

# **Beginning Teachers' Sphere of Influence: Honouring the Diversity of the Student- Learner**

**Submitted to:**

**Dr. Tony Townsend**

**Florida Atlantic University**

**International Congress for School Effectiveness and  
Improvement**

**February 2006**

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the implications of student diversity on the experiences of a cohort of beginning teachers from one school board in Ontario, Canada, based on a grounded theory research study. Further, it acknowledges the struggles of beginning teachers and the development of their professional capacities during their induction into teaching. More specifically, this article presents a unique finding of how beginning teachers exercised distinct dimensions of leadership to foster participatory learning environments in light of the vast cultural and academic diversity of their students.

## **Introduction**

The ability to competently address the vast array of student diversity in the classroom is a daunting task, particularly for beginning teachers. Though they enter the profession as graduates of preservice education programs that account for issues of diversity, many beginning teachers are startled by the range of differences that exist and its impact upon the perceptual world of the students. This article is based on a study that explored the experiences of 40 beginning teachers. What transpired was an exclusive synthesis of grounded theory research, since observations grounded in the data conceptualized the direction of the analyses (see Author, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although the study participants experienced the feelings of frustration, disappointment, and anxiety associated with the job of teaching, this article offers a unique finding in terms of how these beginning teachers exercised distinctive dimensions of leadership. More specifically, participants assumed leadership capacities that materialized into an awareness of their increased responsibility to foster inclusive communities of learning that honoured the diversity of each student.

### **Methodology**

The focus of the article is on a cohort of entry year elementary school teachers employed by the same school board in the Golden Horseshoe in southern Ontario (Canada). The board is in its 28th year of operation. It operates 37 elementary schools (from kindergarten to grade 8) and 9 secondary schools (from grade 9 to grade 12), educating a total of over 25,000 students. The participating school board was selected in part due to the vast cultural and socio-economic representation of its students. The schools consisted of heterogeneous populations that included students of Anglo-Saxon, western European, and Asian descent. Also, the board is an advocate of an inclusive

model of special education whereby all students, regardless of academic proficiency or physical exceptionality, are mainstreamed.

The study consisted of two groups—focus and survey participants respectively, (those who completed two surveys and participated in semi-structured interviews and those who completed the two surveys only). The study participants represented each of the board's 6 major districts. The bulk of the data consisted of 24 semistructured interviews. Four interviews were conducted with each of the 6 focus participants between October and May. There were four 2-day blocks of six interviews. Two survey instruments were also administered to all 40 entry year teachers in this study and were intended to serve as comparative data in light of the focus participants' responses.

The data were interpreted using the characteristics of analytical induction and constant comparison of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is not predictive about outcomes; instead, it is a systemized approach to formulating an inductive discussion about the relevant information and the complex relationship that emerges from the data. The theory is set within a research context and "typically set forth in terms of specific social structural conditions that support interaction, the consequences of interaction, and how interactions change over time" (Wells, 1995, p. 37). In this framework, data analysis was

like a discussion between the actual data, the created theory, memos and the researcher. Such discussion took place when the data was broken down, conceptualized and put together in new ways. The data gave rise to the codes and the categories which combined the codes. (Backman & Kyngas, 1999, p. 149; see also Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

It is not the intent of grounded theory research to test a particular theory. Instead, concepts were grouped to formulate preliminary categories. Categories were concepts that emerged when codes relating to a similar phenomenon were continuously juxtaposed with one another. Throughout the data collection, categories were modified and revamped to reflect the emerging details as the data were collected. It was a “constant process of reviewing the emergent model against the data” (Taber, 2000, p. 471). Analysis of the data concluded when all the variables were explored and each category saturated: whereby further data and examination did not impact upon the emerging patterns and theory (Audiss & Roth, 1999; Taber, 2000; Tamm, 1999). The process of selective coding distinguished one category into which all the other subcategories directly related. This core category was fundamental to the conceptual framework that the grounded theory was founded upon (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002; Tamm, 1999; Wells, 1995).

### **Findings**

Many of the findings described in this paper are consistent with other studies in that beginning teachers experience stressful experiences as classroom practitioners (see, for example, Huling, 1998; Odell, 1996), are subjected to inconsequential and inconsistent induction programs (see Renard, 2003; O.C.T., 2003ab), are reduced to being passive recipients of transmitted knowledge from their mentor (see, for example, Athanases & Achinstein, 2003; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000) and are forced to acclimatize themselves in school cultures that may not necessarily be reflective of school and organizational goals (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Olebe, 2005).

The grounded theory that emerged from the data of this study was identified as a paradox for beginning teachers of loving the idea of being a teacher, but not

necessarily liking the work as a teacher (Author, 2004). Participants struggled with effectively managing their time to meet the demands of the job, but refused to jeopardize their ideal of what it meant to be a teacher. It is not the intent of this article to trace the evolution of the respective codes and themes as they were saturated into a core category (the grounded theory); instead, the theory serves as the premise for the presentation of the study's exclusive findings.

To begin, participants admitted that they were initially quite aware of the fact that their classrooms would not consist of a homogeneous student demographic. What they did not anticipate was the degree of diversity that existed in their classrooms. One teacher stated,

I had students on an IEP (Individual Education Plan) and two kids with behavioural issues. But then the SERT (Special Education Resource Teacher) mentioned the red flagged students, those waiting to be tested [for an exceptionality], and those who had been but didn't quite qualify for an IEP. Then came the ESL (English as a Second Language) consultant too. Then the CYC (Child and Youth Counsellor) sat me down. Suddenly, it was just the first weeks of school and I didn't see my students as a class anymore, but individual cases in one room. When am I supposed to get to each of them?

Participants became stressed and anxious with the various professional challenges that competed for their time. One beginning teacher was candid in expressing their frustration in this regard:

Where am I supposed to find the time to do any work during the day? It's very hard. It's one of those things that you'd love to be able to do, but you can't really

find the time when you're in school.

Their ability to coordinate the multitude of clerical duties while tailoring lesson plans for the unique learning needs of their students became especially taxing as the school year progressed. As this participant stated,

I look at the kids and think, O.K., well, what do I need to do for this student, and this student, and this student? This is a real problem I have to deal with each and every day in my classroom, not my associate's room. And it's not like I was going in blind to all of this. They're so different, and I'm so new.

Participants repeatedly shared their concerns about meaningfully addressing the different cultural influences of their students without adequate support. According to one participant,

I had so many different [student] backgrounds just in my own classroom, not to mention the rest of the school. But these kinds of differences are not easy to deal with day in and day out. Those students are my responsibility. They are not one type or the same kind of child. It was hard to find someone to help me stay on track with what I knew I needed to do each day, and not lose my sanity during it all.

Curricular and extracurricular expectations also contributed to participants' sense of being overwhelmed. Participants became emotionally and physically spent adhering to the routines and expectations of *the job*.

If I were to sit back and just do my job, it [time management] would still be an issue. I want kids involved though. I'm spending 3 days a week doing intramurals and then the track team. I'm arranging for the graduation, and I've

done swim meet...I take work home every night because I know I haven't reached every kid and this overwhelms me. I have to pretend that I have a life.

Participants admitted that they struggled with focussing on student achievement. They experienced significant stress addressing students' learning abilities. The perception existed that workshops did not properly in-service them in addressing the needs of at-risk and special education students. One beginning teacher said,

There was no support for helping us look after all the extreme differences in learning from one student to the next. There wasn't anyone accessible enough. I'm sitting there, you know, wondering what these students' problem areas are, what their curriculum needs are, and then there are all the social issues too.

They all have some it seems.

Participants commented that the high proportion of ethnic groups consisting mainly of new immigrants, were perceived by some teachers as being onerous to teach. One interview participant stated quite frankly that,

I was especially surprised by the old jaded teachers. "I've paid my dues", they'd say in the staff room. It's your turn to try and get through to them. I don't have that kind of energy any more." It's strange listening to teachers saying that kind of stuff.

Given the challenges of the job, however, participants acknowledged the necessity of sustaining a strong commitment to understanding students' multicultural perspectives while asynchronously catering to their development as learners. Participants respected the diversity of their students and acknowledged their responsibility to assume an active role in shaping students' learning. As one participant stated, "School can definitely overrun my personal life, but I'm here to most benefit the

needs of all these kids.” Participants readily distinguished their capacities as having had significant influences on children’s lives, but were candid in expressing their frustration with having to “keep up” with their teaching-partners to ensure that all curriculum expectations were consistently met. Another participant said, “some days I felt I had to be on the same page as them [other teachers]. But that just didn’t feel right. I looked at my students and knew they were coming from different places.”

The beginning teachers in this study recognized that the demographic composition of their classrooms implicated their pedagogical practice. They understood their responsibility to model the principles of equity and cultural congruence within their classrooms. As one beginning intermediate teacher stated,

there were those uncomfortable times when things didn’t go as I planned and someone would say something that ruffled a few feathers and I could see them all just sitting there frozen for a minute just looking. They know that at the end of the day they are all pretty different. There I was – the teacher, the adult, the one who is supposed to have all the answers.

Participants commented on numerous occasions of the difficult but essential task of establishing and then maintaining what one participant described as “a feeling” that all students, regardless of their differences, were assimilated into the “chemistry of the classroom.” They understood that part of their mandate as educators was to integrate all pupils into the classroom thereby inviting students to be active participants in their learning environments. One participant, among others, suggested that,

I wanted to find common ground for my students, and I wanted that common ground to be the classroom. I took opportunities to explain to them that there are strengths in your differences, and I tried to take it down to their level. I

figured that's where I had to start, and I can say now that I didn't really let up all year.

### **Discussion**

It was clear that participants struggled to negotiate the paradox of loving the idea of being a teacher, but not necessarily liking the work as teacher. The manifestation of the capacities that emanated from this tension was what I identified as a process of leadershiping (Author, 2005). These beginning teachers, at various times and under varied circumstances, exercised their influence in the classroom and school community in informal roles as lead teacher, as leader of initiatives, and as models of leadership capacities (representing the leadershiping concept as noun, verb, and adjective.

Participants were willing to take the lead by inviting students to openly discuss their cultural differences. Participants perceived themselves as valuable lead persons in facilitating networking opportunities with other entry year teachers to share their approaches to the task of functioning conterminously with the reality that not all students learn the same, but teachers are expected to cover the same curriculum at the relatively same pace as their colleagues. Last, participants reported a heightened awareness as the school year progressed of students' unique learning styles and as a result, assumed lead roles by collaborating to design specifically adapted lessons with other faculty.

Participants' influence as leaders in benefiting the learning experience of all students was founded upon a genuine respect of students' differences as individuals and learners. They exerted their influence as leaders by accounting for how students' interests and past experiences with the prevailing social conventions of schooling impacted upon their learning experiences.

You can't separate who they are and where they've been with what each of them

brings to the table. You know, we are told by the principal about this and that student's living conditions and home life and I just wonder where some of these little people find the courage to be here. But they got to learn, and I have to teach them.

Establishing genuine connections with others through the various leading roles was discussed by participants in view of benefiting students, and particularly those considered to be a high-risk of completing their secondary education. These were opportunities, according to participants, to foster positive self-images in those students who struggled with the academic rigor of traditional schooling. As one beginning teacher described,

It's kind of sad that you can see it in some of them even in elementary school. I mean, they're here, but they're not here. And their parents are not exactly the type to be knocking on your door the day after report cards go home. How loud are we saying, "I'm here for you too?"

Serving in these leading roles allowed participants to arrive at a more complete and empathetic understanding of the student as an individual and as a learner.

Further, serving in these leadership capacities lent themselves to the creation of invitational classrooms that these beginning teachers sustained out of respect for their students' learning, ethnic, and personality differences. While managing the complexities of student diversity bordered on overwhelming, they exercised their leadership capacities to distinguish between a common curriculum and student differences. They recognized that common standards and common assessments have strong political implications on education, and equally strong connotations in terms of eroding the diversity of students' cultural, gender and proficiency differences. "School has this way", one participant reflected,

of reminding some kids that they don't belong. I never thought about it until I was the one at the front of the class pigeon-holing students based on what they couldn't do. I was, like, what's wrong with this picture?

They observed, reflected, and engaged in constructive professional capacities to make their classrooms more invitational and accepting for all students.

### *Beginning Teacher Sphere of Influence*

Study participants understood that student diversity, given all its complexities in the classroom, had to be meaningfully accounted for in order to create optimal learning conditions. Their focus, then, became on establishing communities of belonging. Participants acknowledged student differences and understood the positive impact of tapping into students' integrative capabilities. It became a mainstay of their practice to sustain participatory learning environments, even at the risk of lagging behind the pace of their teaching partner. These beginning teachers felt responsible for raising students' tolerance and acceptance of individual differences. As one participant suggested,

I know that they know that they are different. After some time, I thought of what was expected of me and what I should be doing and I just began looking at it through different eyes. Then, it was like a light at the end of a tunnel 'cause I

finally got it. I have a totally different perspective on everything I'm doing, and everything that I can do."

Another noteworthy implication of the study's findings was the participants' sensitivity to presenting learning opportunities whereby students themselves could contextualize meaning according to personal experience. As this beginning teacher stated, "I had to find out what makes them [the students] tick. You know, how to bring what I'm teaching to what they can relate to." Participants perceived student diversity as inter-relational in their classrooms. One participant stated,

The ability to call someone in my class right away and know that they are relaxed enough in my class with who they are to answer. It's an amazing feeling to be able to pat someone on the back and help with their confidence. To tell that student that it's alright to take a guess, especially when you know that in September they never would have said it for fear of sticking out even more from the others.

Participants commented that student relations became increasingly positive as did students' potential to engage in contextually relevant learning. Given the decisive influence they had in the classroom, and in some cases beyond, participants in turn empowered students with opportunities for self-expression:

A couple of my kids kept telling me that I just don't get it. That it doesn't work for them that way. Well, I realized that the only way I was going to get around this was to invite those kids to tell me all about it. Finally I said, "you're right, I don't." And I gave them the floor. Guess what? We all learn something this way.

Students were provided with reciprocal learning opportunities in order to construct what was personally relevant. Participants resolved themselves to facilitate a collaborative and active participatory classroom model despite the demands of the job of teaching. As one beginning teacher said,

You have to juggle and know how to prioritize what's good for these students both alone and together. Some nights the other teachers tell me that I should go home. There are days when I feel that it's a nearly impossible job.

Participants were committed to ensuring students felt a genuine sense of belonging in both their classrooms and in the school community. Their paradigms were especially challenged when they publicly advocated for a student in the presence of colleagues who did not necessarily share their perspective. As one participant recalled, "there were those days when I wasn't exactly the most popular teacher in the staff room. But, hey, I'm here for the kids, right?" Participants did not hesitate to be a voice for their students. They had no reservation about speaking on behalf of those students in the school community who were the most misunderstood, and from their perspective, the most readily forgotten. It was interesting that beginning teachers often associated their impressions of feeling disconnected from the majority of their colleagues with those students who were disengaged from their peer group. Such an association gave participants further license to foster student development. It also assisted these relatively inexperienced teachers to create a repertoire of activities that enabled the confidence of these socially challenged students.

## Conclusion

The theory that emerged from this study was grounded in beginning teachers' experiences during their induction into the profession. It revealed that despite the challenges and anxieties of their first year of practice, they were able to distinguish the tangible impact that student diversity had on the learning environment and the sensitivity that was required to validate the complexity of the participatory learning environments they strove to sustain. This analysis embraces the concept of teacher as leader both in its theoretical underpinnings and in practical application. It especially underscores, however, the distinct leadership capacities of beginning teachers who managed to crystallize their profound obligation to advocate for the most diverse of students amidst the quagmire of responsibilities that consumed them of time and energy.

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