

The Unsinkable New Teacher: A Perspective for Teacher Attrition

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Abstract

This article introduces the idea of the developmental readiness of the new young teacher as a contributing cause of teacher attrition in the United States. Written from a leadership perspective, research presented provides consideration for discussion among the leadership community as well as a unique perspective in leadership responsibility.

What imagery comes to mind when you picture the classrooms of America and the teachers who stand at the front of the class? Do you conjure an image similar to an edition of Norman Rockwell's Saturday Evening Post, or does Robin Williams' inspiring performance in *Dead Poet's Society* convey a standard for teacher practice? Whatever image comes to mind, I am sure the Titanic is not the impression on the forefront of your thoughts. Perhaps this assertion is a bit dramatic, but at times, those of us who are a part of education now, may feel like we are a participant on a fateful voyage with little power in our charge than to simply shuffle the seats on board, to delay the inevitable sinking.

Iceberg Ahead!

A damaging trend plaguing the United States Public Education System in the 21st century is teacher attrition. Simply put, it is sinking our schools. It is a pestilence that reinforces the demise of student achievement as well as quality instruction. With educational leaders, policy makers, and statisticians appraising that 40% to 50% of teachers leave within the first five years of teaching (Torres, 2012), this problematic trend's prevalence in America's public education system presents a relevant and immediate obstruction to our students' learning. Here lies our immense iceberg.

Numerous factors have been found to affect a teacher's decision to stay or leave their employment. Among these influences on attrition are work demands, salary, lack of administrative support, school culture, inadequate resources and student behavior (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012). Little research however, has considered the developmental readiness of the young teacher, specifically in consideration of social and cognitive development instrumental in decision making, as proposed by Jeffrey Arnett's theory of Emerging Adulthood. Correspondingly, how does such a proposed theory of development affect educational leaders' capacity for supervision of new teachers entering the field?

Who's on Board?

When considering the idea of teacher readiness, is it logical to deliberate the developmental growth and age of the teacher candidate? Studies have determined adult development and developmental success are influential factors when considering predictors of attrition in teaching. The characteristics of young adulthood, defined as the ages between 18 and 40, have been described by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson as a point of psychological crisis where one faces a conflict of intimacy versus isolation (Sacco, 2013). Preceding this conflict, one battles and evaluates their sense of self and identity. This stage is known as identity versus identity confusion. It is a developmental time where morality is formed through reflection of personal values, beliefs, ethical commitments, and goals (Sacco, 2013).

In the assessment of adult development, it is essential to investigate empirical and theoretical literature to devise an understanding of the developmental traits of a young adult entering the teaching profession and not to dismiss the developmental philosophies and works as such notable theorists as Erikson, Piaget, and Freud. Age ranges of development do not necessarily signify the literal or concrete shift in the developmental growth of an individual, but rather serve as a guide or frame to outline a particular time period in a person's life (Scales, Bensen, Oesterle, Hill, Hawkins, & Pashak, 2016).

Young adulthood is categorized as the age range between the ages of 18 and 40 according to Erikson (Sacco, 2013). It is a period of substantial growth defined by significant transitions that provide constructs that support the integral foundation for a person's life. Closer examination of this developmental shift by theorist Jeffrey Arnett, proposes that "there is now a longer road to adulthood" ("Emerging Adulthood : The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties," n.d.). Arnett notes that despite leaving home in their late teens, many young adults do not establish or ground themselves in their adult lives until they are as old as 29. This theory, in the face of obligatory and institutional duties charged to teachers, suggests that despite perceptions of maturation of the college graduate teacher candidates, levels of psychological development and autonomy may be wanting in the face of professional realities and expectations for classroom management, efficacy, and level of commitment ("Emerging Adulthood : The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties," n.d.).

As we emerge through the stages of early adulthood and develop not only a personal identity, but professional identity, it is important to recognize a phenomenon known as teacher voice (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). During formal collegiate education and preservice education, student teachers develop attributes that support the complex ethical and developmental decisions that will be made in their classrooms as they pertain to their students. Young adults constructing their professional identity, in congruence with their developmental journey into adulthood, have significant individual social and community role identification processes to manage (Walkington, 2005). Combining theoretical knowledge derived from coursework, while attaining to contextual, multifaceted situations that require personal practice and assessment, can result in feelings of stress, inability to handle the workload, and poor self-efficacy (Torres, 2012).

Oh Captain, my Captain!

What is the role of principals in consideration of these young teachers? During this outlined semi-autonomous stage of development, it is obligatory that educational leaders recognize that it is an intensely self-reflective period of development. Arnett characterizes this time in a person's development as a time of self-focus and instability where one typically internalizes problems and stress that can ultimately lead to anxiety and depression ("Emerging Adulthood : The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties," 2015.). Transition into young adulthood intensifies in a person's late twenties as the rational part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for judgement and long term consequences, matures fully ("Understanding the Teen Brain - Health Encyclopedia - University of Rochester Medical Center," n.d.).

Inevitably educational leadership must consider the impact of such significant growth in maturation, world views, and cognitive development of teachers in their twenties. Building principals and administration in particular play an instrumental role in mentoring and supporting staff, while concurrently modeling the art of decision making to be balanced with an awareness of rationality and maturity. Furthermore, "the willingness and capacity for leaders to be self-reflective, to be actively engaged as leaders, develop a capacity for disciplined and honest self-reflection are essential to becoming an authentic leader"(Nohria & Khurana, 2010, p.22). Additionally noteworthy is the idea of creating meaning. Meaning creates significant impact upon personnel. "Meaning creation is an important phenomenon regardless of its relation to economic performance" (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Where's the Map?

Bernard Bass, a leadership theorist influenced by the study of psychology, placed emphasis and examination of the relationship between leader and follower. His development of theory focused attention on the terms of the influence of and on the followers of leaders as a tool of measurement affecting success of leadership. Central to his concentration of study, Bass looked specifically to motivation, inspiration, and charisma (Clayton, 2016).

Significant to his work, Bass suggested that workers seek to find meaning beyond themselves and that people are innately wired to respond to those leaders in whom they feel a sense of trust, admiration, loyalty and respect. Performance outcomes under transformational leaders produce value in terms of not only labor production, but inspiration derived from a sense of mission and efficacy celebrated beyond the self that contributes to the company as a whole (Clayton, 2016).

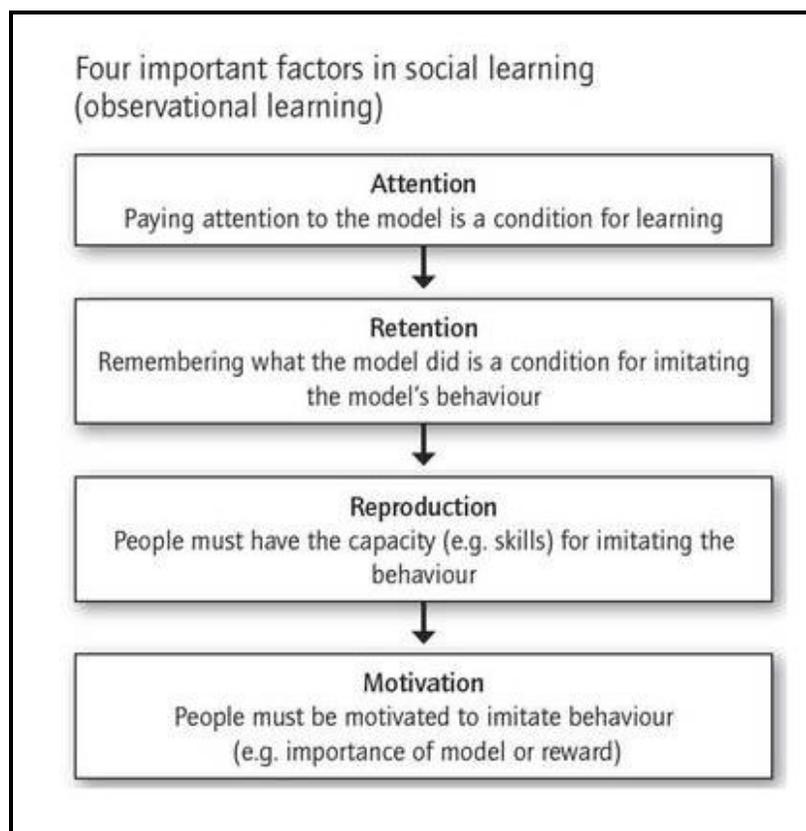
Furthermore, Bass advanced the idea that workers under transformational leadership are influenced by the charisma of their leaders. They are encouraged to contribute to the decision-making process, while feeling motivated by the idealized influence of those above them (Clayton, 2016). With Arnett's theory in mind, how can our captains of education, our principals, institute themselves as leaders in their communities that not only lead, but mentor, and provide developmental guidance?

How do we steer the ship?

In contemplation of the aforementioned, how do we balance the delicacy of development with the responsibilities held by young teachers? Moreover, how does educational leadership effectively navigate such a psychologically complex situation, beyond the daily responsibilities attributed to running a school?

Perhaps a relevant model of developmental readiness could be derived from a study from the Global Leadership Institute at the University of Nebraska based on military leadership. The U.S. West Point Military Academy is said to develop leaders in four years. Sean Hannah, who conducted the original study, based his research on the ideas of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, a method of observational learning (Figure 1.1). Bandura's work over his career focused on the idea of efficacy. Efficacy refers to the idea in one's head that they are competent and could be successful at a task. He further maintained that people must feel confident in order to make or create change (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Figure 1.1 Bandura: Social Learning Theory



Retrieved: <http://www.psychologywizard.net/social-learning-ao1-ao2-ao3.html>

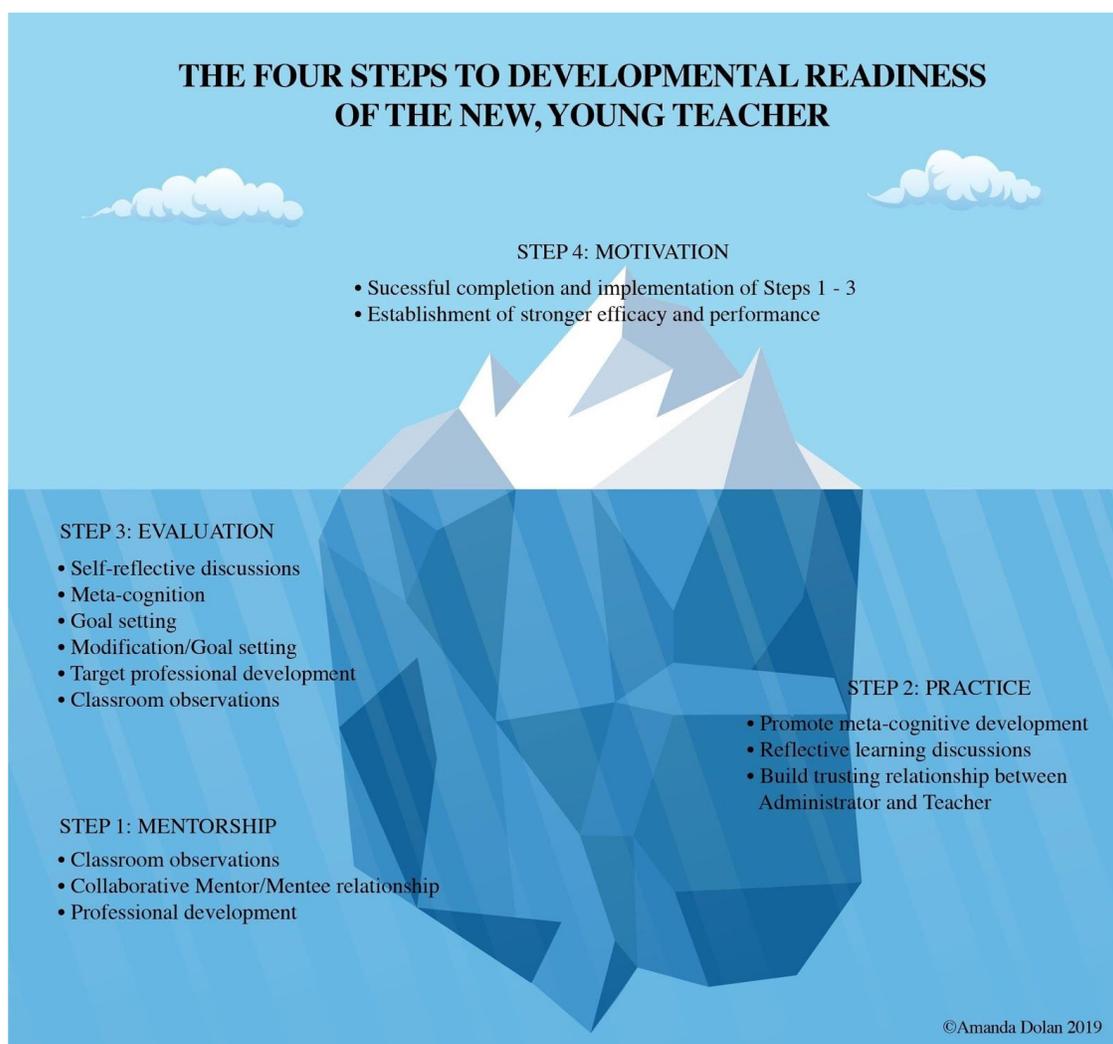
Hannah's work later lead others to "research and explore motivation not only associated to leadership, but associated to learning, as well as the motivation to develop" (Nohria & Khurana, 2010,p. 753). Hannah's work is now one of numerous studies completed at West Point in the area of developmental readiness. Meta-analyses of studies have concluded that one's ability to think meta-cognitively as well as one's attunement of learning goal orientation and perception of self or self-clarity, can all be considered to be predictors of developmental readiness. Such findings are relevant not only to the nature of leadership versus authentic leadership development, but can also be assignable and relevant to educational leadership specifically (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Considering Bandura's model in educational leadership application, in order to create and facilitate the learning and competency of a new young teacher, it is necessary to consider the steps needed to convey and secure the previously stated predictors of developmental readiness as derived from the study of West Point Academy students; meta-cognition, goal orientation, and self-clarity. As an educational leader, a prudent means to address this problem of practice, and level of developmental readiness in teachers, would be to first and foremost understand the relevant nature of development and the identification of stage and crises faced throughout a person's twenties. Being that this developmental growth time is comprised of feelings of instability and intense self-reflection, it would benefit the educational community to contemplate the systems in place and position emphasis on models that promote

meta-cognition of staff, self-reflection and clarity, as well as goal setting and orientation. It would equally be advisable to develop motivating means to further enhance practice and self-efficacy (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Let's build a better boat!

Utilizing Bandura's model of social learning in Figure 1.1, in consideration of attrition rates of new young teachers, let's couple Arnett's theory of social and cognitive development with Bass's theory of creating meaning to formulate programming and support to ensure observational learning to build efficacy in our new educators. With the aforementioned in mind, I propose the following, modeled in Figure 1.2, to help create unsinkable teachers.



Step one is to establish a strong mentorship program within the school setting. Mentorship opportunities should include regular meetings between mentor teacher and new teacher, observations in veteran teacher classrooms, and professional development opportunities relevant to the subject area and classroom management. The establishment of such focus should additionally, and most importantly include conversations on the development

of self beyond the individual - toward the greater good of the students and in collaboration with the staff.

Step two to further ensure teacher efficacy in relation to practice, administrative support through weekly classroom visitations, meaningful discussions of practice, and encouraging and targeted accolades in areas of competency and displayed performance should be upheld. It is within this time that the principal should work to build a trusting, supportive relationship with the new teacher. Commendations of authentic successes are critical in this stage of development as they build robust feelings of worth and purpose. In turn, such growth exhibited in the classroom provides further goal setting discussion opportunities between principal and teacher, and establishes a professional relationship for development of practice (Sacco, 2013).

Step three, in conjunction with meetings established in step two, is an optimum time to work on developing meta-cognitive practice and self-reflection. Being able to assess one's own level of performance as not just a practitioner, but a thinker and a learner, is imperative to advance developmental and professional growth. This developmental and professional step, in practice, should facilitate not only collegiate discussion, but written reflection of practice. Clear, self-evaluative practice and reflection is necessary for depth of learning and growth (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Bandura's final factor in recognition of social theory is the idea of motivation. Motivation, as displayed in figure 1.2, is the tip of our iceberg, floating above the sea for all to set eyes upon. It is supported by the strength underneath the water's surface. Using motivation as a tool designed to enhance efficacy and competency, is necessary for leaders to understand that emulation of a model or performance is a compulsory means for learning and growth. Successful completion and implementation of the preceding steps leads to stronger efficacy and performance through recognition and reinforcement of desired behavior. In turn, confidence is not only attributed to performance growth, but more significantly to the idea that confidence, which Bandura maintains, is necessary for change. (Nohria & Khurana, 2010).

Bon Voyage!

The mentoring relationship is a decisive factor in attrition, new teacher growth, and professional competency. All steps of mentorship, including motivation and targeted, attainable goal setting, must be a part of the system that educational leaders promote within their schools. It is through the transformational leader that relationships and shared visions can be established for the benefit of all stakeholders. Building administrators hold a crucial role in transitioning new teachers from the college classroom to the head of the classroom. Establishing a safety net comprised of trust, support, and learning is no small feat. It is ultimately the amalgamation of the of principal, mentor teacher, mentor program, and novice teacher working in congruence to develop the readiness skills during this developmental time that leads to optimal outcomes and performance. Confidence, a noted developmental marker, in congruence with Bandura's theory of social learning, can aide in not only the development of U.S. West Point graduates, but must be considered a pertinent and applicable theory in relation to the developmental readiness of teachers.

This article is a call to action to keep our young teachers afloat! Nurture their developmental growth and help them navigate through developmental transitions. In the wake of significant teacher attrition, foster continued self-reflective practices centered around

meta-cognitive growth. Create safe havens for practice and learning and provide strong mentorship programs, not discounting your own role as leaders.

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