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## Novice Art Teachers: Navigating Through the First Year

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*Four researchers collaborated on this multisite qualitative case study that examined 11 novice art teachers negotiating their way through their first year of teaching. Participants in three states were selected through a criterion method sampling strategy. The subjects were employed in rural, urban, and suburban public school districts. Researchers conducted 3–4 structured interviews using the same time line and interview protocols during the 2005–2006 academic year. Results indicate that, as novice art teachers assimilated into their respective school cultures, logistical and classroom management issues were of primary concern. Successes reported included a sense of community with their students, improving dialogue about art, and showcasing their art program.*

Universities face numerous complexities and problems within the process of teacher education (Brewer, 2006). In addition, state and national mandates cover a breath of issues, including legal and professional issues, mainstreaming students with special needs, assessment, interacting with students, learning styles of students, technology, designing and implementing curriculum, and many more (Galbraith, 1997). Clearly, teacher education programs seek to prepare future teachers for successful careers. Yet, once preservice students graduate from university preparation programs, little research has examined how these recent graduates, now novice art teachers, navigate their way through their first year of teaching. To begin to fill this gap in knowledge about beginning teachers, this qualitative study was conducted by four university faculty researchers involved in art teacher prepa-

ration programs. Our purpose was to discover and document the experiences of 11 novice art teachers during their first year of teaching.

### Related Literature

Comparatively little research in the field of art education has been devoted to a proportionately large part of our job: the preparation and training of art teachers. A concern about lack of research focusing on preservice art education was voiced by Davis (1990), who noted that “practice will continue to be guided for the time being by philosophical position rather than by empirical evidence” (p. 754). Zimmerman (1994) echoed this concern. Art education researchers have examined preservice students’ understanding of reflective thinking and practice (Campbell, 2005) and the impact of technology in preservice programs (Galbraith, 1996; Keifer-Boyd, 1996). Kowalchuk (1999) found that, when preservice teachers felt prepared, they displayed more flexibility in both their thinking and behavior. Investigating the beliefs of preservice teachers toward art education, Grauer (1998) discovered that their beliefs were primarily influenced by their own earlier school experiences with art. These findings were further supported by studies conducted by Stuhr (2003) and Jones (1997). Grauer (1998) further found that preservice research ends when students leave the university and “more longitudinal studies that follow preservice teachers into the workplace would be of great benefit to teacher educators” (p. 369). Indeed, very little research exists dealing with novice or first-year art teachers, although a few studies are worth mentioning here. For example, La Porte, Speirs, and Young (2008) found that the participating teachers in their study were most influenced by their own knowledge and comfort levels in what they were teaching. Kowalchuk (1997) found that novice art teachers planned simplistic instructional experiences that lacked interconnection between lessons, and they relied heavily on published curricular materials. Guay (1994) surveyed first-year art teachers listed with the National Art Education Association (NAEA) and found that this population felt unprepared to teach students with disabilities in mainstreamed art classrooms. In response to such concerns, Keifer-Boyd and Kraft (2003) contended that the HEARTS (Human Empowerment through the Arts) model can help prepare preservice students for the challenges and rewards of an inclusive art classroom.

Teacher retention is an additional area of inquiry relevant to teacher preparation that needs attention. Cohen-Evron (2002) described why art teachers found it hard to stay in the public school system, as part of a larger study about how beginning art teachers negotiated their teaching identity and beliefs (Cohen-Evron, 2001). The major challenges emerging from the teachers’ accounts included a feel-

ing of isolation, having to negotiate the status of art, and conflicts with the educational system. Kagan (1992) reviewed 13 studies of novice teachers from varying disciplines and identified three major themes that emerged from the results: their self-image as teacher, the role of their school culture, and their growth in problem-solving skills. Darling-Hammond (2007) stressed that working conditions contributed to teacher turnover more than any other reason and made recommendations regarding both conditions and mentoring.

As a response to the lack of firsthand accounts of first-year art teachers' negotiation through their first year of teaching, our study focused on graduates from three art education programs in Texas, Georgia, and Arkansas. The four researchers collaborated on this multisite qualitative case study that examined 11 novice art teachers' challenges and successes during their first year of teaching during 2005–2006.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

### *Participants, Data Gathering, and Research Questions*

We used a form of purposeful or criterion sampling (Creswell, 1998) to identify participants through which we felt we could learn the most about novice art teachers' experiences. We each selected three participants who met the following criteria: They were novice art teachers (first-year art teachers); they had received grades in their art education course work at the university, showing proficiency or excellence (A's or B's); they were interested in collaborating with the researchers on this project; and they were supported and granted permission by their administration to work with the us. Participants taught in rural, urban, and suburban districts in all grade levels (see Table 1). Six participants were from Texas, three were from Arkan-

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

Participant	Age	Gender	School location	Grades taught
Erica	23	F	Suburban	Int: 5–6
James	28	M	Suburban	MS: 6–8
Dan	27	M	Suburban	MS: 6–8
Jennifer	22	F	Rural	JH: 7–9
Beth	22	F	Suburban	El: 1–5
Carolyn	23	F	Rural	El: K–6
Anita	24	F	Urban	El: 1–5
Tammy	28	F	Urban	HS: 9–12
Peggy	30	F	Suburban	HS: 9–12
Sally	54	F	Urban	HS: 9–12
Mary	28	F	Urban	El: K–5

Notes. El, elementary school; HS, high school; Int, intermediate school; JH, junior high school; MS, middle school.

sas, and three were from Georgia. Nine were women and two were men.<sup>2</sup> Nine participants were Caucasian and two were Hispanic; most were in their 20s, with the exception of one who was 30 and one in her 50s. Our rationale for selecting such a heterogeneous sample was to identify whether the themes that emerged from our research were particular to our specific geographic areas and to specific grade levels, and to determine whether additional factors influenced first-year art teachers' challenges and successes in any ways. Our focus was on the journey of these 11 first-year art teachers. Research questions included what successes do first-year art teachers experience? and what challenges do first-year art teachers experience?

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

To ensure that we would obtain similar data that could be compared and analyzed, we established a time line and standardized our sets of interview questions. Each researcher conducted 3–4 interviews during the 2005–2006 academic year. The interviews served as our main source of data collection; however, additional data were culled from e-mails and phone calls, classroom visitations/observations, examination of unit and lesson plans, and observation of student work. Initial interviews were scheduled in August; a second interview occurred in late September or early October 2006; the third interview took place in January or February 2007. Our final interviews were conducted after the end of the school year in June or July 2007. Each researcher was responsible for transcribing her interviews.

In qualitative research, data collection typically coexists with analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Each researcher in this study employed a constant-comparative method of analysis and content analysis of all data, including interviews, on-site visits, lesson plans (if available), and student work (if available).<sup>3</sup> During this process, we sorted through data to identify key concepts and themes that began to emerge (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After compiling and sorting through our data individually, we began sharing initial descriptions and impressions with one another. We began a cross-site comparison and clustered similar data in tables, ranking items by the frequency and intensity in which they were reported, in order to create and understand a more holistic picture of our participants' experiences.

## **Findings**

### *Challenges*

First-year teachers felt that their jobs were nearly overwhelming at times. They described many challenges, including exhaustion, time management, motivating students, instructional interruptions, classroom management, lack of resources, lack of specialized training (such as technology or for children with special needs),

and meeting the expectations of administrator and/or colleagues. One of the most common problem first-year art teachers experienced was learning how to balance time and energy in order to fulfill their duties. For example, Beth explained how difficult and time-consuming it was to plan meaningful lessons. She said the reality of teaching 900 students a week at two different schools was that some days she simply addressed “What am I going to do with second grade?” Likewise, Peggy’s comment is typical of many novice teachers. She confided, “I really did not realize how tired I would be.” James reported feeling “wiped out” and questioned whether he would be able to balance the demands of teaching art during the day with teaching martial arts several nights a week. Similarly, Sally who spent the entire summer preparing and was possibly the most organized of our novice teachers, commented that all of the extra tasks she was required to do sometimes felt overwhelming.

Another major concern reported by these novice teachers was motivating their students. As Tammy noted of her high school students, “It was not that they struggled; it was just that it was too much work. They would literally look at you and go, ‘Uh, I don’t feel like doing that today.’ And just sit there.” Beth echoed a similar sentiment: “I don’t expect everyone to love art, but at least try.” Carolyn was frustrated with “kids that refuse to do any more, just develop to a low point and are done.” In a junior high classroom, Jennifer said, “Students want to rush through, but I don’t let them.” Most of these situations improved as the teachers made personal connections with the students, but it took continual attention, energy, and a building of trust throughout the year.

For these novice teachers, classroom management was also a major concern, and many mentioned being disturbed by interruptions of various sorts: students talking during instruction, announcements, tardy students, attendance monitors, and phone calls. Tammy shared her struggle of just “keeping afloat” and remembering all of the little things, like “just keeping attendance when you don’t have a computer and it has to be done within the first five minutes (of class).” Erica lamented about how announcements could be aggravating: “The other day I think there were six announcements during one class period. It was so annoying! I’d just get started and get interrupted again and again. After awhile I looked at the kids and asked them, what was I just saying?”

While first-year teachers knew that they should not take students’ comments or criticism personally, sometimes that was easier said than done. Erica recalled such a situation of introducing a new assignment when a female student groaned and yelled out, “Yuck!” Even though the student ended up loving the assignment, Erica notes, “I was kind of hurt that she would act that way at the beginning.”

Another major challenge was trying to fit in or assimilate with the school culture. Often there were challenges in working with colleagues or meeting the

expectations of administrators. Peggy confided, “I’m frustrated with dealing with two different administrations, because they’re like night and day. It’s like things I can do over here that I can’t do there. It’s just the way they treat you. It’s maybe just the general school environment.” James looked forward to working with a second art teacher in his middle school. At the beginning of the year, the other art teacher suggested that they plan lessons together. However, their relationship quickly deteriorated when he found that he was doing all of the work. James shared, “When I asked her what her ideas were for lessons, she never seemed to have any, or they were really shallow. Our teaching philosophies are at total ends of the spectrum.” Beth, Jennifer, and Dan voiced frustration that principals did not offer needed feedback or support. Dan noted that when he sent students to the office for breaking rules, administration did little or nothing and the students were quickly sent back to class. Jennifer stated, “I never felt like I had a place to go to talk. I felt like I was wasting their time . . . too ‘first-year-teacher-ish.’ I felt like things that were serious they didn’t pay attention to.”

### *Being the New Teacher*

James’s point that being the new teacher came with additional responsibilities and expectations was reiterated by virtually all of the other teachers. Beth was having some problems with other projects she was asked to do. She described devoting a whole week to creating a red wagon for the Drug-free Red-Ribbon parade and then not even being able to attend the parade because her schedule included teaching at two schools. Erica, James, Dan, and Sally initiated art clubs. Erica had so much student interest that she had to offer 2 days a week for her art club. Not only did being a new teacher mean extra work, it also meant that their voice was typically not as valued as senior teachers’ opinions. Counselors also assigned the least desired classes or courses to new teachers. In many cases, these classes were oversubscribed, and it was common for a counselor to add up to 40 students to a class. This issue continued throughout the year when Carolyn was faced with a large fifth-grade class beginning in March because of the temporary addition of many band students, leaving her unable to offer students the individual attention she desired. Sally commented that she picked up on both subtle and not-so-subtle cues from administrators that made it clear where her “place” was. She said, “As a new teacher you are on the bottom rung of the ladder.” Novice teachers also had no control or input regarding their schedules. Mary’s schedule designed in very short periods was the counterpoint of that needed by an elementary physical education specialist. The schedule was counterproductive for not just what she taught, but proved nearly impossible for cleanup. Tammy described how she had drawing and painting in two different rooms. She explained, “Then I have to have two still lifes set up. We don’t have to, but it’s harder on me if we’re doing different projects

and then we have to share paints. We have to get students to carry the paint . . . and it's just crazy!"

### Successes

Even though the new teachers in this study sometimes felt overwhelmed by their many challenges, the majority of them (10 of 11) reported that they felt that they had a successful first year of teaching. Successes included building trust/sense of community with their students; making a difference in the students' lives; improving dialogue/discussion about art; showcasing the art program; building relationships and respect with colleagues, parents, and administration; and producing high-quality student artwork.

**Building Trust/A Sense of Community** Not only did novice teachers feel strongly about connecting to their students, they also felt it important that they facilitate a long-term change in their students' perspectives. Peggy described how she noticed how her students help one another: "Like, 'oh, you measured that wrong, it's this, right here.' And I'm like, that's great!" Erica also wanted to build a sense of classroom community as she expressed, "I want to be an encouraging teacher and know my students well enough to know their strengths and try to encourage them in that area." Beth expressed the desire for her students to "find a niche" in art and to be successful, and ended the school year with the desire to be a teacher who is remembered for enriching the children's lives and bringing "joy in their hearts." Jennifer's comments suggest a bit of a change, in that her focus was student learning before the year began, whereas the environment of her classroom became the focus at the end. She ended the school year with the desire of being a teacher "that students can come to with problems," and of being more respected and more of a disciplinarian.

**Dialogue About Art** James was proud that student artwork in the cafeteria sparked conversation in his school about art. He received many comments from other teachers:

One of them was really mad and said that I shouldn't have let the kids write their own stories on the paper around the edges of the figures. For example, one student wrote, "War is stupid. Bring our troops home." Another teacher said it's the best thing that he's ever seen an art teacher do with kids because it made them really think hard about important issues.

Sally, who taught an Advanced Placement high school course, was generally pleased about the conversations her students had about art, but wished there was more time to just talk about art. At the elementary level, Carolyn saw students growing in their openness to compare and contrast as they carefully looked at art. Her third graders were discussing the most. She wanted her students to begin to

appreciate art and know “how to have a conversation.” Beth described how she could have done a better job with her Japanese kimono unit with more emphasis on students’ thinking about when, where, and why they would wear the kimono they designed. The next year, she planned to have students write a story about where they would wear their kimono. And Anita concluded, “To me balancing discussion and studio is an important part of it and it takes a lot of time doing that too. It’s kind of a balancing act.”

***Making a Difference*** The demographics in James’s middle school was eclectic, with many minorities represented. After Hurricane Katrina, several students who were displaced from New Orleans joined his classes. He reflected, “I think that art was kind of a safe haven for them though. They could come in here and forget about everything for awhile.” Jennifer’s first unit was on comics. Some students found redrawing their character and thinking in a logical sequence to develop a storyline with conflict and resolution was hard, yet some made personal connections with their comic character. In fact, one student continued to work until he had completed 77 panels. Anita described her success by sharing, “I had some students who are really quiet and then I have their teachers come back and tell me how much they love art and enjoy it and talk about something to them. You just don’t realize that they are paying attention or that you are getting through to them but you are.”

***Showcasing the Art Program*** In every visit to Sally’s school, the hallway to the art room was covered with high-quality artworks by the students. Sally indicated that she had many positive comments by fellow faculty about the quality of the student work. Beth and James established Web sites that posted students’ work for parents to view. Jennifer had a survey on the wall outside her classroom for students to respond to the question “Are comics art?” She related how many students didn’t think of comics as being art. She thought students’ definitions of art and art-related jobs had expanded. Showcasing the art program also included moving beyond the walls of the school. For example, James and Erica encouraged students to participate in various community art contests.

## Discussion and Implications for Preservice Art Education Programs

Among the most frequently discussed concerns or challenges included the novice teachers’ surprise at the demands of their teaching on their energy level and time. The novice teachers were often concerned with ways to address apathy and negative attitudes. Time management, including the logistical considerations of being an itinerant teacher; classroom management and size; adequate budget; and lack of training for teaching students with special needs rounded out the top five hindrances to the delivery of instruction. These concerns mirror those reported

by novice teachers in other studies. As Cohen-Evron's (2001) study demonstrated, new teachers need to understand and find their "place" or sense of identity within their school. Likewise, Kagan's (1992) review of research on novice teachers' professional growth noted the nature of the teaching assignment, support from colleagues, and relationships with students' parents appeared to be determinants of growth and success. These findings appear to be confirmed in our study. By the end of the year, 10 of the 11 novice teachers felt positive about their first-year teaching experience. They were happy with their students' accomplishments and felt positive about their abilities as teachers. First-year art teachers felt successful in connecting their lessons to students' experience, making a difference in students' lives, and having examples of high-quality student artwork by the end of the year. They also felt that they had helped improve dialogue about art, helped build a sense of community within their school, and showcased their art program both within and beyond the walls of their school.

On the other hand, our study suggests that it is not unusual for new teachers to be assigned the least desirable teaching positions in the district or school (Goodlad, 1994). Novice teachers who are preoccupied with logistical concerns may not feel comfortable speaking up and asking for assistance or mentoring (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Yet, we found that novice teachers are unlikely to buck the system. There may be a need in preservice programs for more time devoted to developing leadership skills so that novice teachers feel equipped to express their needs and physical limitations better to those in decision-making positions. As Freedman (2007) points out, "Creativity can be seen as an act of leadership as well as the expression of an individual" (p. 204). Darling-Hammond (2007) suggests that advocating for bettering working conditions such as class size, teaching workload, reasonable schedules, and availability of materials would help novice teachers. She further recommends providing a mentoring program for novice teachers as one of the most beneficial ways of keeping good teachers.

University faculty can aid in helping students examine their preconceived notions about teaching, their personalities, their expectations, and the wide ranges of what various school cultures value (Bain, 2004). We found it interesting that, at the end of their first year of teaching, 6 of the 11 participants were not going to return to the same school next year. Of those six, two relocated because they were unhappy with the lack of administrative support in their school (and felt it impeded their growth and progress as a teacher), one teacher was reassigned to another school, one moved out of state, and two decided to stay at home with infants. While every qualitative study will yield results that cannot be generalized to large numbers, our hope is that this study will help illuminate commonalities that many novice art teachers share. By hearing the voices of first-year art teachers de-

scribe their successes and challenges, university educators can use this information to better prepare the next generation of art teachers.

## Notes

1. We express our appreciation to the University Research Council, University of Central Arkansas, for their support of this study.
2. Each researcher selected 3 participants for a total of 12, but 1 participant encountered health problems and elected to drop out of the study. Pseudonyms are used to represent participants' names.
3. All quotes from participants in this study are personal communications from interviews conducted from August 2005 to July 2006.

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