

9-1-2010

# The Analysis of an Unsuccessful Novice Teacher's Induction Experiences: A Case Study Presented Through Layered Account

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*Although induction support is heralded as an effective way to reduce high attrition among beginning teachers, nationwide increases in induction participation have not been accompanied by a comparable reduction in attrition rates. This inconsistency suggests some induction programs may not provide adequate support. This article presents the results of a case study that explored the experiences of a beginning teacher who left the profession despite participation in an induction program. The research question was: "Why was Stella unsuccessful in her second year of teaching?" The results are presented through the postmodern ethnographic method of layered account (Ronai, 1997). In addition to raising questions about how to effectively support new teachers, this article includes a discussion of methodological limitations, ethics, subjectivity, and researcher response to participant distress. Key Words: Induction, Struggling Teachers, Case Study, and Layered Account*

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## **Introduction**

Less than five months into her teaching career Stella proclaimed, "I'm ready to be done with this whole stupid induction thing!" These ominous words came from a participant in a qualitative study about first-year teachers' induction experiences (Fry, 2007). Although Stella's school offered an induction program with components that have been identified as effective in beginning teacher retention (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), implementation was problematic, and Stella looked forward to the end of the program that was supposed to support her. Despite her frustration with the program, Stella felt successful during her first year of teaching and received positive, constructive feedback and evaluations from her administrator.

When Stella returned for her second year of teaching, her induction program was over, and she had a new administrator who provided less feedback. She was disheartened because she had come to value and to rely on regular support and evaluation from her first administrator. At the end of the school year, after no informal feedback and seemingly positive formal observations, Stella was surprised to be informed her contract would not be renewed. Stella resigned from her position at the conclusion of her second year of teaching, joining the ranks of former teachers reflected in new teacher attrition statistics.

## Related Literature

A teacher's induction period consists of student teaching through the first three years of teaching (Odell & Huling, 2000). Support during this time is referred to as induction and the support is delivered through what is often referred to in the literature as induction programs. For clarity, in this article the term *induction* is used to refer to both the time period and the actual support provided to novice teachers.

Effective induction programs help beginning teachers successfully adjust to their demanding profession. The form of induction support varies in different school districts, but some of the most common characteristics include providing a new teacher with a mentor, ideally a veteran teacher with experience in the same grade or content area; common planning time with other teachers in the same grade or content area; and participation in seminars for beginning teachers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Induction can help socialize beginning teachers into the profession, creating lifelong learners who use collegial relationships to improve their teaching. Rosenholtz (1989) stated:

Beginners who are offered help and who see requests and offers of assistance regularly exchanged between senior colleagues are socialized to accept school norms about the way in which one learns to teach. Under these conditions, novices perceive that advice is legitimately required to achieve instructional goals, that mutual assistance is often needed to attain them, and that they should avail themselves of collegial resources whenever possible. (p. 431)

The supportive elements of induction can help preservice teachers learn to be collaborative professionals, which in turn supports the primary goals of induction: reducing attrition and promoting the success of beginning teachers (Rauth & Bowers, 1986).

While attrition rates in the United States indicate that nearly 30% of teachers leave the profession during the first three years of their careers (Luekens, Lytter, & Fox, 2004), successful induction programs retain more than 90% of new teachers during those years (Legan & De Witt, 2001). Such high retention rates and more than two decades of literature praising induction (Brock & Grady, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Huling-Austin, 1986; Mager, 1992) have had a nationwide impact. Nearly 80% of first-year teachers in the United States participated in some form of induction during the 1999-2000 school year – an increase of approximately 40% from a decade earlier (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

The increase in induction participation ought to be good news as it should help reduce attrition along with the resulting financial costs and negative impact on student learning. The national estimated cost of replacing teachers who leave the profession is an astounding \$2.2 billion annually (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005), and high attrition contributes to the shortage of quality teachers in the United States (Harrell, Leavell, van Tassell, & McKee, 2004). The bad news is that attrition rates have not declined along with increased induction participation rates. This inconsistency may mean many new induction programs do not provide quality support experiences that reflect research-based recommendations or other variables may complicate or undermine the

potential benefits of a supportive induction process.

Given the high costs of attrition, the expense associated with offering induction programs, and consistently high attrition rates despite increased induction participation, there is a clear need for the educational community to examine potential shortcomings with how induction is implemented. Without such critical evaluation, high attrition rates seem likely to continue. The purpose of this article is to respond to this imperative by examining the experiences of a young teacher named Stella, the beginning teacher whose story began this article. While the literature documents the benefits of induction support and the challenges novice teachers face without support, research illustrating the challenges faced by novice teachers *despite* induction support appears undeveloped.

Stella joined the attrition statistics despite participation in an induction program that had elements designed to support her retention. The case study of Stella's experiences provides readers with an opportunity to consider the complexity of negotiating the challenges of the first years of teaching from the perspective of a new teacher who was unsuccessful in this journey. As Shank and Vilella (2004) remind us, "we do qualitative research initially not because of competing models of understanding, but because we believe that our understanding of the areas in question is too superficial or incomplete" (p. 50). Their words support the value of qualitative inquiry as a means of making sense of an individual novice teachers' induction experience since our current understandings do not explain the inconsistency of increased induction offerings and stable attrition rates. Specifically, Stella's experiences demonstrate how one teacher left the profession despite a supposedly supportive induction program, and thus offers insights into the contradiction posed by increasing induction participation rates being met with stable attrition rates. The section that follows describes the methods used to answer the questions: Why was Stella unsuccessful in her second year of teaching? Was her induction program flawed, did she lack the requisite skills needed to be a teacher, or did other factors lead to the early end of her teaching career?

## Methods

The data for this article was collected over a period of three years as part of two separate studies. The first study was conducted for my doctoral dissertation, which was about the impact an induction network had on a group of preservice teachers' student teaching experiences (Fry & Bryant, 2006-2007). The second study about four beginning teachers' induction experiences (Fry, 2007) was conducted while I was an assistant professor at a different university.

## The Participant

I used purposive sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to identify Stella as a participant. She was part of a group of candidate elementary teachers I had taught in a content methods course during the first semester of her senior year of college. She and with her classmates were recruited to participate in the initial study about induction experiences during student teaching (Fry & Bryant, 2006-2007). Since Stella demonstrated strong reflective capabilities and thoughtfully discussed her teaching verbally and in writing, she, along with three other participants with strong reflective

skills, were recruited for the second study (Fry, 2007). Stella grew up in a rural community and also spent the two years of her career teaching fifth grade in a rural community. She had student taught in second grade and found the transition to teaching upper-elementary children difficult.

### **Research Design: Case Study**

The two studies used a similar research design: case study. Merriam (1998) defined a case as “a phenomenon that is inherently bounded, with a finite amount of time for data collection or a limited number of people who could be interviewed or observed” (p. 27). This made case study an appropriate choice for both studies for practical reasons: Stella and the other participants only had one four-month student teaching experience and one first year of teaching. Case study also allowed me to obtain in-depth data about a small number of cases and compare the cases (Creswell, 2007). When Stella’s teaching career ended, her experiences were considered as a single case in order to provide an in-depth exploration of a beginning teacher who was unsuccessful during the induction process.

### **Ethical Considerations: Research with Human Subjects**

Before undertaking each investigation, I obtained approval from each of my university’s Institutional Review Boards (IRB) for the research design. In addition to promoting ethical treatment of the human subjects who participated in this investigation, this process allowed me to thoroughly think through the process and procedures for the research before beginning the studies. The IRB required that a study proposal include a discussion of potential psychological risks human subjects may face as a result of participation.

In a case study design such as the one I used in which my participants were not subjected to potentially traumatic treatment or asked questions about sensitive personal information, the risks were low. But when Stella called me, devastated, after she was informed that her contract would not be renewed, the importance of being prepared for participants’ psychological distress in a low-risk study became poignantly clear. Stella did not experience distress because of this investigation or my research methods, but she experienced distress because of her experiences during the phenomenon I was investigating. As an ethical researcher, I promoted her emotional well-being and safety. Never before had the significance of my university’s IRB choice to use bold, capital letters on their proposal application to state, “There is always risk associated when participating in research,” been more clear. Even a low-risk study can put a researcher in the position of needing to ensure that a participant obtains appropriate care because of psychological distress.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data sources for the first study included notes from classroom observations and post-observation interviews; Stella’s student teaching journal; emails she and I exchanged; documentation of Stella’s participation in the student teacher induction

network, which included video-taped professional development sessions and an electronic discussion board; and an exit interview (Fry & Bryant, 2006-2007). For the second study the data sources included phone interviews, emails, teacher journals, and exit interviews (Fry, 2007). The phone interviews were the primary data source. They were conducted on a monthly basis and lasted between 15-50 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and always began with the question, “How is teaching going so far this year/since the last time we talked?” Follow-up questions were raised during the interview to get additional information about responses.

Other questions were also developed based on data analysis, which began during data collection. This approach allowed me to structure data collection efforts based on emerging themes and avoid collecting unfocused, repetitious, and voluminous data (Merriam, 1998). Thus, I often prepared questions for an upcoming interview based on my preliminary analysis of the most recent interview. For example, in a November 2005 interview, Stella described spending a great deal of time on writing instruction. She explained some of her recent efforts to improve her approach and mentioned future plans to have her students edit examples of disorganized writing. I reminded her of some strategies she had learned in her teacher preparation program, and we discussed how she could possibly implement them. One of the strategies involved inviting her special educator and a paraprofessional into the class to help facilitate writing conferences. When this section of the interview concluded, she cheerily stated, “I was just thinking this week about how it would be nice to get another adult in the classroom, but I couldn’t think of how” (November, year 2). When I reviewed the interview transcript later as part of my ongoing analysis, I wrote the following in a researcher memo:

Follow up on this next time – has she gotten an adult to help with the conferencing? How did editing an example of disorganized writing go? Did the process of looking at non-examples seem to help her students write more organized pieces of their own?

These questions were asked in the next month’s interview and were important because I was interested to find out if she would begin to feel more confident and successful about her teaching as a result of implementing plans to improve writing instruction. Discouragement was starting to appear as a theme by November of Stella’s second year of teaching.

I also kept a researcher reflexivity journal, which served as a data source for both studies. Kleinsasser (2000) explained the purpose:

Researcher reflexivity represents a methodical process of learning about self as researcher, which, in turn, illuminates deeper, richer meanings about personal, theoretical, ethical, and epistemological aspects of the research question. Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity because they have reason to believe good data result. (p. 155)

I tried to write in my research reflexivity journal immediately after each data-collection experience. However, since the phone interviews for the second study were usually conducted in the evenings, sometimes I read through my data first thing the next morning

and then wrote in the reflexivity journal. Writing in my reflexivity journal supported the ongoing data analysis process. For example, in response to the November 2005 interview described in the preceding paragraph, my reflexive journal entry included the words:

I'm so sad to hear her sounding so discouraged... the school year was off to such a better start [in September and October]. I'll have to follow up on this next month and see how things are going.

In this case, processing my personal reaction to the data led me to identify an emerging theme: discouraged. This helped me identify follow-up questions for subsequent interviews.

After Stella left the teaching profession, I had to decide how or if to proceed with additional data analysis. After contemplating the ethical considerations associated with Stella's traumatic departure from teaching that are described in detail in the section that follows, I decided on an analysis plan. Instead of just considering the data from Stella's second year of teaching, I also reanalyzed the data from her first year of teaching and student teaching. I wondered if the earlier data would help explain why Stella was unsuccessful in her second year of teaching. Rather than just considering the shortcomings of her induction support, I wanted to try to discover if she lacked the requisite skills needed to be a teacher or if other factors lead to the early end of her teaching career.

I began searching for answers to the new research question, "Why was Stella unsuccessful in her second year of teaching?" by reading and rereading raw data: interview notes from her two years of teaching and the relevant data sources from the study about student teaching. As I reread the data, it became clear that Stella's experiences as a beginning teacher were often at two extremes: she either felt successful or overwhelmed. This pattern also appeared in her student teaching, although it was less pronounced. I read the raw data so I would not be overly influenced by the codes and themes already identified during earlier data analysis through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once I had reread the raw data multiple times, I reviewed the data that was coded during analysis for the studies about student teaching (Fry & Bryant, 2006-2007) and four beginning teachers' induction experiences (Fry, 2007). Many of the codes I had already used were still relevant to the new research question, but I also added to the analysis by using additional codes that helped identify and understand the patterns of Stella feeling successful and overwhelmed. This formal description of the analysis procedures resembles one outlined at the start of a study. That was not the process used in this investigation because the approach was influenced by the reading and reflecting I did to process the ethical considerations that were of paramount importance after Stella left teaching.

### **Ethical Considerations: Subjectivity and Informed Consent**

When I began the second study, my goal was to continue it for three years, through all four participants' induction period. After the successful conclusion of the first year of the study, I renewed the IRB approval and continued. When Stella's contract was not renewed, she left the profession, and was emotionally devastated by the

experience, I confronted a dilemma as a researcher. I could not stop thinking about something a discussant said at a conference after I presented the results of the first year of the study: “You had become part of their induction support. Your caring and interest helped those four beginning teachers navigate through the difficult first year of teaching.” Toma’s (2000) discussion of subjectivity in qualitative research helped me learn that caring about participants can help “researchers and subjects collaborate to determine meaning, generate findings, and reach conclusions” (p. 177). I discussed this caring and how it affected my role as a researcher in the article about the first year of the study (Fry, 2007). But when Stella left teaching, my subjectivity took on a new prospective. Why, I wondered, if I was a caring researcher who was part of her induction experience, hadn’t I seen Stella’s difficulties earlier and been able to help her overcome them and succeed?

As I dealt with my personal reaction to Stella’s departure from teaching, I continued to talk to her on a regular basis to make sure she was getting the psychological support she needed in the turbulent time that followed the end of her teaching career. I began to fear that my subjectivity as a researcher had gone too far. At the end of my second year in the professoriate, I faced a situation that went well beyond my doctoral training in researcher ethics and subjectivity. I turned to colleagues and qualitative research literature to try to better understand the methodological implications of the situation. I considered abandoning my goal of continuing the study for a third year even though two of the original four participants were still teaching (the fourth had resigned after the birth of her first child but planned to return to teaching in a few years). Eventually I decided to continue the study in its third year, but I redesigned the data collection methods (Fry, 2009).

It took me longer to decide if I could or should write about Stella’s last year of teaching. When I brought the idea up with her, she had no reservations. As recommended by Cooney and Kleinsasser (1997), I had reconfirmed her informed consent at multiple critical junctures in my study, including after closure of formal data collection. Cooney and Kleinsasser described informed consent in qualitative research as requiring “far more than simply securing written permission. The intimacy and open-ended features of qualitative research make it complex and impossible to know exactly how the study will unfold” (p. 19). When a participant has a traumatic experience related to the phenomenon under investigation, Cooney and Kleinsasser’s description of ensuring and maintaining informed consent as an ethical act is particularly relevant. Informed consent was reconfirmed as part of the member checking process, which Cooney and Kleinsasser called maintaining access. Ensuring that participants are aware of the ongoing findings and interpretations through member checking also promotes credible, quality results (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Ultimately my goal became to enhance the dialogue about why new teachers continue to leave the profession despite increased participation in induction programs. While this one case cannot be generalized, Stella’s unique experience provides insights about what can go wrong for a new teacher. I had resolved my dilemma as a researcher, improved my understanding of researcher ethics and subjectivity, and I had Stella’s support to analyze and write about the experiences that led to the end of her teaching career. One problem remained: I was predisposed to believe that Stella’s induction program was flawed and contributed to her departure from teaching.



## Layered Account

Knowing that I brought a bias to my interpretations, I selected layered account (Ronai, 1995, 1997) as a method of presenting my findings. Layered account is a “postmodern ethnographic reporting format that enables the researcher in question to draw on as many resources as possible in the writing process, including theory and lived experience” (Ronai, 1997, p. 420). Additionally, layered account offers an impressionistic sketch, handing readers layers of experience so they may fill in the spaces and construct an interpretation of the writer’s narrative. The readers construct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it, and taking more away from it (Ronai, 1995, p. 396). Markham (2005), who referred to the approach as fragmented narrative, pointed out that while this approach empowers the reader to make meaning, “the interpretations are not unlimited, as the author still structures the experience of the reading” (p. 814). Markham also explained:

Our taken for granted methods of collecting and analyzing data ... and representing culture in our scholarly work can only benefit from interrogation and reconsideration of how we derive and constitute the picture of social life we present to our colleagues and public. (p. 815)

The approach is challenging and time-intensive. Because the analysis and writing process were so lengthy, I had time to come to terms with my bias. I began to see where I was blinded by my affection for Stella and thus unfairly critical of her induction experiences. The process of sharing advanced drafts with critical friends and submitting it for peer review also allowed me to refine my analysis and writing. Ultimately, this report is about more induction for beginning teachers; it is also about methods, researcher ethics, subjectivity, and how to respond when something goes wrong for a participant.

Thus, I use the powerful technique of layered account or fragmented narrative to invite the reader to question, along with me, the role Stella’s induction support played in her departure from teaching. It is through this questioning that I believe we can begin to complete our understanding of how to best support beginning teachers. In the pages that follow, I apply the ethnographic technique of layered account or fragmented narrative to my case study of Stella. I present renderings of Stella’s experiences through fragments of data, excerpts from my research reflexivity journal (Kleinsasser, 2000), an interpretive narrative, and connections to existing research about induction and beginning teachers. The organizational headings “Stella,” “Researcher,” “Narrative,” “Raw Data,” and “Literature” are used to guide the reader through the text, and italicized font is used to denote Stella’s words. Through this nontraditional approach, I invite the reader to join me in answering the questions: Why was Stella unsuccessful in her second year of teaching? Was her induction program flawed, did she lack the requisite skills needed to be a teacher, or did other factors lead to the early end of her teaching career?

## **The Beginning**

### **Narrative.**

Stella graduated with an elementary education degree from a public, land-grant university in the western United States. It was a fairly large program that prepares approximately 150 elementary education majors annually. Stella shined in the program; in addition to earning high grades, her peers elected her to leadership roles in student-led organizations. She student taught in a rural community about three hours away from the university and enjoyed a close relationship with her mentor teacher. In addition to working well with her mentor, Stella also felt supported and nurtured by other teachers in the building.

She spent her two inservice years as a fifth-grade teacher in a small town located 20 miles away from a medium-sized city. The town was a mix of working class multigenerational-community residents and newcomers who were high-paid professionals who commuted to the nearby city. As a result Stella had students whose experiences ranged from one who spent most nights sleeping in the cab of a truck because his single parent worked the graveyard shift to another who brought each classmate an individual gift after a weekend trip to Disney World.

### **Researcher.**

I remember the first time I visited Stella's school. My impressions were highly positive. I walked in and the building felt like a good place for kids to learn. I know the building is an inanimate object, but it *felt* happy. When I stopped by a bulletin board filled with local newspaper articles, one really stood out. There was a picture of the principal smiling as he was surrounded by grinning children who had just spent the night at school as part of a "lock-in party." The building itself was less than ten years old, and it was apparent that students, faculty, and staff took pride in keeping it clean. It seemed like a place where a new teacher would be successful.

### **Literature.**

Buckley, Schneider, and Shang (2005) reported that the quality of school facilities seems to be a factor that impacts teacher retention. Their study of public school teachers in Washington, DC indicated that teachers seem more likely to remain in the profession if they taught in safe, clean school buildings with sufficient resources and adequate heating and cooling.

### **Stella.**

Stella's first classroom was in a modular outside of the main building. In November she lamented, "I feel like I'm on my own a lot, forgotten because I'm outside. Folks don't just drop by because it is such a trip."

**Literature.**

Patterson (2005) described how school districts often unintentionally haze new teachers through “institutional practices and policies that resulted in new teachers experiencing poorer working conditions than their veteran colleagues” (p. 21). Patterson explained that new teachers, when compared to veterans, were more likely to (a) be assigned to float between classrooms or even school buildings, (b) have inadequate classroom resources and furniture, (c) have larger numbers of special education students, (d) get the oldest and most ragged textbooks, and (e) be assigned multiple preparations for high school classes.

**Year One Challenges****Stella.**

Everyone keeps telling me the first year is the hardest, and it better be because otherwise I don't want to do this. I was ready to quit the Tuesday after we started... everything was tough and overwhelming. I know I student taught the first day of school, but it's different when it's all on you. I just need to get my feet under me, but they're just not there yet. (September, year 1)

**Researcher.**

Stella had previous work experience; during her college summer breaks she worked a physically demanding job, often for 50 or more hours a week. Although she was used to full-time work, Stella was not used to being so far away from her family-based support network. Stella had immersed herself fully in campus life as an undergraduate, but her hometown and family were only 90 minutes away. Her first teaching position took her to a town that was more than five hours away from her family. Could the unfamiliar surroundings and distance from home have contributed to her stress and struggles?

**Literature.**

Being overwhelmed at first is a common phenomenon among new teachers. The typical beginning teacher faces struggles that, at times, seem insurmountable (Freiberg, 2002; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005; Veenman, 1984).

**Researcher.**

Looking back on Stella's adjustment to the profession now that she is no longer a teacher, I worry that her struggles were more severe than those faced by the “typical” beginning teacher. With 20/20 hindsight, I wonder if her early struggles were a sign of what was to come. At the time I was worried that she seemed so overwhelmed, and I offered suggestions that I hoped would make her transition easier. As one of her former

methods instructors from her undergraduate program, I was familiar with her teacher education curriculum. I tried to remind her of specific resources, skills, and instructional techniques she was trained in as an undergraduate that would be useful in her current situation. Her early struggles compelled me to step beyond my role as researcher and offer assistance. I did not realize I had begun to act as part of her induction support.

### **Literature.**

Long (2004) indicated that continued support from teacher preparation institutions is a factor that can help novice teachers succeed in the induction process.

### **Raw Data.**

Stella: The curriculum is so wide open. On the one hand that is good, because there is flexibility. On the other I feel like I'm not doing anything. I'm just not sure where to go.

Researcher: Are there colleagues you can ask for help and curriculum resources?

Stella: I feel like I take too much time from people, which is just a personal thing I've got to get over. I almost don't want to ask... I don't want them to think I don't know. Team teaching was good during student teaching, but I only ended up with the class for a week by myself, like completely on my own. The rest of the time there was someone always giving me feedback. There was always someone there. I can't ask anyone if what I'm doing is okay because nobody knows.

Researcher: I asked for help a lot, too, during my first year. Every teacher in your building has been a first-year teacher before. If you ask, they will know it is because teaching is hard, not because you are incompetent. (September, year 1)

### **Researcher.**

After the interview was over I wrote the following memo in response to the dialogue above: "Warning sign – don't let her fall through the cracks b/c [because] she won't ask for help." I was becoming a part of Stella's induction support. Instead of simply sticking to my research questions, I was trying to help Stella succeed.

In retrospect, I wonder why Stella did not have a fuller sense of the responsibility of being a teacher. Her teacher preparation program recommended that student teachers assume full responsibility for teaching for at least four weeks, but that did not happen for Stella. At the time I, as her supervisor, was told this was because Stella's mentor had a hard time letting go of the classroom, which is not uncommon. But was there a problem with Stella's performance or ability to handle all of the responsibility that went unreported by her mentor and/or unobserved by me?

### **Literature.**

Sabar (2004) compared beginning teachers' socialization into their new profession to the challenges immigrants face when adjusting to life in a new country. For immigrants, the period of adjustment is often acknowledged as a crisis portrayed in "thousands of works of literature and art [that] described the hardships that immigrants experience and the price they pay to fulfill their dreams" (p. 146). Sabar explained how new teachers face similar concerns that include illusions, hope, high expectations, despair, and a sense of loss and grief that, for those who remain in the profession, are ultimately replaced by compromise, acceptance, and adjustment. Although Stella's first month of inservice teaching included a lot of despair, she seemed to adjust rapidly. Things seemed to improve.

### **Stella Gets Her Feet under Her**

#### **Stella.**

It's going a lot better – I'm getting to the point where I'm feeling a lot more comfortable with it. I don't know what direction to go since there's not really a curriculum. I talk to other teachers now, but I still need to figure out what works for me. (October, year 1)

#### **Narrative.**

Stella developed a supportive, informal mentoring relationship with the administrator who evaluated her during her first year of teaching. Stella and her administrator connected on a personal as well as professional level, and their relationship provided Stella with support. As a result, in contrast to research about how beginning teachers hesitate to seek guidance because they do not want to appear unqualified (Valli, 1997), Stella grew past her initial reservations and became confident asking for help. Stella even invited her administrator to observe her teaching during her most problematic class so she could obtain feedback about how to improve her classroom management. This comfort resulted from her administrator visiting her classroom informally on a regular basis, as well as being willing to talk or listen when Stella had a concern. Stella described how her administrator provided a balance of praise and constructive feedback that helped her feel confident while also helping to improve her practice. The administrator also reassured Stella about her progress, "She told me I am exactly where she expects a new teacher to be." During her first year teaching, Stella was evaluated by an administrator who seemed like an effective instructional leader, something Marshall (2003) indicated is a challenge given all of the demands placed on school principals and administrators.

**Stella.**

Teaching is going a lot, lot better. I'm just a lot more comfortable. And I feel like I'm to the point now where I can just be myself and joke around with the kids more. Now they know I'm serious. I ended up keeping my class for part of lunch today because they were misbehaving. I'm kind of past the point of feeling inferior because it doesn't do me any good. I'm still a little timid to share ideas, but the other teachers are open and want me to share. I was writing [in my journal] the other day that it's kind of becoming routine – not in a bad way. (November, year 1)

**Remaining Concerns: The Induction Program****Narrative.**

Aside from her continued challenges with having an open-ended curriculum that required her to develop a lot of material “from scratch,” the only other challenge Stella reported pertained to her induction program. The new teacher professional development meetings her district required her to attend often felt like a poor use of her time because the sessions addressed topics she already felt competent about. Mandel (2006) recommended that “the content of professional development workshops [be] derived from the expressed needs of the new teachers themselves” (p. 69). Instead, at Stella's school, the topics had been predetermined by administrators. The mentoring component of her induction program also seemed problematic.

**Stella.**

The whole mentor system they have set up here is something I'm kind of frustrated with. They shouldn't assign mentors; they should let you find your own. (January, year 1)

I just got an email today from my mentor. She wants to have a meeting about the observation she made 4 weeks ago! (February, year 1)

**Literature.**

The literature suggests that new teacher frustration with poor mentoring matches is common (Gilbert, 2005; McCann et al., 2005). Indeed, “[mentoring experts] contend that it is better for a school to have no mentoring program at all than to have a bad mentoring program” (McCann et al., p. 32). McCann et al. recommended that a mentoring program include carefully selected mentors who receive training in how to coach and communicate with new teachers, as well as a plan for regularly scheduled meetings between mentor and new teacher. Mandel (2006) emphasized that mentoring meetings should focus on issues the new teacher brings forward.

### **Narrative.**

Stella's induction program consisted of an assigned mentor and monthly induction meetings. Other supportive elements were also in place as part of Stella's induction experience: she had regular observations, both formal and informal, and feedback from her administrator, as well as common planning time with grade level colleagues who shared curricular ideas and materials.

The strong relationship Stella developed with her administrator was not an official part of her induction program, and the mentor and administrator did not consult with one another about Stella's progress. Twice during the year the mentor teacher actually discouraged Stella from talking to the administrator so regularly. Stella reflected on the first such conversation "I was terrified. They said you shouldn't let the admin think you don't know what you're doing" (October, year 1).

### **Literature.**

Smith and Ingersoll's (2004) research suggests the kind of induction package that Stella received tends to only be moderately effective in terms of retaining new teachers. Their findings were based on results from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a national study that includes data from approximately 52,000 elementary and secondary teachers. After controlling for differences in teacher and school characteristics, Smith and Ingersoll found the predicted attrition rate for beginning teachers receiving induction packages like Stella's was 27%. First year teachers who received no form of induction support have a predicted attrition rate of 40%. Meanwhile, taking the induction support Stella received and adding one or more of the following additional components reduced the predicted attrition rate to 18%: reduced teaching load, assignment of a teacher's aid, or participation in an external network of new teachers.

### **Researcher.**

The induction support Stella received took time and money for her district and colleagues to provide. Surely this investment should do more than merely reduce the likelihood of a teacher leaving the profession by 12%! Compared to the other new teachers I studied along with Stella (Fry, 2007), Stella had the best induction support. But she did not find value in all of the components. She described the induction meetings as repetitious of things she already knew. Her assigned mentor did not share a common planning time and thus did not have the chance to meet with Stella regularly. Stella did not feel like she had a strong rapport with her mentor, and she reported that her contact with her mentor stopped completely when the induction program ended in March.

Should I really be so concerned that Stella ultimately left teaching when, statistically speaking, one in four new teachers who participated in induction programs like hers were predicted to leave the profession anyway? My answer is yes because I saw so much promise in her as a student teacher. She loved teaching and was so successful. So what went wrong? Is the gap between theory and practice to blame? Or, as Brock and Grady (1998) pointed out, is it problematic to stop induction support on official, pre-determined end dates that do not take individual teachers' developmental needs into

account? Would Stella have been successful if her induction program had continued through her second year of teaching? After all, even though she did not value all of it, perhaps she was getting support she did not know she needed. But, then again, Wilkinson (1994) recommended that induction programs be responsive to the different developmental needs of beginning teachers rather than providing prescriptive programs with the same support for all new teachers. I was not worried at the time because at the end of her first year of teaching all seemed to be going so well...

### **At Last: Confidence**

#### **Raw data.**

Researcher: What part of teaching do you think you are best at?

Stella: I have done a particularly good job getting some of the kids who struggle with reading excited about it. (April, year 1)

Stella comments regarding the results of her summative evaluation for the year:

The principal was very supportive and very encouraging. His only warning with me was to be careful with my humor and make sure it doesn't turn into sarcasm. He doesn't want the students to take it the wrong way and have them think I'm being mean to them. His recommendations were to continue standards-based planning, sequential style of teaching writing... and continue sharing ideas and asking questions. (April, year 1)

### **Literature and Researcher**

This report of Stella's summative evaluation seemed positive, but upon re-analysis I wonder if the principal was picking up on a problem. Was Stella's approach to classroom management becoming caustic? Perhaps the first year was so emotionally challenging that Stella had crossed a fuzzy line of "emotional exhaustion [that] has been associated with depersonalization and/or cynicism, factors associated with burnout and attrition" (Liston, Whitcomb, & Barton, 2006, p. 354). But she was confident about what lay ahead.

#### **Stella.**

I'm excited for next year. I see myself as having a curriculum in place, having ideas, not reinventing the wheel, which is how I felt this year. (May, year 1)



## **The Beginning of the End**

### **Literature.**

Mager (1992) explained that because “becoming a teacher is a continuum of experiences over a span of time, rather than one point in time” (p. 6), “after preservice preparation, the experience of becoming a teacher continues into the inservice years of a teacher’s career. A teacher continues to learn about teaching as the practice is carried out” (p. 4). Stella’s induction program did not recognize becoming a teacher is a process, rather than a one-time event. Instead, the program ended after she had been in the profession for a mere seven months. The non-renewal of her contract suggests that Stella could have benefited from continued support and guidance.

### **Researcher.**

Excerpt from my researcher reflexivity journal dated May, year 2:

On Friday Stella was told that her contract was not going to be renewed. We had done an interview on Tuesday, and she had just had her last in-class observation. Her summative evaluation was Thursday, and she was marked satisfactory in all categories except one pertaining to collegial relationships. She said Friday came out of the blue.

Excerpt from the researcher’s reflexivity journal, dated June, year 2:

I was outside gardening when Stella called that day in May. I was not expecting her call and did not have my tape recorder set up or my lap top handy. If I had, perhaps I could have captured her shock, sadness, and anger more accurately. To some extent I shared those feelings; after all, I believed in Stella and had studied her growth as a teacher for nearly three years. I began to revisit all of the data I from her second year of teaching, trying to figure out what went wrong.

## **Back to the Middle (or the Beginning of Year 2)**

### **Narrative.**

Although Stella expected her second year of teaching to be easier because she would have a starting point for her curriculum, she “started the year off almost entirely differently” so she could improve upon what she had done the year before. Stella described her students in her second year class as being very different from her first year. A larger number were below grade level readers, so she was unable to reuse materials she developed the year before when she had mostly above-average students. She was happy with some of the changes she implemented, but continued to wish for a formal curriculum that would provide more direction. In November of year 2 she lamented, “I just feel like I’m pulling things out of thin air. Things just take longer than I think they

should, I guess. I feel like I'm not covering as much as I should." Boger and Boger (2000) and Freiberg (2002) indicated that beginning teachers need support in order to avoid this problematic trial and error approach to curricular decision-making that overlooks research and best practices.

Another challenge resulted from a change in administration; Stella had a new evaluator during her second year of teaching. It was his first year as an administrator, and he provided Stella with less feedback than her former administrator. During her first year teaching, Stella had two formal observations by November and numerous informal visits from her administrator.

### **Raw data.**

Stella: The principal who is supposed to be evaluating me hasn't even come in yet. This is really frustrating for me because I want his feedback.

Researcher: Is there a way you could invite him in?

Stella: I have already done that, and I think he's just overwhelmed right now because he's new and all. He came in today and said we need to find a time. (November, year 2)

### **Literature.**

Principals have extensive demands on their time ranging from discipline to administrative duties to instructional leadership (Marshall, 2003). Learning to handle all of these responsibilities is demanding; Marshall (1996) explained that regularly observing teachers is a responsibility that is easy to let slide.

### **Narrative.**

Stella was not observed by her principal until late January during her second year of teaching. She was eager for feedback, which, for the first evaluation, was positive. The new administrator did not provide Stella with many detailed suggestions to improve her teaching, but she was glad someone had observed her again. In the post-observation conference he asked how the administration could help her, and she asked him to be in her classroom more. Stella welcomed feedback because she knew how helpful it was during her first year teaching.

The hoped-for increase in feedback never materialized. Her second formal observation passed uneventfully, and she received no critical feedback. The third evaluation, however, did not. During the post-observation conference, the administrator informed her that he had concerns about her collegial relationships. According to Stella he did not provide many details, told her to work on developing more positive professional relationships, and seemed to indicate that it was not a big deal. During a phone interview the same night as the conference, Stella's disappointment was pronounced, particularly when contrasted with the enthusiasm with which she had described her evaluations during her first year of teaching.

Two days after the discouraging third evaluation, Stella had her year-end summative evaluation. Her school used a three-level assessment: satisfactory, needs improvement or unsatisfactory. She was rated satisfactory in every evaluation category except one that pertained to collegial relationships, where she received a needs improvement. Less than a week later, she was informed that her contract would not be renewed. Stella was shocked. Before the third observation and conference, she had not had any negative feedback from her administrator. She received her first criticism four days before the non-renewal decision, and she had insufficient time to improve. Stella had incorrectly assumed a principal was required to work with a teacher to develop an improvement plan before a non-renewal decision. Her administrator would not answer any of her questions about the decision, explaining that district policy prohibited him from doing so, although he indicated that he had no concerns about her instructional skills. Stella was given the option to resign so her record would not indicate that her contract was not renewed.

Stella was frustrated and baffled. She accepted the offer to resign, and she decided not to try to obtain another teaching job. Stella said, "I know I'm a good teacher. But part of me doesn't want to teach because of the system. I know I can do my job, but I don't want to get burned again". Stella's teaching career ended, and she joined the thousands of other beginning teachers who leave the profession and are reported in attrition statistics.

### **Literature.**

Marshall (2003) described the difficulties of providing teachers with negative feedback if classroom visits are infrequent:

The hardest thing for a teacher to handle is getting negative feedback when the administrator hasn't visited in three months and hasn't seen the hundreds of successful teaching moments. Sensing this potential upset, some fair-minded administrators who have been guilty of not getting into classrooms tend to shy away from critical comments, sugarcoating their criticisms or reaching for something positive to say. (p. 704)

Perhaps Stella's administrator was in this situation since he did not see her teach until late January. It is possible he had concerns all along that he did not communicate.

### **What Went Wrong?**

#### **Raw data.**

Stella: Right now I just feel like I am not doing anything right.

Researcher: Why do you feel like that?

Stella: I don't know. I just do. I just don't know.

Researcher: Is it easier than last year? Are you liking teaching more?

Stella: It depends on the day. Sometimes I think it's easier because I kind of have a pool of things to pull from. But I still feel lost. But every time I mention it to my teammates, they say it takes more than two years to get comfortable. They all felt the same when they were getting started. (November, year 2)

**Researcher.**

Researcher reflexivity journal, written the same day as the November, year 2 interview:

I'm sad to hear her sounding so discouraged... the year was off to such a better start earlier. I have to follow up on this next month and see how things are going. I hope she will let me help her plan, although I'm not totally sure how to do this at a distance.

Researcher reflexivity journal, written during data analysis, after Stella's resignation from her teacher position:

Looking back, Stella seemed so dependent on external critique and feedback on her teaching. At what point should new teachers develop their own goals for improvement without that input? Was this a problem for her because her student teaching experience was so supportive? It does not seem like having a great relationship with one's mentor and receiving ample feedback should be a bad thing. But perhaps the highly supported experience made it difficult for Stella to learn to implement effective teaching behaviors independently, a skill that facilitates inservice success (Liston et al., 2006). Stella certainly had to handle challenges on her own during student teaching as the following email that she sent indicated:

I was "subbing" today and now I am completely drained-mentally, physically, emotionally. At times it felt like the kids were going to eat me alive, obviously they didn't though cuz I'm writing to you 😊. (September 29, student teaching data)

Although these concerns are raised with 20/20 hindsight, Stella's second year of teaching had seemed to start out well. She got a classroom that was inside the building instead of a modular and some responsibilities had seemed easier.

## What Went Well?

### Raw data.

#### *September, year 2.*

Researcher: What is making this year different?

Stella: I'm not homesick, which is one thing that is helpful. I would say I have my curriculum in place, but I'm starting the year off almost entirely different. Not having to go to all of those meetings for new teachers is helpful.

Researcher: Would those meetings have been better if there were several and you got to choose which to attend?

Stella: The problem is more because they bombard you with meetings, and you don't get to get settled in your classroom. There's grade level, content areas, team, building, and new teacher meetings.

[Researcher Memo: Interesting – perhaps she doesn't remember being disappointed with the content of some of the new teacher meetings last year. Follow up on this].

#### *October, year 2.*

Researcher: What are you doing better this year compared to last year?

Stella: I guess I'm using my plan better because I'm inside. I'm not always going into the building to try to have adult interaction because I get that during the day. Also, I'm not as stressed over the grading stuff.

#### *February, year 2.*

Researcher: What do you want (as an inductee teacher)?

Stella: A curriculum. Help with figuring out how to grade – I still get overwhelmed with that sometimes. It's been a little worse lately because of an after school program I have been helping with. It was a lot of time. That was not a good decision for this year.

Researcher: Do you think teaching would be easier in another school?

Stella: I complain about things a lot, but when I stop and think about it, it's actually not that bad. I'm still new enough that I don't want to go someplace else.

## **The End of Stella's Teaching Career**

### **Stella.**

I think the main thing right now that makes me happy, is I'm kind of at peace with the whole situation. I'm not as angry about it anymore. I still have my, not even just moments; I still have my hours and days. This has definitely been a huge growing experience. And growing is always painful. It is never easy. (2 weeks after the non-renewal decision)

### **Researcher.**

Stella's contributions to my three-year study about induction came to a premature end when she left the teaching profession. It is hard not to look back on the three years of data I collected about Stella's journey as a teacher and try to find some early indication of the problems that would end her teaching career. It is a frustrating search; as I look back over my notes see evidence of someone who wanted to be a great teacher and was struggling with parts of the job. Stella fell short – whether because of faults of her own, her administrator, her induction plan, or some combination thereof, it seems impossible to tell. Were there weaknesses Stella was not aware of and that I failed to identify that could have helped her find success?

### **Stella.**

I know I'm a good teacher. I know that I can do it. But the other part of me, it's so stressful. At this point right now I can't seem to deal with the stress and still deal with life. That's where I feel like I am right now. (May, year 2)

### **Literature.**

Eldar, Nabel, Schechter, Talmor and Mazin (2003) conducted case studies of three entry-year teachers. One of them, Gila, decided to leave the profession. Gila believed her failure was a result of personal traits that made her unsuited for classroom teaching. Eldar et al. pointed out that an analysis of the teaching environment in which she functioned clearly indicated a total lack of support from the system for the novice teacher. Moreover, it is possible to see how the school environment played an important role in her failure (p. 43). Although Stella remained confident in her ability to be an effective teacher, Stella's experience seems similar to Gila's in that she was unsuccessful and could have been better supported by her school.

Intrator's (2006) concerns about what happens to children when new teachers are demoralized and overwhelmed by stress are also significant since Stella admitted she struggled with the stress, "If our beginning teachers have no strategies for retaining their enthusiasm, rejuvenating their energy, bouncing back from the inevitable dark day, then our children will suffer" (p. 238). Perhaps Stella's students were short-changed as Stella unsuccessfully struggled to negotiate the challenges of teaching.

### **Researcher and Literature.**

In my quest to make sense of Stella's experience, I came across the writings of another former elementary teacher who is represented in the attrition statistics. MacKenzie (2006) reflected on her own departure from teaching,

I could choose to leave the vocation, an act that felt somewhat like a desertion of the children I had made a commitment to be an advocate for, or I could choose to stay and slowly wither within a space that pulled the light out of everything I believed I could offer as a teacher. (pp. 122-123)

MacKenzie chose to leave the profession, and she eloquently described her inability to reconcile the differences between who she wanted to be as a teacher and the conflicting demands made by her school. MacKenzie's words make it clear that no induction program can help beginners overcome the reality that the daily act of teaching forces some to choose between abandoning their beliefs or the profession. How many beginners are destined to leave because teaching requires them to do something they were not meant to do? That is a percentage not reflected in attrition statistics. Was Stella one of those teachers?

### **Literature.**

More than a decade ago, Darling-Hammond (1996) explained how "haphazard hiring and induction" is a major barrier to assuring that every child in America has competent teachers:

Those [new teachers] who do get hired are typically given the most difficult assignments and left to sink or swim, without the kind of help provided by internships and residencies in other professions. Isolated behind classroom doors with little feedback or help, as many as 30% leave in the first few years, while others learn merely to cope rather than to teach well. (p. 197)

Darling-Hammond's concerns about new teachers and their struggles, as well as the need for effective induction, were not new. Darling-Hammond's concerns echo earlier voices (Huling-Austin, 1986; Lortie, 1966), and since the problems have not been alleviated, more recent publications reverberate with similar ideas and woes (Buckley et al., 2005; Mandel, 2006; McCann et al., 2005; Patterson, 2005). How is it that American educators have been concerned about supporting new teachers for more than 40 years and the problem remains so dire?

Sarason (1990) may offer an answer in a book gloomily titled *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*, in which he suggested that schools have been unable to make truly helpful changes in part because of an inability to change the status quo. Sarason used the Founding Fathers and their work in writing the American Constitution to demonstrate the sort of shift in thinking educational reform does *not* use,

[The Founding Fathers] knew that the Articles of Confederation were inadequate and potentially lethal to the growth and security of a fledgling society. As long as they allowed themselves to stay within the confines of these articles, the major problems would be intractable to remedy. Confronting that intractability, they entered history. (p. 179)

Sarason suggested that until school leaders revise their approach, reform efforts in American education will remain ineffective.

### **Methodological Reflections**

Stella participated in a study designed to investigate the induction experiences of four beginning teachers. Although the research design was not without limitations, the methodological decisions I made when designing that study were appropriate for a study that sought to examine how beginning teachers were supported and how they responded to the support. These methods had significant limitations when Stella's teaching career ended early, and the new question about why Stella was unsuccessful emerged. Regular site visits and interviews with Stella's mentor and administrators would have provided a richer, more complete picture of what unfolded in Stella's second year of teaching. Multiple data sources may have allowed for triangulation of themes in the data.

Another limitation to the methods was the extent to which I cared about Stella. While Toma (2000) tells us caring for our subjects leads to better data, one also needs to maintain researcher objectivity. I crossed a line of caring too much to maintain objectivity. On the one hand I am comfortable with having crossed that line because Stella was floundering and needed help. However, this decision affected my abilities to effectively analyze my data. Indeed, it took nearly two years of distance from the situation to become more open to multiple explanations and find the bias in my initial analysis and writing. It took me three years to see the flaw in the title I gave to this piece before I was even half-way through my data analysis: What happens when induction comes up short? I was so convinced that Stella was unfairly treated and her induction support inadequate that I blamed the induction process rather than recognizing other factors that may have contributed to her failure.

Time provided me with objectivity about what went wrong in Stella's second year of teaching and where I erred as a researcher. In addition to documenting an unsuccessful induction story, which is uncommon in the literature, the ideas presented in this article contribute to the qualitative research literature through the candid discussion of methods, researcher ethics, subjectivity and how to respond when something goes wrong for a participant. Mager (1992) told us that, "A teacher continues to learn about teaching as the practice is carried out" (p. 4), and Kleinsasser (2000) underscored the importance of researcher reflexivity to learn about the self as researcher and better understand data. Their words have heightened importance when I reflect on the lessons I learned about research through what went wrong and what went right in this investigation. I conclude that a qualitative researcher continues to learn about research as the process is carried out and researcher reflexivity is essential for that growth.



## Conclusion

While research about high attrition rates, the value of induction, and what makes the early years of teaching difficult is prevalent in the literature, research about teachers who struggle despite participating in induction programs is not. This study documents the case of one teacher who was unsuccessful; she faced many challenges in her entry to the profession, including the premature end of formal induction support. If this paper were an analytical report, I would conclude with definitive recommendations about how to improve induction and reduce attrition. If this paper was a made-for-TV movie, the attrition problem would be solved and Stella, along with all new teachers, would teach happily and successfully ever after. But Stella's professional story is ongoing, as are those of other struggling new teachers, and as Tillmann-Healy (1996) explained, real stories do not always have resolutions. The attrition problem has not yet been resolved, and until it is, beginning teachers will continue to leave disappointed and sad that they failed to thrive in the profession they expected to love.

What I can say with certainty is there is a need for continued research in order to solve America's teacher-attrition problem. In 2004 I began a study of four new teachers' induction experiences. Statistically speaking, I should not be surprised that one failed. As a person who cares about the education of America's students and the personal well-being of new teachers, I was shocked by Stella's flight from teaching. New research and practice must find a way to improve a system where one in four new teachers fails. As MacKenzie (2006) explained,

Teachers are leaving education, they are leaving the places where they first become teachers – and the rate of this exodus is growing; however, we know little of that which may inspire this exodus, beyond that which whispers across the numbers. I hear the whispers and I feel that I must stop to listen more carefully. (p. 118)

I am determined to join MacKenzie and listen closely to the whispers of those who leave the glorious profession that is teaching. Surely their voices can explain what goes wrong during induction and point educators towards the true solution to the problems resulting from new teacher attrition. Stella's experiences, or whispers, suggest part of the solution is providing new teachers with differentiated, research-based induction with a strong mentoring component that builds on, rather than duplicates, the skills beginners learned during their preparation programs and student teaching.

## Epilogue

Three years after Stella left teaching, her life is completely changed. She spent one year soul searching, healing, and working part-time as a paraprofessional for severely disabled children, barely making ends meet. She is now a librarian and happily married to someone she met as a result of her activities in her year of soul searching and healing. She handles professional stress much better and is in a "totally different place in life." While her story continues to unfold, the portion of it shared in this article has a happy personal and professional ending.

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### Author Note

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### Article Citation

Fry, S. W. (2010). The analysis of an unsuccessful novice teacher's induction experiences: A case study presented through layered account. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(5), 1164-1190. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-5/fry.pdf>

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