affect retention (Boyer & Gillespie, 2000). Despite the “paychecks” Jenna received from student achievements throughout her teaching year, Jenna turned in her resignation. She remarked that she was searching for what she was going to do with her life.

Providing emotional support to beginning teachers may have a powerful impact on subsequent teacher retention (Odell & Ferraro, 1992). In the case of Jenna, this has indeed been substantiated.

Cathy: Find Someone to Listen

“I don’t feel supported. I’ve just been placed here and dumped,” says Cathy, a first-year special education teacher at age 47. Her advice to all novice teachers in the field is “to talk to teachers, anybody. Find someone to listen. I’d like to hang in there. It’s just frustrating that I don’t have anyone to lean on right now. I guess it takes a while.”

Cathy’s story is no different from those of Ann, Sinda, and Jenna. She identified relationships, or the lack of those, as the root of her problems as a first-year teacher. Relationships with her students and parents were strained, and she was at a loss as to how to handle these. She had no mentor and admitted that there were times during the year that “I was so stressed out, I could’ve walked out.”

At the end of that first year, Cathy resigned. “For students, the year has ended up being a positive one. I have seen a lot of accomplishments in them. As for me, I still feel like I was dumped there. I didn’t have the support I needed. It was almost like I was overlooked. As a person, I feel like I am not important. I am not needed. I have resigned and hope the next person who comes into this job will feel that they are both needed and important. Otherwise, students will continue to have a new teacher every year. I was the fourth, I believe, in as many years. That is not good for students.”

Ray: A Success Story

“I couldn’t ask for better relationships than we have in our school. I have teachers that have been working some 30-odd years in the building, yet they look at the 26-year-old me and consider me the expert in my field. Then I’ve got an administration that makes you feel as if you are a part of the staff. They are not on a different table; the principal is right with you, involved in every process, and he makes you feel that your opinion is as important as anybody else’s. Relationships with the students are great. I am very fortunate. I count my blessings every morning when I walk in there. If there’s ever a problem, people at my school look at you and know that they are not going to give up and you are not going to give up. It works because we are a team.”

Research has acknowledged attributes that enhance first-year success. A positive outlook, resourcefulness, sharing experiences with others, and networking have been known to be critical to first-year survival (Conderman & Stephens, 2000). Ray’s story indicates that his school culture had already developed those emotional qualities needed to ensure successful retention of novice special educators. Contrasted with Ann, Sinda, Jenna, and Cathy, Ray described his first-year experience as a “blessing.”

Novice special education teachers have critical skills that they must develop during those first experiences as teachers. Dealing with problem students, classroom management, and excessive paperwork; knowledge of special education law; connecting with peers and administration; and scheduling conferences are only a few of the skills that they must develop (Maroney, 2000). With emotional support, it has been shown that new teachers clearly handle these hurdles and are able to perform the most important task: teaching.

Ray noted that during his first month, he was focused on learning how to do the job. “The first month, just getting used to the inclusion environment was different for me, because I did my student teaching in a self-contained classroom. Even more challenging was learning how to work with five different teachers in one level.” Ray indicated that, in addition to what they taught, he viewed how they conveyed content. Ray said he was the student in those first months: “I’d be raising my hand like one of the kids and saying, ‘What do I do?’ Learning the ins and outs of daily routine was challenging.”
Ray indicated that he had a strong mentor. However, in his situation, it was also the support of a team of teachers, the paraprofessional, and administrators that enabled Ray to establish relationships that promoted job satisfaction.

**First-Year Special Educators: The Measure of Emotion and the Effect of Relationships**

How important is emotion, and what effect does it have on first-year special educator retention? Collectively, research alludes to the critical nature of feelings. However, little has been done to focus directly on the relationship factor. For that reason, it could be considered important to take a closer look at what was found in the stories of Ann, Sinda, Jenna, Cathy, and Ray.

Recall that Ann desired leadership and direction from a mentor she could trust. Her need to be transparent with another human being indicated her greater need to be valued as a person. When Ann was not valued in this way, she felt discouraged. The impact of the affective was monumental. Quitting had become not a fleeting thought but one that consumed her mind.

Outwardly, Sinda’s point of contention may have appeared different from Ann’s. Sinda had been given a caseload that was unreasonable. She had made several attempts to communicate her concerns; although administration members had been willing to meet, they had been unable to respond. In that lack of response, Sinda perceived that her concerns were not important, that she was not important. This feeling of insignificance caused her to feel dissatisfied and to question her professional choice.

The factor that caused Sinda to return had to be one that could override feelings of insignificance and dissatisfaction. In this case, relationships with students and their parents made the difference. Sinda’s efforts to reach her students were affirmed by them. The emotional reward of established strong relationships was enough to keep Sinda in the field.

Jenna’s story had a not-so-happy ending. This was unfortunate, because her love for students was strong. Her ability to obtain student trust and confidence was notable. However, in all other areas, Jenna found the lack of socialization to be critical to her sense of desperation. The lack of follow-through on the part of educators who said they would help, the feelings of aloneness and being overwhelmed and inadequate all contributed to the negative aspects of working in the special education field overriding the positive ones.

Mixed feelings were the result of the emotional vacuum Jenna found herself in as a novice teacher. This vacuum led to a resignation that left Jenna disconcerted by the perceptions she had about herself. When last contacted, Jenna said she continues to question whether she will teach again.

These stories might be an indication of the need to take a closer look at relationships and their connection to retention of first-year special education teachers and, perhaps, teachers in general. Apparently, when relationships are poor, attrition is increased. Success has been perceived to be minimal at best.

However, in Ray’s case, it can be said that there is a much-overlooked solution. The success of Ray’s experience speaks for itself. All of the elements research deems necessary for success were a part of his experience. Ray was able to teach successfully because he had a strong mentor, a great team of teachers, students whom he felt close to, connections with administration, and an overall strong sense of belonging. Ray had a support system of strong relationships that did more than retain him for the next school year; his experience led him to believe that he had found his calling in life.

**Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research**

Although we are confident in the soundness of our methodology, this study does have limitations. First, the data are based on five respondents. The recurrent themes that emerged from these interviews, although consistent, should be confirmed in a larger pool of subjects. For example, it would be interesting to replicate this study with novice teachers representing different geographical and socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, an analysis incorporating interviews of more experienced teachers could provide insight into the temporal dynamics of burnout. Specifically, do positive teaching experiences early in a teacher’s career galvanize a teacher against burnout in later years or in a less supportive school in the future?

In this study of the experiences of first-year special education teachers, we found that strongly forged relationships and the accompanying feelings of emotional well-being are protective factors and critical to retention. Until the primary need of belonging has been met, first-year teachers seem to find that they do not have enough of anything else to encourage them to stay.

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, we can offer tentative observations on strategies that may be helpful for novice teachers, administrators, and mentor teachers to support a seamless induction into the teaching profession:

1. Mentoring is an important element in seeking to establish a strong sharing relationship between the mentor and first-year teacher.
2. Novice teachers should not need to rely on a single source of support, such as their mentor teachers. In addition to being supportive and helpful themselves, administrators need to foster a collegial environment.
3. Building administrators should be aware of the many stressors that novice teachers encounter. In addition to mentors, novice teachers would benefit from being assigned to buddy teachers to promote socialization.
4. Train novice teachers to recognize the importance of establishing relationships with students. Incremental progress and accomplishments of these students could be springboards for connections that retain both special educators and their learners.
5. Administrators should be cognizant that student–teacher relationships can be critical to student performance. When first-year special educators give up, so do their students. When students lose, there can be no winners.
6. Teacher educators should encourage networking and collaboration among students in their classes. Each class within a professional education sequence can provide an opportunity to practice establishing cooperative and supportive bonds with a new set of “colleagues” or fellow students. These skills could be important during...
first-year teaching, and the development of a support network may be critical for success and professional satisfaction.

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