

# **The Lived Experience of Public School Teachers: Novice to Expert**

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## *Introduction and background*

Recruiting, preparing, and retaining highly effective teachers will be one of the greatest challenges our nation faces in the next decade because of current federal mandates governing teacher quality. With the enactment of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (Public Law 107-110) the qualifications of a teacher were defined through credentials specifically, a college degree, a teacher's certificate and any of several measures which document knowledge about an academic subject. None of these credentials address the teacher's ability to teach his subject to students. The teacher's effectiveness in teaching students is not part of the credentials as a Highly Qualified Teacher (P.L. 107-110). Based on the NCLB criteria, an inexperienced graduate with a Bachelor's degree and a passing grade on a state teacher's certification exam meets the current federal criteria to be a Highly Qualified Teacher.

A graduate who was not a teacher candidate in college, never took methods or pedagogy classes, who never completed a day of supervised field experience or invested a day in student teaching, could still be classified as a Highly Qualified Teacher. By finding a job teaching the subject for which he holds a college degree and while enrolling in an alternative teacher certification program, this graduate may be classified as a Highly Qualified Teacher for up to three years while attempting exams for state certification or licensure. While this is an extreme example, it satisfies criteria for the Highly Qualified Teacher established by the U.S. Department of Education (P.L. 107-110). Keller (2007) stated that labeling a teacher as Highly Qualified does nothing to make him an "effective" teacher.

In a study of 900 Texas school districts, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) found that teacher expertise accounted for 40% of improvement in student achievement in reading in grades one to seven. The Aspen Institute Commission on NCLB (AICNCLB) (Aspen Institute Commission on NCLB, 2007) reported that, "the effects of teacher quality are cumulative" (p. 30). A three year study in Dallas Independent School District found that students who were taught by effective teachers for three consecutive years demonstrated above expected gains on standardized tests each year of the study. Conversely, groups of similar students taught by less effective teachers demonstrated decreasing progress each of the three years of the test (AICNCLB, 2007).

School accountability and teacher effectiveness are often measured through student performance on high stakes tests. Boyd (1991) repeated the common assertion that there were three types of teachers, natural born teachers, bad teachers, and those that ought not be teachers. Is teaching expertise a talent or innate ability, simply the result of experience, or something that teachers learn? This study sought to understand how effective teachers set themselves apart from other highly qualified teachers.

## *Literature Review*

A review of the literature focused on several topics which may impact a teacher's "effectiveness." Teacher expertise, experience, attrition and retention of teachers in the practice, and growth and development from "novice to expert" within a profession, specifically teaching were investigated.

Lopez (1995) compared student achievement with teacher capacity. This author investigated 6,000 Texas public school teachers and the standardized test achievement data for their 1 00,000 students.

Lopez's study found that student achievement increased each of the first seven years of a teacher's career. In the seventh year of teaching, teachers appeared to have reached their capacity for effectiveness, as the yearly increases in student performance plateaued. According to Lopez, beginning in the 17th year of their career, a small decline in student performance was observed for each year over the remainder of their teaching career.

David Berliner (2002) reported that anecdotal evidence from teachers in the U.S. noted that three to five years of experience were required for a new teacher to not be surprised by what happened in his school or classroom. Berliner defined "not being surprised in one's work environment" as an indicator of competence (p. 201).

*Recruiting, preparing and retaining teachers.* Recruiting, preparing and retaining highly effective teachers is one of the greatest challenges facing our nation today and through the next decade. The 2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (Reynolds & Thomson, 1999) completed on behalf of the Department of Education (DOE) reported 70% of teachers who left the profession did so for reasons other than retirement. Additionally, In 2005 Alliance for Excellence in Education (AEE) reported that 50% of new teachers left the profession by the end of the fifth year.

In 2006, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) reported that an all-time record 53 million students entered school. Increasing enrollment was projected to continue at the same level over the next decade. With this new wave of enrollment, the public schools of our nation could soon fill to capacity, or even overflow (NCSL). Additionally, NCSL reported that according to the Census Bureau, more than half of the nation's teachers were over 45 years of age. This means that half of the nation's public and private school teachers were expected to retire during the next 10 years (NCSL, 2006). In a 2006 report commissioned by the White House, the DOE warned that with the combination of record enrollment and retirement, school districts would need to hire 2.2 million new teachers during the next 10 years (White House, 2006).

*Cost to replace teachers.* The AEE removed retirees from their analysis of the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 National Center for Educational Center data (AEE, 2005). These researchers concurred that 13% of a typical school's faculty would not return for reasons other than retirement. When AEE utilized guidelines provided by the U.S. Department of Labor which estimated attrition costs employers 30% of the employee's salary, it was found that teacher attrition cost U.S. schools \$4.8 billion in 2001.

*Novice to Expert.* Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) reported to the National Academy of Teacher Preparation Committee on Teacher Preparation that many new teachers were unprepared to meet the challenges they faced. These authors recommended that teacher education programs must learn how a teacher's practice develops. Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden reported that new teachers progressed through several stages of development from novice to expert. These authors cautioned that those new to the profession must move beyond "acting" like a teacher and learn to "think" like a teacher.

A number of researchers suggested that teachers progressed through stages of development before becoming highly effective in their professional practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994; Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1991). Some researchers indicated it takes about three to five years of professional experience for a new teacher to demonstrate competence in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Eraut, 1995). Lopez (1995) found that student performance improves for each of the first seven years of a teacher's career before reaching a level which represented his capacity as a teacher. Several researchers have found that teachers required several years to feel fully prepared (Berliner, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Palmer, 2007). Education experts suggested that completion of neither a traditional college teacher preparation program nor an alternative certification program prepares new teachers for the challenges they faced (Berliner, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Feiman-Nemser, 2001, 2003).

Dreyfus (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985) found that, in general, new professionals in any area required four to five years to make the transition from novice to "competent" in their professional practice. Some were able to increase their knowledge and skill to reach a stage described as "expert". Dreyfus' novice to expert skills acquisition model described five identifiable stages through which a novice progresses in becoming an expert in his field: (a) novice, (b) advanced beginner, (c) competent, (d) proficient, and (e) expert. He

recognized that the earliest stages of skills acquisition (novice, advanced beginner and competent) were characterized as the "know what" stages while the later stages (proficient, and expert) are "know how" (Dreyfus, 1965).

#### *The Study*

This study investigated the lived experiences of public school teachers by examining the impact of varying years of teaching practice, comparing the differences based upon assignment (elementary or secondary) and by investigating their lived experiences as a teacher. By investigating the lived experiences of public school teachers at various stages of their career, this researcher sought to understand how "effective" teachers set themselves apart from other highly qualified teachers.

#### *Theoretical Basis*

This study utilized hermeneutic phenomenology to uncover the lived experiences of public school teachers of varying experience. Phenomenology is founded on the concept that through inquiry, one may move past awareness of things, experiences or understandings to arrive at the very essence of the thing itself or the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Sokolowski, 2000; Shank, 2002). Shank (2002) discussed how for Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology was the uncovering of the awareness of a world view or lived experience through studying written records. Creswell (2007) described hermeneutic phenomenology as using texts to make sense of the phenomenon which are our lived experiences.

Dreyfus' Novice to Expert theory provided the theoretical framework for this study (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Dreyfus' theory describes the behavior and rationale for the behavior at five stages of skill development from novice to expert. In the Skills Acquisition theory, individuals with less than three years experience were considered to be novice. Those with three to five years experience may be expected to demonstrate the behaviors which describe one who is competent. According to Dreyfus' theory, with more than five years experience, one may potentially develop skills to the level described as expert. Dreyfus' labels were used to identify each of the three groups of teachers differentiated by years of experience.

Dreyfus observation of the human condition suggested the minimum amount of experience required for a professional to move from novice to expert. The two year novice stage with an additional three years gathering even more experience in the competent stage are best case scenarios. His theory includes the disclaimer that few will actually reach the expert stage. Many professionals will reach some level of expertise that they will never exit, no matter how much experience they collect (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986).

#### *Data Collection*

Data were collected from information contained in the 2008 Teacher of the Year (Texas Education Agency, 2007) application. Seven Teacher of the Year applications were obtained through a request for public records submitted to the Texas Education Agency. Eight applications were solicited from teachers through public school administrators known by the researcher. The Teacher of the Year Application (TEA, 2008) provided the seven essay prompts. In addition, a section of the application collected information about demographics, preparation, honors, and information about the city or town, district and school where the applicants practiced.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

Applications were collected from a purposive stratified sample of 15 respondents who were all teachers at public schools across Texas served by 12 of the 20 Regional Educational Service Centers. Among the respondents were five "novice" teachers with less than three years classroom teaching experience, five "competent" teachers with from three to five years teaching experience, and five "expert" teachers with more than five years teaching experience. Among the respondents were female (n = 13, 87%) and male (n = 2, 13%) teachers. Respondents taught at elementary (n = 9, 60%) and secondary (n = 6, 40%). Four respondents taught in urban areas, and four taught in suburban areas. Five taught in county seat towns and two were from rural areas.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method for qualitative data analysis. Colaizzi's method established a strict procedure to follow which resulted in uncovering the meaning contained in the

qualitative data. This method was outlined in a series of steps: the texts were read and re-read, and words, phrases and fragments about how the informant experienced the topic were listed to create a non repetitive, non-overlapping list of statements (categories); the statements were grouped into meaning units (subthemes); the researcher reflected on his own descriptions to group the meaning units by varying frames of reference to construct a description of how the phenomenon was experienced (major themes); the researcher then constructed an overall description of the essence of the phenomenon (overarching theme ).

Data for this study was analyzed utilizing Qualrus™ software. Utilizing Qualrus™ software for qualitative analysis assisted in providing an auditable trail. This trail confirmed that the analysis process was followed and provided the means by which other researchers may follow the same process to corroborate findings.

### *Findings*

Teachers who provided responses for this study described the experience of being a public school teacher from three perspectives: "Who I Am," "What I Do," and "External Factors" that influenced their teaching practice. These same three themes were repeated for all respondents regardless of the amount of teaching experience. Responses varied with experience. This study did not identify major differences in the lived experience between public school teachers with teaching assignments at the elementary and secondary levels.

*Who I Am.* Teachers identified traits that described the characteristics of the person who is a teacher. All respondents cited a role model, a former teacher or a family member who was a teacher whom they desired to emulate. A novice commented, "I have wanted to be a teacher since I was about five years old. I have two aunts and an uncle that were teachers at that time and I always helped them fix up their rooms for the new year." A teacher with 5 years experience added, I have always loved to read. I have also always been a good student. I love to learn new things but I had never imagined myself becoming a teacher until late in high school. I had always believed I would become a lawyer or a psychologist. But that all changed when my high school hired a new English teacher who taught my Honors English class; she was the speech coach, and the director of all the school plays. Somehow, this law bound student became involved in a wonderful new world of literature, creative writing, speech and drama." Other traits included a passion for the subject they taught or teaching in general, participation in community service, and valuing education.

*What I Do.* Teachers described the activities and behaviors associated with the role of teaching. All teachers had high expectations for their students. Teachers described making lessons fun and caring as activities to facilitate student learning. "My students in my class this year are wonderful. They enjoy coming to school, they are hardly ever absent, and love reading and math. My students may not remember that I taught them their sounds and letters, but they will remember that I cared about them," was offered by a first year teacher. All teachers accepted responsibility for the academic success of the students in their class. A fourth year teacher related, "I come in early or stay late. I give up lunch hours and conference periods. I do whatever it takes to insure that instruction and learning occurs regardless of the bumps we may hit along the way."

*External Factors.* Respondents described issues and policies, people and events beyond the classroom that affected teaching and learning. An experienced teacher said, "My duties do not end when I drive away from school. My students know that I am "on call" at all times for them." Another experienced teacher offered, "Ask any teacher why did he or she leave teaching, and the answer is always the same - the money, or should I say the lack of money . . . Salaries are simply not high enough to attract and keep the best educators behind a school desk." The emphasis on standardized testing, specifically the state exam mandated by NCLB to assess school accountability was cited as a disruptive factor to teaching and learning for both teachers and students, as cited by a second year teacher, "As soon as children come to school they are told about THE TEST. I taught kindergarten last year and they had even heard about a TEST." Parental involvement and support for education was universally viewed as inadequate among teachers. Teachers associated long or un-paid hours, low pay, and inadequate funding for education in general with lack of respect from legislators and the public in general.

*Over-arching themes.* "Bittersweet" ultimately became the overarching theme that summarized the collective conceptualizations reflected from the experiences of novice teachers. Bittersweet encompasses the three major themes and underlying descriptors to characterize the individual who is a novice teacher; what he does, and external factors which effected teaching and learning. "Bittersweet" captures in a single word the essence of what the five novice teachers may jointly declare, "I always wanted to be a teacher, and I enjoy what I do, but this is not what I expected."

"Self-confident" was identified as the overarching theme which synthesized the collective experiences of the competent teachers. The three major themes and many of the sub-themes which were identified from the submissions of competent teachers were similar to the findings of teachers with more or less experience. Three categories were identified only among competent teachers: "confidence," "possessiveness" and "group focus." Competent teachers generally expressed their world view of teaching in the possessive tense. They laid claim to and took responsibility for their territory which included their teaching assignment, their classroom, and their students. They were confident in their mastery of the ability to teach the group of students who were their class. "Self-confident" captured the essence of the lived experience of the competent teachers who may jointly state that they were, "Self confident to teach my class."

The lived experience among experienced teachers was synthesized as "teach each child." Expert teachers were characterized as one committed to excellence, well grounded in family and spiritual values, and passionate about what they did. They completed advanced academic preparation, remained current in their discipline, and mentored, led, or shared with fellow teachers. Expert teachers focused on the student by caring for each student. They made learning fun but maintained discipline while respecting each student. Experts held high expectations and expected students to achieve academically. They were concerned about the state of the profession, especially how funding affected attracting and retaining experienced, effective teachers. Expert teachers actively nurtured communication with and were respected by students and parents. They strove to improve teaching by sharing their knowledge with other teachers and through facilitating teaching and learning for each student.

#### Conclusions

Certification is not the end, but the beginning of the journey to become an effective teacher. Public school teachers are found to have different needs as they progress through various stages of development in their profession. This study found that the attitudes and focus of a teacher changes over time with experience. As a result, teachers have different needs at different stages in their career. To facilitate faculty improvement and address the problem of educator drop-out, educator preparation programs should include growth and development in the profession as part of educator training. Hanssen and Ostrem (2003) found that administrators and mentors may guide a teacher with less experience along the path toward effectiveness and expertise. It may be beneficial for Principals and other administrators to differentiate teacher expectations and professional development training as appropriate to address the developmental needs of their teachers.

For novice teachers left alone without guidance, there is no promise the path the inexperienced teacher chooses will lead him toward attaining either effectiveness or expertise. Wenger (1991) noted that in the communities of practice novice to expert model, a novice may and frequently does, select an experienced colleague who is not necessarily effective, and who practices many undesirable behaviors as their role-model.

This study supported Dreyfus' (1986) Skills Acquisition theory as applicable in the special case of skills acquisition and progression through definable stages of novice to expert among public school teachers. Educator preparation programs may relate these findings to candidates preparing to enter the profession and advise new teachers to identify a mentor who can help them reach the goal of becoming an effective teacher. This study may also serve as a guide to campus administrators to provide effective leadership to faculty members of differing amounts of experience in their role of campus instructional leader.

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