

Breaking Through Isolation with New Teacher Groups

Learning to listen thoughtfully and deeply is an important part of becoming a teacher. New Teacher Groups give beginning practitioners a forum for being listened to as well.

I know it has been rough because it is the first year. And it is always going to be rough in your first year. But I never expected it to be like this. I never thought I'd feel so down and so incompetent. . . . There have been times this year where I felt so small I couldn't even scrape myself off the floor.

—Rebecca, a 3rd grade teacher

The first year of teaching is trying, even traumatic, for many beginning teachers. Moving from teacher-in-training to teacher-in-charge represents so painful a period in the professional lives of new teachers that it has its own name: *reality shock*. The term, however, does not adequately describe the arduous and perplexing experiences that new teachers face in school each day because it “suggests that it is

New Teacher Groups offer a safe place where beginning teachers can share their joys and frustrations.

only a very short shock . . . like a swimmer who must acclimatize to cold water” (Veenman, 1984, p. 144). Veenman contends that the reality shock that new teachers endure is “the assimilation of a complex reality which forces itself incessantly upon the beginning teacher, day in and day out” (p. 144).

Loneliness and lack of support further exacerbate the problems. Rebecca's story illustrates the devastating consequences of a novice's struggle with the complexities and contradictions of teaching within the isolated, individualistic culture of schools. Physical and social isolation have long been problems for teachers (Lortie, 1975). It seems that “almost without exception, teachers work in settings where the actual structure of the school building precludes much interaction among adults”

(Harris, 1995, p. 19). Also, the “invisible walls” created by the “culture of teaching” promote privacy and autonomy within the teaching profession (Britzman, 1986). The culture of teaching imposes unspoken rules; it is acceptable to talk about the weather, sports, and even sex or to “complain in general about school and the students,” yet “it is unacceptable for teachers to talk to each other about teaching and what goes on in classrooms” (Lieberman & Miller, 1984, p. 11). Given the sociocultural context of most schools, we can easily understand why beginning teachers feel isolated and are afraid to reveal uncertainties about their practice and reluctant to ask for assistance for fear of appearing inadequate.

We have created New Teacher Groups to offer a safe place where beginning teachers can voice their concerns, share their joys and frustrations, and help one another deal with problems. Establishing regularly scheduled times when new teachers can talk and listen to one another not only helps them cope with the many problems they encounter during their first year, but also gives them the chance to learn and grow professionally.

The New Teacher Groups

We adapted the framework for the New Teacher Groups from Caplan and Caplan's (1993) problem-solving model for group consultation. This model reduces isolation and provides teachers with collegial support from others who are experiencing similar difficulties. This noncoercive relationship with peers is especially important in a group setting with beginning teachers who are in a vulnerable position and sensitive to evaluative comments by supervisors and colleagues. By establishing a nonhierarchical power relationship with their peers, new teachers experience an open and honest exploration of issues.

We began our New Teacher Groups in fall 1995 with two main goals: to give beginning teachers a regularly scheduled opportunity to engage in professional dialogue with other new teachers and to investigate the teachers' perceptions of the groups to determine whether this method for providing professional support for first-year teachers is valuable.

In our first group were five elementary teachers from four schools. We added eight groups in 1996-97 and 1997-98, for a total of 49 elementary teachers from five school districts in central North Carolina. These school districts encompass urban, rural, and suburban areas

and serve children from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although we have had groups as small as three and as large as nine, a group of five or six is ideal.

Groups typically meet in one teacher's classroom on a biweekly basis and are led by one or two facilitators—a faculty member or a graduate student in teacher education or school psychology. The fact that the facilitators are "outsiders" with no power to evaluate the teachers is crucial to the success of these groups.

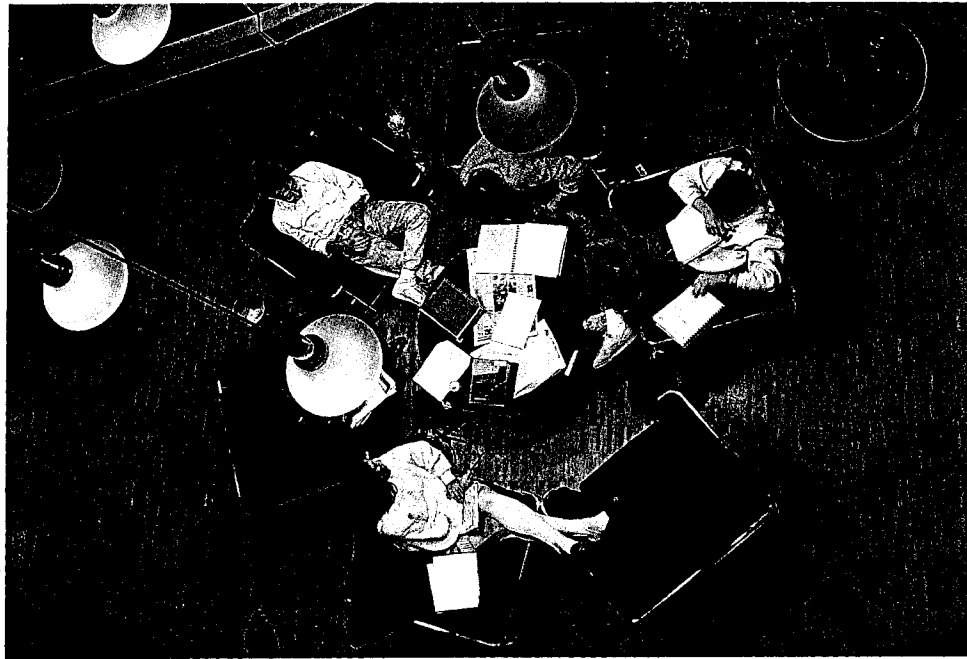
The Problem-Solving Process

Group meetings center on work-related problems raised by the teachers. We follow a problem-based discussion format in which a teacher shares issues and concerns. Under the guidance of the facilitator, the group then works to help the teacher better understand and resolve the problem.

To encourage group problem solving, the facilitators use the following structure to guide the discussions: (1) A teacher presents a problem; (2) the facilitator and the group try to help the presenting teacher gain a deeper understanding of the problem and generate alternative interpretations through asking information-seeking questions and pushing for clarification and further refinement of the problem; (3) once the problem is refined, the group assists the presenting teacher by brainstorming possible solutions and developing an initial plan of action; and (4) at subsequent meetings, the teacher reports on the success of the plan.

The Facilitator's Role

The facilitator encourages thoughtful dialogue about the problem presented to the group. The new teachers describe the role of the facilitator as "setting the tone for the group" and "helping us keep a focus." Others noted the importance of facilitators for guiding the problem-solving process because they help "you maintain your dignity by asking questions to guide you to your own answers" and "pull things out of



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you rather than tell you what to do."

The most difficult task for the facilitator is helping group participants ask questions that encourage the presenting teacher to define his or her problem more clearly. We emphasize this second step of the process because teachers are initially more eager to offer solutions, often based on personal experience, than to ask questions to gain a deeper understanding of the context and the complexity of the problem. With the guidance and modeling of the facilitator, teachers become better listeners and better questioners. Overall, they become more thoughtful about helping the presenting teacher define the problem before they begin making suggestions.

The Group Format

A typical agenda for a two-hour meeting follows:

1. Each teacher talks briefly about a problem recently encountered or shares a success story (15 minutes).
2. Teachers whose problems were discussed at the last meeting provide a follow-up report (20-30 minutes).
3. Two or three teachers volunteer to present a problem to the group (2 minutes).

4. The group engages in problem solving with the presenting teachers (20-30 minutes for each teacher).

5. The facilitator asks the teachers to write a brief evaluation of the meeting (5-10 minutes).

Not all New Teacher Group meetings follow this format. Like a good teacher, the facilitator must adapt the structure of each meeting to satisfy the needs of the teachers at that time. For example, we have devoted an entire session to assisting one teacher. At times, the problem-solving structure becomes restrictive, which requires the facilitator to refine it to meet the needs of a particular group. In general, though, this format is a powerful and productive way to structure the group discussion so that everyone has the opportunity to present problems and receive help.

Benefits of the New Teacher Groups

End-of-year interviews with the new teachers revealed that nearly two-thirds attended the meetings regularly for the personal and professional support they could not get anywhere else. Many participants believed that the New Teacher Groups were beneficial because they had the opportunity to

talk about and reflect on their teaching experiences with other first-year teachers, they were able to broaden their understanding of the teaching profession and learn new ideas to incorporate into their teaching repertoire, and they gained new perspectives on teaching and insights about themselves as teachers through the feedback they received during the problem-solving process. We were genuinely surprised by the importance the teachers placed on listening to their peers and having others listen carefully to them.

The Power of Being Heard

Although sharing personal stories about the classroom helps new teachers gain a deeper understanding of themselves, listening to other teachers talk is just as valuable. Opportunities to hear others' stories are integral to developing our identity (Harris, 1995). Coles (1989) claims that when we listen to others' stories, we share their lives by experiencing their joys, their pain, their perceptions almost as if we were seeing them through their eyes. Harris (1995) asserts that "we learn and grow by trying to understand what the story means to the teller and what it could mean to us" (p. 16). Yet, too often we diminish or ignore the importance of listening.

Not only is it valuable to listen to others but it is also immensely important to have others really listen to us. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist, claims that "it is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood" (Powell, 1969, p. 5).

New teachers are expected to listen carefully to administrators, parents, mentors, and other colleagues, who overwhelm them with advice on such topics as teaching strategies, state curriculum standards, policies and procedures of the school, and classroom discipline. Some of this advice may be welcomed and even helpful. The problem is that although new teachers must listen to others, seldom



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do others listen to them. And those few friends or relatives who will listen usually do not have enough interest or experience in teaching to listen intelligently and empathetically to novice teachers talk about issues concerning their school, their curriculum, or their students. As Marie, one of the New Teacher Group members, explains, "I tell my friends that my kids are writing sentences. They are excited, but it doesn't mean nearly as much to them [as it does to the group]."

This need to be "really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood" is especially important for beginning teachers who are struggling with competence, respect, and identity. "The ability to appear adequate and normal is one of your most precious possessions, but one that you must also grant to others" (Wardhaugh, 1985, p. 12). Giving new teachers the opportunity to listen to one another gives them the chance to be taken seriously and to appear adequate and normal at a time in their personal and professional lives when their confidence is shaken and they are constantly questioning their competence.

We are not suggesting that enrolling beginning teachers in New Teacher Groups will alleviate all the problems associated with the first years of teaching. However, we have discovered

that this simple idea—providing regular opportunities for new teachers to thoughtfully and seriously discuss their work—is powerful. These group gatherings are unlike any other meetings that new teachers attend because they have the chance to discuss and listen to issues about teaching, children, and their personal and professional selves. This kind of collegial discussion rarely, if ever, happens in schools.

Our goal is not to provide university and school personnel with a model to duplicate; instead, we hope to stimulate others to create supportive, nonevaluative settings in which new teachers can meet regularly to discuss problems and issues they encounter in their first years in the profession. ■

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Dwight L. Rogers (e-mail: dlrogers@email.unc.edu) is Associate Professor and **Leslie Babinski** is Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Education, Peabody Hall CB#3500, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3500.