The Wish List: Articulating and Responding to New Teachers’ Concerns

Like many novice teachers, I (Erinn) experienced much anxiety during my first year in the classroom. Hired to teach English at an all-girls’ secondary school in Japan, I wondered, Am I communicating clearly? Will they find my lessons engaging? Have I planned enough material to make it through the day? Soon, however, my new-teacher concerns shifted in focus from TESOL pedagogy to daily survival. For instance, the copy machine was a giant, mysterious contraption; every button I pushed displayed directions in a language I could not read.

Attempting to fend off my new-job anxieties, I articulated my pedagogical deficiencies and lack of daily survival skills in a Wish List, a list of concerns and questions I faced and wished I had mastered before becoming a new teacher. Items on my Wish List included how to use the copy machine and how to hold a group discussion when my students seemed too reluctant to speak in English. Creating this list, I realized I could not solve my teaching dilemmas alone; I needed a mentor. My school’s principal had assigned me a mentor; however, she was a reserved Japanese woman, nearing retirement, who only reluctantly conversed with me in English. Thus, our cultural dissimilarities, age differences, and language barriers made it difficult for me to feel comfortable seeking help from her.

In short, I possessed many questions and concerns, but I had not yet established a network of support. I lived thousands of miles from friends and mentors from my teacher-preparation program. I felt isolated and didn’t know how to ask for help. Between my frustrations in managing daily tasks and my growing need for pedagogical advice, I quickly realized the reality of my job was much more difficult than I had anticipated. Only later did I discover that my concerns as a new teacher were not unique.

New Teachers’ Need to Understand “Real-World” Concerns

A substantial body of literature documents the concerns of new teachers. For example, Simon Veenman reports “classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students’ work, relationships with parents, organization of class work, insufficient materials and supplies, and dealing with problems of individual students” are the most frequently cited new teacher concerns (160). Similarly, Ye He and Jewell Cooper cite classroom management, student motivation, and parent involvement as prominent themes among student teachers’ concerns (103). According to the studies conducted by Veenman and He and Cooper, both preservice and inservice teachers emphasize the importance of well-managed learning environments and healthy home-school relationships. In other words, teachers preparing for the profession and those actively in the profession share similar job-related concerns.

While data collected by Veenman and He and Cooper may suggest that prospective teachers “know what they’re getting into” on training for this profession, other scholars indicate there...
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There may be discrepancies between preservice teachers’ expectations and the reality of full-time teaching. According to a study conducted by Thomas M. McCann, Larry R. Johannessen, and Bernard P. Ricca among beginning and experienced English teachers, “preservice teachers do not have a realistic idea of the workload of a high school English teacher, the fatigue they might experience, or the negative effects the fatigue might have on their physical and emotional well-being” (45). Further, this study shows that beginning teachers are less confident than their experienced counterparts in regard to pedagogical and content-area knowledge (50).

In short, some new teachers may enter their first job with both unrealistic expectations and apprehension about their teaching abilities.

To help counter these and other concerns, K–12 districts often support beginning teachers through induction or mentoring programs.Statistically, such support systems have proven to positively affect teacher attrition rates. For instance, “Among beginning public school teachers who were assigned a mentor in 2007–08, about 8 percent were not teaching in 2008–09 and 10 percent were not teaching in 2009–10. In contrast, among the beginning public school teachers who were not assigned a mentor in 2007–08, about 16 percent were not teaching in 2008–09 and 23 percent were not teaching in 2009–10” (Kaiser 3; italics added). Mentorship, then, appears to significantly impact whether a new teacher remains in his or her profession.

This body of research, however, does not specifically address how to help new teachers name their job-related misconceptions or concerns. How might novice teachers articulate their misconceptions and learning needs, and how might I, as a mentor, respond to these new teachers’ concerns?

The Wish List: A Personal Professional Development Plan

As a novice teacher, I developed a Wish List as a method for clearly and specifically documenting skills I wanted to learn. This list contained both general teaching skills and those particular to my teaching context. Throughout my first years in the classroom, I used my Wish List as a personal professional development guide: continually referring to my list, adding new skills or concepts, and systematically looking for mentors to guide me.

For example, I needed to learn how to use the copy machine to create handouts and teaching materials. The machine’s display panel was comprised of technical Japanese words I could not read. In addition to this “survival skill,” I also had a pressing pedagogical issue on my Wish List. My high school students, though fairly proficient at reading, writing, and listening in their second language, were hesitant to speak English aloud in class. None of the strategies I learned in my teacher-preparation program were working in this learning environment.

One day, I noticed the physical education (PE) teacher, Ms. Suzuki (a pseudonym), replace the toner in the copy machine. I had never talked with this teacher; I did not even know if she spoke English. However, I knew learning to navigate the copier was at the top of my Wish List, and this teacher seemed mechanically inclined. In imperfect Japanese, I asked her to explain some of the copier’s functions. To my relief, Ms. Suzuki spoke English, and she helped me create a bilingual diagram for using the machine. Soon afterward, Ms. Suzuki approached me with a favor. She coached the high school girls’ dance team, learned I had studied dance, and asked me to choreograph an “American dance” for their next recital. As I attended rehearsals, I noticed several of the students playing a word-association game in Japanese. They played the game every day, so I asked them to teach me. Suddenly, my Wish List came to mind: My students were too hesitant to speak English aloud in my class. What if I used this game, with which the students were already familiar, as a vocabulary activity? The next day, I introduced this activity to my students, who not only began speaking English, they also eagerly taught me other games to use.

My Wish List, then, became a specific and directed professional development plan. My list challenged me to look beyond the fact that my new job did not match preconceived notions of “what it means to be a teacher.” Instead of dwelling on new-job exhaustion, isolation, or disenchantment, I focused on one learning goal at a time; the “list format” made my goals tangible and attainable.

How might novice teachers articulate their misconceptions and learning needs, and how might I, as a mentor, respond to these new teachers’ concerns?
short, my Wish List served as a way to articulate my specific learning needs, set professional development goals, and establish mentor relationships.

The Wish List: Attaining “Insider” Knowledge

In a quest to find answers to my Wish List questions, I discovered mentoring relationships in unexpected places. Prior to this experience, I had belonged to a teacher support network comprised of English professors and classmates at my undergraduate institution. I assumed, once employed full-time, I would continue to lean on other English teachers for support. To find solutions for my Wish List issues, however, I learned that good mentors possess qualities other than English content knowledge.

For example, Ms. Suzuki was a PE teacher; she did not have any background knowledge in ELA pedagogy. I could not turn to her for advice on rubrics, vocabulary assessments, or reading strategies. However, I could turn to her when I needed help translating and completing paperwork. She was patient and willing to work with me; further, she possessed practical knowledge regarding the logistics or daily operations of the school. Ms. Suzuki became my go-to person. She possessed specific knowledge I could not find in my teaching handbooks or undergraduate program; she had on-the-job knowledge only an “insider” could provide.

For several years, I used the Wish List approach to develop a personal professional development plan as a classroom teacher. This year, however, I decided to use the Wish List in a new way. As an English education professor, I was assigned to supervise two students (Allison and Tammie) in yearlong internships. Allison and Tammie were enrolled in a teaching licensure program and were employed as full-time secondary-level ELA teachers under probationary certification. My supervisory duties included completing teaching observations, providing candidates with pedagogical support, and advising their action-research projects. I reviewed their lesson plans and offered advice on ELA pedagogy and behavioral management; however, I wondered whether this was enough. Did they possess new teachers’ concerns that were not being met? In an attempt to better understand their professional development needs, I asked Allison and Tammie to create a Wish List, shown in Figure 1.

I had expected the interns would focus primarily on classroom management and motivating students. These concerns prevailed among new teachers I had supervised over the past three years; further, these issues were cited in current literature regarding new teachers’ concerns (He and Cooper; McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca; Veenman). Instead, each intern posed a concern I had not considered before. As their supervisor, I listened to their concerns and provided them with targeted, personalized mentoring advice. In short, the Wish List provided me, as a mentor,
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Allison’s Concern: Terminology

When I first met Allison, she was just beginning her second year as an ELA teacher at an urban high school. She had recently earned her master’s degree in literature, had taught first-year composition at a nearby postsecondary institution for two years, and was in the process of completing her secondary-level ELA certification. In many ways, then, Allison was a nontraditional education major. That is, she had already earned a master’s degree, and she was highly knowledgeable in ELA content; however, she had not yet finished all her pedagogy coursework, which traditional preservice teachers complete prior to their first teaching assignment. Considering her nontraditional background, I was uncertain as to what Allison’s professional development needs might be. During one of our mentoring meetings, we referred to the Wish List we had created collaboratively with Tammie; I asked Allison which item on the list most concerned her, and she identified “teaching terminology.”

Allison explained, “When I was hired as an ELA teacher at my school, I had just earned my master’s degree in literature. While I had experience teaching at the college level, I had never taken an education class. I was under the assumption that my principal (and other colleagues) would cut me some slack when it came to certain aspects of my job. I was, after all, a first-year teacher. Some colleagues were understanding and helpful; these colleagues became my mentors. However, I was still hesitant to ask for help with some things I felt I would know if I had an education from a traditional teacher-preparation program.

“The terminology one would learn in education classes was one of the most difficult (and embarrassing) of my shortcomings. Asking anyone to define a word they were using so comfortably was too humiliating; I had to pretend I knew what they meant. Once, this almost got me into trouble. My academic coach came into my room after school one day and said the words I dreaded as a first year teacher, ‘We have a problem.’ As it turned out, a mother was quite upset with me because her son was not doing well in my class, and she was not receiving weekly updates, a requirement laid out in this child’s 504. ‘504’ meant nothing to me. I’m sure I had heard it along the way and looking it up was a task that fell by the wayside. I just came out and told her, ‘I have no idea what that means.’ Luckily she understood, and we worked it out.”

Until Allison shared her story, I had not considered that some preservice and inservice teachers might struggle with unfamiliar teaching terminology. As her mentor, I encouraged her to continue asking colleagues for help in learning unfamiliar terms. Though she was embarrassed by her lack of knowledge, I reminded Allison that education terminology changes over time as new pedagogical theories are implemented; terminology varies across content areas; and even veteran teachers may not fully grasp every teaching term.
Together, Allison and I devised a plan for her to continue improving her “teaching terminology” while developing mentoring relationships among her colleagues. Since the special education terms within her inclusion classroom seemed the most difficult to master, we decided to focus on those. Allison was co-teaching with a special education teacher, and they exchanged lesson plans and other teaching materials prior to teaching. These teaching materials often included ELA content-specific terms (e.g., *dramatic irony, personification, allusion*). Likewise, these materials often referred to specific terms associated with students’ learning accommodations. Both teachers possessed general knowledge of ELA pedagogy and knowledge on differentiating instruction based on students’ needs; however, Allison was not certified in special education, and her co-teacher was not an ELA specialist. Therefore, it was likely they both encountered unfamiliar terms in their co-teaching materials. We decided, in this situation, a Wish List might be used to develop a “give-and-take approach” for teachers to learn new terminology.

For example, when Allison encountered unfamiliar teaching terms related to special education, she consulted her colleague. She explained, “Simply asking a colleague outright to define a term was something I had to get used to doing. At first I was embarrassed, but then my colleagues answered my questions, and I was thankful for those co-teachers who were willing to help without judgment.” As she had already received help from her co-teacher, Allison said she then felt “more comfortable” offering to explain ELA terms or concepts to her colleagues. She admitted, “I used to worry that if I asked too many questions, other teachers would think I was ‘weak.’ Now that I ask questions and give answers, I feel like I’m a team player.”

As illustrated by Allison’s situation, we believe the Wish List can serve as a catalyst for novice teachers and their mentors to identify specific professional development needs. Once those needs are identified, mentors can create a specific plan for novice teachers to reach their professional development goals. We believe other mentors might find this approach helpful, as the Wish List allows new teachers to articulate a wide range of needs. These needs—which may vary in topic from teaching logistics, to behavioral management, to ELA content pedagogy, to job performance—may require a different mentor for each topic. In Allison’s case, the best-qualified mentor was a special education teacher. In short, if used as a needs-assessment tool, the Wish List might help both mentors and mentees determine individualized development goals and appropriate development plans.

**Tammie’s Concern: Standards**

Similar to Allison, Tammie was a novice teacher, provisionally certified to teach ELA at an urban high school. She was completing her final year in a master’s program, specializing in English education and earning her secondary-level certification. Like Allison, Tammie’s most pressing teaching concern on the Wish List focused on terminology. More specifically, Tammie struggled to connect her theoretical understanding of the term “The Standards” with her newly found experiential understanding of the term. In one of our mentoring sessions, Tammie was visibly frustrated; she stated, “As a new teacher I’ve had a lot of challenges in making the transition from being a student of educational rhetoric (i.e., ‘The Standards’) to a professional who has to actively engage with these criteria, teach them on a daily basis, and be held accountable and assessed based on them.” When I asked her to pinpoint the source of her frustration with the term “The Standards,” she felt there was a disconnect between her preservice training and her real-world job. “Before I became a teacher,” Tammie explained, “I understood that my students needed to know these concepts and I realized how they connected to student achievement, but I was never instructed as to how I should physically bring ‘The Standard’ itself (technical wording and all) into the classroom. In my program the Standards were treated as the unseen guidepost on the road of creating lessons.

“As I began my first year of teaching, I created unified and differentiated lessons. I felt confident
and comfortable in my classroom because I knew my lessons were standards-based. My gradebook was standards-based, which allowed me to immediately see which students did not yet grasp the standards covered and were in need of remediation. I felt that I was doing what was expected; however, when other teachers visited, they looked for my standards, which were not posted. As I had limited space in my room, and floated for much of the year, I didn’t dwell on this too much—there simply was not any additional space to display them. Then, after an informal observation, my school’s Academic Coach informed me that I did not have an ‘opening’ to my lessons introducing ‘The Standards’ to my students, which is required by my district and part of my yearly assessment.

“Even though ‘The Standards’ guided my planning and instruction, I was not following the protocol on which I would be assessed. ‘The Standards’ were not displayed in my room and students did not recite them. As a new teacher, I struggle when including the required ‘Standards’ protocol; the formal recitation of ‘The Standards’ immediately caused my students to tune out and lose interest.”

Like many new and veteran teachers, Tammie understood that student achievement is linked with teachers’ “continuous service” or promotion. She was not frustrated that her teaching effectiveness was directly connected to her students’ mastery of prescribed standards. Rather, Tammie was frustrated that her district’s policy regarding the visual and oral presentations of the standards conflicted with her teaching philosophy. In mentoring Tammie, I encouraged her to maintain her faith in her educational beliefs. I also reminded her that being a classroom teacher requires balancing theoretical beliefs with real-world learning contexts (e.g., district policies, administrator values, students’ learning needs, parent concerns). Tammie’s experience emphasized the importance of novice teachers clearly understanding how their job performance will be assessed. Though Tammie did not philosophically agree with her district’s policy regarding classroom implementation of “The Standards,” she was, nonetheless, held accountable to that policy.

In an effort to help other novice teachers who may not fully understand job performance assessment, Tammie and I developed the following suggestions for mentors and mentees:

- Do not assume that preservice teachers are assessed in the same way as inservice teachers. Each teacher-preparation program and K–12 school district typically uses its own, distinct rubric or tool for evaluating teacher performance.
- Be sure new teachers are familiar with the district assessment tool or rubric at the beginning of the school year.
- New teachers may benefit from using the district assessment rubric to complete self-evaluations throughout the year.
- New teachers may benefit from one (or more) “practice” assessment/observation. If possible, mentor teachers might perform these assessments and coach new teachers in areas of improvement. (Being coached and assessed by a mentor teacher may be less stressful for novice teachers than being assessed by administrators.)
- New teachers often like to observe more-experienced colleagues teach. Asking to visit a veteran teacher’s classroom can be intimidating for some new teachers. If possible, mentor teachers might invite new teachers to watch specific lessons.

In reflecting on her observation experience, Tammie noted, “I was lucky that my Academic Coach did an informal observation and helped me better understand the district’s policy before my official observation.” In Tammie’s situation, the Wish List, then, became a tool for reflection. At the beginning of the school year, she had written, “How do students’ assessment of the standards connect to my assessment as a teacher?” on our list. Being a busy new teacher and full-time graduate student, however, Tammie did not find the time to fully investigate this connection between student assessment and her own assessment as a teacher. In this case, we realized it might not be possible for new teachers to master every professional development need on a Wish List. Still, we believe this tool may help new teachers and mentors reflect on professional accomplishments at the end of a semester or school year and use the list to establish new goals.
The Wish List: A Way to Listen Closely

It has been 9 years since I was a full-time secondary-level teacher and 15 years since I was a “new” teacher. Therefore, I cannot rely entirely on my own experiences as a classroom teacher to guide my mentoring practices or curricular decisions as an English educator. The Wish List has helped me understand interns’ specific learning needs and tailor my mentoring to those needs. As the interns and I have learned, a Wish List can be a means for articulating specific learning needs and for reflecting on one’s own teaching beliefs, frustrations, and aspirations. In other words, a Wish List can facilitate problem-solving and reflective conversations within mentor relationships.

Scholars, including Thomas M. McCann and Larry R. Johanness, Blaine Ackley and M. D. Gail, and Ken Zeichner, describe successful mentor teachers as proactive; they anticipate problems new teachers may encounter and attempt to address these issues before they reach “crisis” status. Further, good mentors employ collaborative problem-solving, offer emotional support and motivation, and model effective teaching practices (He and Cooper 112–13). In sum, good mentors listen closely to new teachers’ concerns, take those concerns seriously, and help find solutions. As a mentor to both preservice and inservice teachers, I know I am not the perfect listener, role model, or problem solver. A Wish List, however, allows me to hear novice teachers’ concerns and offer them individualized, specific support regarding the complexity and reality of the teaching profession.

Works Cited


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**READWİTETHİNK CONNECTION**

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“Our Classroom: Writing an Owner’s Manual” invites students to write an owner’s manual that helps them get to know their classroom, provides them with a sense of ownership, and lets others know about their classroom similar to the “wish list.” http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/classroom-writing-owner-manual-862.html

Erinn Bentley with Allison Morway and Tammie Short