Diversity in the Elementary Classroom

Prepared for the O-QAT Title-II Initiative 3.1 Continuing Licensure Design Team

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Synopsis 3

Questions Pursued

In this brief we move to the classroom: *The classroom context and the diversity of the classroom* as a potential influence on the beliefs and practices of beginning teachers. Specifically, we focused on the following questions:

- What are the class sizes for this group of teachers?
- How many students who speak English as a second language are in their classrooms?
- How many students with disabilities are in their classrooms?
- How much time do these teachers have to teach their classes as a whole group?
- How many students do they have who they feel are particularly difficult to teach?
- What are the teachers’ perceptions of the overall levels of demand and support in their classrooms?

This brief reports data for 1st year teachers only.

Related Measures/Data Collection Procedures

- Structured interviews with individual beginning teachers were held during their first year of teaching. A number of questions regarding preparedness, classroom characteristics, school and community context, and orientation to standards were asked.
- Open-ended questions from a Self-Assessment instrument administered annually asked for descriptions of their classroom and school contexts and orientation to standards.
- A school climate survey and a classroom demographics form were administered annually as part of a suite of surveys.
- A description of their teaching contexts as part of a Teacher Effectiveness Portfolio prepared during their first and second years of teaching.

These multiple data sources provided a well rounded picture of the teaching contexts in which these beginning teachers find themselves.

Number of Subjects Involved

Seventy-seven (77) beginning teachers with classrooms at all elementary grade levels, kindergarten through sixth grade. Fifteen of the teachers (approximately 19%) reported teaching more than one grade level in “blended” classrooms. Of these teachers one has a K-3 combination, one has a K-1st combination, 2 have a 1st and 2nd grade blend, 2 have a 3rd and 4th grade blend, and 9 teach in a 4th and 5th grade blend.

Findings

- **Class sizes:** The average class size across all teachers was 23.15 students, but class sizes varied considerably, ranging from a minimum of 13 students to a maximum of 47 (the teacher reporting 47 students had separate sections of 6th grade students).
- **Students with English as a second Language (ESL):** Across the classrooms the average number of ESL students was approximately 4 per class, with a range reported of 0 to 23.
• **Students with special needs or learning challenges**: The data provided by the teachers indicated a considerable range in the number of students in their classrooms who are receiving some type of additional educational or special education assistance. An average of 4.66 students per class, with a range of 0 to 22 students, receive additional services, while an average of 2.5 students per class, with a range of 0 to 10, are eligible for special education services and have active Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

• **Number of students in pull-out programs**: Students with special needs or learning challenges may receive additional services in a variety of settings, including outside of the classroom. We asked the teachers to indicate the number of their students who leave the classroom to receive assistance or extra attention in other settings. The teachers reported that an average of 5.5 students per class, with a range of 0 to 24 students, leave their classrooms for additional instruction/attention.

• **Number of minutes per day available to teach their entire class**: With the diverse nature of many of today’s classrooms, and the array of services available in many districts to accommodate the varied needs of these students, the amount of time available to a teacher to provide instruction to his or her students can vary dramatically. The average amount of time reported available to teach each class was approximately 4 hours per day, but a range of 20 minutes to 6.5 hours was reported.

• **Number of students in classrooms who are especially demanding of a teachers’ time and energy, or who the teachers felt were difficult to teach**: The teachers studied reported a range of 0 to 13 such students, with an average of 3.8 students per class who, these teachers felt, were very demanding of time and energy.

**Implications for CONTINUING Licensure**

• At this point in time, regardless of where they received their initial license, early career teachers coming to a program for continuing licensure will vary a great deal in terms of the proficiencies they possess that are to be demonstrated for continuing licensure.

• Teachers selecting a preparation program for continuing licensure are likely to do so based more on geography, i.e. close to where they are teaching, rather than on where they did their initial preparation. In some cases these teachers may work at a school a considerable distance from the closest continuing licensure program. This has implications for how the program may be structured for these “distance” teachers. Continuing licensure programs may need to have available some type of induction/orientation process for teachers entering the program who are unfamiliar with that program or institution.

**Implications for INITIAL Licensure**

• Beginning teachers need to be prepared, both pedagogically and emotionally, for the classroom variability they are likely to experience when they accept their first teaching position.

• These teachers should learn/develop skills that allow them to adjust instruction “on the fly” as they work with students in the classroom.

• These teachers should learn and/or develop an array of assessment practices that will allow them to accurately gauge the learning of the students within their classrooms, and the progress they are making toward benchmarked standards for learning.
Background and Rationale

This is the third in a series of briefs describing the work being conducted and reported through the TEP-2 Project (The Longitudinal Effects of Teacher Preparation on the Practice and Beliefs of New Teachers and the Learning of Their Students). The central objective of the project, as more fully described in Research Brief #1, is to better understand whether selected emphases within teacher preparation programs make a difference in the practice, beliefs and thinking of early career elementary school teachers and the learning of their students in Oregon’s standards-based design for schools.

Within this broad area of inquiry one set of questions focuses on better understanding the development of these beginning teachers within the context of Oregon’s design for standards-based schools, and what contributes to their development as professional educators (McConney & Schalock, 1998).

Research on teacher attrition has documented that many early career teachers leave the profession within five years of obtaining their first position. Estimates vary, but range as high as 40 to 50 percent (Heyns, 1988; Marlow, Inman, & Betancourt-Smith, 1997; Marso & Pigge, 1997). Reasons given to explain this attrition tend to cluster around two general areas: The teachers’ personal characteristics, which may include aspects of their initial preparation, and the external environment that surrounds a teacher once he or she enters the classroom.

Teachers entering the public schools today frequently confront demanding work environments. Class sizes can be large and the range of student abilities, needs, and behaviors can be diverse. Typically, a beginning teacher obtains a teaching position in a school with an established faculty and administrative structure; rarely is there a large number of beginning teachers concentrated in a single school. These beginning teachers need to “fit in” with the existing culture of the school and establish some sort of support network among their colleagues and administrators.

There appears to be a strong interaction between personal characteristics and environmental conditions that affect a beginning teacher’s decision to stay in or leave the profession. The effects of the setting on this decision are becoming increasingly salient as teachers completing their preparation programs at the close of the 20th century and take their first positions in schools are buffeted by high standards for learning, new emphases on accountability, and lack of security in teaching positions through lack of stable funding.

The most recent school reform efforts across the United States, with an emphasis on teaching to standards and increased teacher accountability, have necessitated changes in the types of preparation new teachers receive. Increasingly there is an emphasis in preparation programs on teaching and learning related to high performance and content standards, adherence to a specified state curriculum, and continuous assessment of student progress in learning. As teachers prepared under the umbrella of “standards-based teaching” enter the profession and their first classrooms, they are likely to be entering a school that has not yet fully adopted a standards-based approach to teaching, or they may be the only new teacher in a building with predominantly veteran teachers.

In addition, beginning teachers may take their first jobs in especially demanding settings. Preliminary findings from the TEP 2 Project show that first year elementary teachers in Oregon tend to obtain positions in schools that have 1) relatively low SES levels, 2) relatively low levels of student achievement as measured by state assessments, and 3) have assignments at grade levels that are assessed by the state assessments (Schalock, M., McConney, Ayres, & Schalock, D, 1999).

Related Research Questions

While context plays a part in the majority of data analyses conducted within the TEP-2 Project a number of questions have been developed that focus strictly on teaching contexts in a descriptive manner. Some of these contextual questions were addressed in Research Brief #2: Teaching Assignments and Conditions of Work.

In this brief, we will continue that discussion and move to the next level of description: The classroom context and the diversity of the classroom as a potential influence on the beliefs
and practices of beginning teachers. Specifically, we focused on the following questions as they pertain to the 1st year of teaching:

- What are the class sizes for this group of teachers?
- How many students who speak English as a second language are in their classrooms?
- How many students with disabilities are in their classrooms?
- How much time do these teachers have to teach their classes as a whole group?
- How many students do they have who they feel are particularly difficult to teach?
- What are the teachers’ perceptions of the overall levels of demand and support in their classrooms?

**Data Collection Sources/Methods**

The depth of inquiry proposed for the TEP-2 project, and the level of funding available, necessitated a relatively small sample size. We chose to focus solely on elementary teachers (grades K-5) as a means of keeping the overall sample size modest but large enough to conduct the various analyses we wanted to pursue. Two cohorts of beginning teachers were recruited, one at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year (N=68), and one at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year (N=9). (See Research Brief #1 for a more thorough description of sample size and procedures).

A mix of data collection methods and sources have been used to describe the classroom, school and community contexts within which these first year teachers worked. These have been described in Research Brief 2, but include:

- Structured interviews with individual teachers;
- Open-ended questions on a Self-Assessment instrument;
- A school climate survey and a classroom demographics form that were administered as part of a suite of surveys; and
- A description of their teaching contexts as part of a Teacher Effectiveness Portfolio prepared in both their first and second years of teaching.

These multiple data sources provide a well rounded picture of the teaching contexts in which these beginning teachers found themselves.

**Results**

**Classroom Contexts**

As reported in Research Brief #2, the 77 beginning teachers had classrooms at all elementary levels, kindergarten through sixth grade. Fifteen of the teachers (approximately 19%) reported teaching more than one grade level in “blended” classrooms. Of these teachers one had a K-3 combination, one a K-1 combination, 2 a 1st-2nd blend, 2 a 3rd-4th blend, and 9 a 4th-5th blend.

*Class size* varied considerably, ranging from a minimum of 13 students to a maximum of 47 students (the teacher reporting 47 students had separate sections of 6th grade students). The average class size across all 1st year teachers studied was 23.15 students (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Number of Students per Class](image1)

The number of *Students with English as a second Language (ESL)* also varied widely in the classrooms of these first year teachers, with an average of nearly 4 per class, and a range of 0 to 23 (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Number of ESL students per class](image2)
In addition to ESL students, most of the 1st year teachers studied had students with special needs or learning challenges. The number of students who are receiving some type of additional educational or special education assistance averaged 4.66 students per class, with a range of 0 to 22 students (see Figure 3), while an average of 2.5 students per class, with a range of 0 to 10 students had active Individual Education Plans (see Figure 4).

Students with special needs or learning challenges may receive additional services in a variety of settings, including outside of the classroom. We asked our 1st year teachers to indicate the number of their students who were in pull-out programs, that is, students who leave the classroom to receive assistance or attention in other settings. The teachers reported that on average, 5.5 students per class were involved in pull-out programs, with a range of 0 to 24 students (see Figure 5).

With the diverse nature of many of today’s classrooms, and the array of services available in many districts to accommodate the varied needs of these students, the amount of time available to the teacher to provide instruction to his or her students can vary dramatically. This proved to be the case with the 1st year teachers in the present study. We asked each teacher to provide an estimate of the number of minutes per day available to teach their entire class. The average amount of time reported was approximately 4 hours per day (247.25 minutes), with a range of 20 minutes to 6.5 hours (390 minutes) (see Figure 6).

We also asked these teachers to offer their subjective judgments about the number of students in their classrooms who they felt were, for whatever reason, especially demanding of their time and energy, or who they felt were difficult to teach.
These estimates ranged from 0 to 13 students, with an average of 3.8 students per class who, these teachers felt, were very demanding in some way (see Figure 7).

Finally, we asked our 1st year teachers to rate their classrooms in terms of the overall level of demand and their views of the overall level of support available to them in providing instruction to their students.

On a 6-point scale, with 1 representing very low demand and 6 representing very high demand, the average perceived demand rating from these teachers was 3.95, with a range of 1 to 6 (see Figure 8).

Teachers’ ratings of their perceptions of the amount of support available to them in the classroom also were provided on a 6-point scale, with 1 representing a very low level of support, and 6 representing a very high level of support. The teachers’ ratings ranged from 1 to 6, with an average rating of 3.77 (see figure 9).

The teachers’ ratings of demand and support levels in the classroom seem congruent (average demand level of 3.95 and average support level of 3.77), and could suggest that high demand classrooms are provided with greater amounts of teacher and/or instructional support. Further analysis of the relationship between these two sets of data are needed, however, before such an interpretation can be made with confidence.

Summary

The 77 first year teachers studied in the project provide a window to the contexts in which new teachers work in Oregon’s public schools. Research Brief #2 provided a picture of the geographic locations and district-level characteristics of their employment. This brief (#3) provides a picture of their classroom characteristics. What strikes us about the data provided by these teachers is the enormous variation that exists across classrooms. The averages tell us that the typical classroom has about 23 children in it, but the ranges reported indicate the picture is more complex than the average. Some beginning teachers have 15 or fewer children to attend to and accommodate, while others have 30 or 40. Likewise there are teachers who have no children who speak a language other than English, and there are teachers whose entire class is made up of non-English speakers. Similar variation exists with respect to students with special needs,
and to the demand and support levels of their classrooms.

This variability in classroom contexts has far reaching implications for the skills needed by these first year teachers if they are to be successful as facilitators of learning. When they plan their lessons and assessments they must take into account the range of interests and abilities arrayed before them in the classrooms. No doubt their choice of instructional materials will also be affected by the nature of the classroom in which they teach, and the adjustments they will need to make to their instruction “on the fly” in response to their students will vary greatly in complexity. So, too, will their assessments of student progress in learning. With the range of student characteristics reported by these teachers, a “one size fits all” approach to assessment is clearly inappropriate. A wide range of instructional approaches will need to be accompanied by a wide range of assessments to be responsive to their students’ progress in learning.

This is not to suggest that these teachers are in some way different from their teaching peers, and that first year teachers are somehow unreasonably challenged by their classrooms. Nearly, if not all, teachers confront this diversity in the classroom in the course of their work. But this variability in context suggests to us that diversity of setting and the accompanying demands of the classroom will require active consideration as we examine differences in teachers’ classroom performance, or make judgments about teachers’ effectiveness as facilitators of learning, or monitor changes in teachers’ beliefs about their competence and their approach to their practice.

References


