

Octopus or Frazzled Juggler: The Challenge of Teacher Retention ¹

By Susan Gold, Sara Falls, Claudia Haas, Peter Hippard, K.E. Hones, and Virginia Marshall,
MetLife Fellows, TNLI San Francisco

Things Fall Apart

It was Wendy's first year of teaching and she had been assigned a second grade class. She remembered enjoying the creativity and enthusiasm of children that age and couldn't wait to meet them. As she approached the door to the room she had been assigned, she was surprised to see it was already open and lit. A woman was standing on a ladder taping things to the ceiling. Wendy remarked, "Hi, I thought I was assigned this room."

"Oh, I didn't realize. There were some boxes here, but the principal told me she wanted me to have this space. I think the boxes were moved somewhere on the third floor."

"Oh, thanks. I guess I'll go look for them."

After asking a fifth grade teacher for help, Wendy found her boxes dumped in the corner of the dingiest room she had ever seen. The floor had not been swept, nor the windows cleaned for what looked like years. Garbage and papers were strewn everywhere. All the other classes on the floor were upper grades. She wondered why she had been moved.

The first day of school the students came in fresh and neat. She had planned to do a shared reading of the first story in the textbook, a fantasy about space travel. When they were all gathered on the rug, she did a brief picture walk discussion about the topic. Then, asking the students to read along with her, she began to read aloud. Only two voices accompanied her. The rest simply sat and watched, except for Janine who started kicking Damien. She brought Janine closer to her, which made DeShay start to cry. Shavonne told him to shut up, which made him cry louder. This was clearly going to be more challenging than she had thought it would be. And it was only the first day.

By October, the class had settled into something of a routine. She had found another room to send Janine to when she got restless, and DeShay had finally reconciled himself to the idea that he was not going to be in his summer school teacher's class. Twelve of the 18 students were being seen on a regular basis by the school therapist, which seemed to lighten their moods. However, the varied-level books she had ordered still hadn't come. Only three students could read the second grade textbook with comprehension. One of them finished the whole book the first week. Six could read at about second semester first grade level, and nine were preliterate. Wendy went home each night and simplified the textbook stories, converting them into scripts. Each part was double cast with a reader and non-reader so that they had support. The rest of the day, she had them in centers so she could focus on those who needed help. It turned out their first grade teacher had wanted to quit at the end of that year, but the principal talked him into staying one more year.

Around the end of October, the leveled readers Wendy had ordered finally came. One student went to the third grade during reading, and the rest were making steady progress. Then in January, Ben entered the class. His adoptive parents were divorcing and his mother had custody. Retained in the second grade, he was a full year older than all the students, except for Jeremy, who was also repeating. As the big fish in a little pond, some of Ben's attention-getting behavior, like banging his head against the wall, was quickly adopted by most of the younger boys. He was

¹ Inspiration for this case was taken from *A Precarious Balance: How Can We Help Support Our New Teachers?*, an action research study conducted by Rebecca Hollander and Nell Scharff, TNLI MetLife Fellows, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2002.

actually a good reader and a decent writer and mathematician. If he had been retained for academic reasons, it was because most students at his former school must have greatly surpassed Wendy's students' academic preparation. Ben wanted his life to go back to the way it had been before his parents separated. He was not going to take this change in his life lying down. With the new, dynamic Ben introduced, the class quickly degenerated. A few times the literacy coach came into Wendy's room, told her she needed more structure, and left. It was all Wendy could do to keep students from tearing at each other. Although she discussed her challenges with her mentor teacher during their four scheduled meetings, more than half their time together was spent filling out state-mandated paperwork. In addition, her mentor was working in a middle class school across town. Wendy soon realized her mentor had never worked with poor urban children.

Wendy received a negative evaluation from the principal, who asked her to try to find a job elsewhere the next year. As she packed up her classroom at the end of the year, she doubted she'd try to find any job with second graders again, or with any grade for that matter. "What would have helped me?" she wondered. "More well-organized, accessible materials? Support from the literacy coach, who currently spent most of her time with the teachers who didn't need as much help? A more collegial atmosphere? A principal who truly wanted to encourage her and nurture her professional growth? A mentor who was at the same site?" So many different ideas ran through her head. What would she do now?

Curriculum Interrupted

John was so excited about the workshop about hands-on math he had attended Friday; he could hardly wait for Monday. Even though he had had to take a personal day, and pay for it himself, it had been worth every penny. He could just see Jameel's eyes light up when he handed out the million-dollar checks and the ledgers. They were going to have a great time looking at the catalogues choosing what to buy. Besides, the activity would develop reading as well as computational skills.

Checking his mailbox Monday morning, he found a memo from the principal, "See me before class."

His step was slightly less spry as he stepped into Jerry's office. "Oh good, John, you're here. I just need you to pick up your test preparation materials. Everyone else has gotten the boxes, but yours is still sitting here. You were intending to start this week, weren't you? After all, it is the beginning of February!" John's face fell as he looked at the voluminous box. Would there be time to sneak in a minute of hands-on activities? He thought about his table partners at the workshop who all taught at Northside Charter. At this very moment, they were probably sitting in their teacher lounge planning their presentation to the rest of the faculty. What would it take to get *his* principal to see beyond the test? Maybe other faculty who were willing to challenge the assumption that drilling students on math facts was not the best way to raise math achievement?

When Seniority Is Not Enough

Jane, an award-winning teacher for more than twenty years, taught language arts across the hall from first-year teacher Melinda at a low-performing middle school. At grade level meetings where teachers analyzed test data, Melinda could see that Jane's sixth grade language arts students had made enormous gains on district and state standardized tests. Other teachers let on that Jane's students' scores exceeded the district average for the past decade. She was well

respected by her colleagues and loved by the parents of her students. However, the school had a new principal that year, just as they had every other year for the past ten years. Jane stopped by Melinda's room one day with a weary look on her face. "How can the district keep doing this? The constant change in administration disrupts our staff cohesiveness and stifles the momentum we need to bring up our low-performing students. If I didn't care so much about the kids, I'd have left a long time ago."

Melinda learned that each new principal, after reviewing Jane's test scores and reading the various newspaper articles applauding her students' progress, concluded that she should be given the most difficult students, run workshops, and attend meetings that pulled her out of her classroom regularly. As if that weren't bad enough, they were quick to criticize her when things didn't go well.

Melinda couldn't understand why Jane wasn't given the respect she deserved. Despite the long hours Jane put in working with her students after school and the money she spent to purchase supplies and learning materials, this stellar teacher was still unrecognized and unsupported by her principal. "Is this what I have to look forward to?" Melinda wondered.

4:00 a.m. Blues

Leslie woke up at 4:00 a.m. and realized she had been dreaming about Dana, one of her sixth grade students. Some of Dana's friends had come in at lunch the day before and confided that they were worried. There were impending problems at home—something to do with Dana's mother and a boyfriend. Leslie asked the friends to tell Dana to come to her personally. "Just be aware that if she tells me there is a problem, I am obligated to call Child Protective Services. In the worst-case scenario, they would take her out of her home. She needs to know that before she comes to me. I will do everything I can to help her find a good place to live if that happens." The students left determined to convince Dana to come to her.

Leslie's first job out of college had been at a temporary shelter for children removed from their homes. Once they were institutionalized, they were treated like criminals by many of the staff. Would she really have the power to intervene and make the situation better?

She had promised her students an interactive social studies activity the next day. If she didn't get back to sleep soon, she wouldn't be on top of her game. But the image of Dana locked away in a welfare shelter kept her tossing for another hour. "What would help solve problems like Dana's so I could just focus on teaching, which is hard enough," she wondered. Maybe if we had more support services on-site, such as crisis counselors and trained family psychologists?

Bad News

Norma entered Room 206 on Monday morning. Even though she still felt sleepy, she felt a sense of excitement. Math had become her favorite subject of the day due in large part to her spirited, young teacher, Ms. Morales. Norma had never liked math before this, her eleventh grade year, but Ms. Morales brought in three-dimensional models and had the class outside making human graphs or measuring their school, which made it fun and engaging.

Norma knew that her class was one of the lower tracks; most kids in the class were kids who also had hated math and made their dislike vocal every chance they had. They had also failed the state-mandated math test the year before, just as she had. Norma always felt bad for Ms. Morales who clearly worked so hard thinking of ways to make the subject fun and who always had so much energy, even when all the kids were angry or disengaged.

But this morning, when she walked into the room, she didn't see Ms. Morales at the board writing out the day's agenda. Instead, a slightly balding middle-aged man sat at Ms. Morales's desk. "Hi," said Norma. "Are you our sub for today?"

The man smiled at her. "I think I might be subbing for a while. Your teacher isn't coming back."

"Oh." Norma slunk into her desk. She knew it would be stupid to cry, but she suddenly felt so sad. Why had Ms. Morales decided not to come back? Was it because the students were so difficult? How would she handle the rest of the year without Ms. Morales?

Meeting the Standards

Sandy looked at the clock apprehensively. As the hands moved past 5:45, she visualized her daughter waiting on the sidewalk outside her after-school program on the cold November evening. If she left the meeting immediately, she would arrive just in time for dismissal. However, there did not seem to be any chance that the committee would reach consensus within the next half hour. All of the seven teacher leaders and the principal had given input on the proposal for a new school-wide discipline program. The pros and cons had been debated over the last two hours, but everyone cleaved to his or her original position. Sandy saw good points on both sides, and she realized that any program would have glitches to be worked out. The important thing was for all the teachers to agree to a process and follow through with it. She decided to take the plunge. "I will go along with whatever decision is made. I trust the committee's judgment. But right now, I have to pick up my daughter."

Jesse, her principal, took a deep breath. "Sandy, I understand—we've all had a busy day, but this is an important decision. I don't want to have to make it alone. You made a commitment to take this on. No one else is leaving. Please don't walk out on us now. Isn't there someone else who can pick your daughter up?"

Sandy almost snapped, "No! I don't earn enough money to pay for childcare." Instead, she, too, took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, but I really have to go." As she walked out the door, feeling his eyes burning into her back, she shook her head at the irony. How often had she heard the faculty criticize the parents of their students for improperly caring for their children? Yet, teachers who cared for their own children were considered unprofessional. She had been glad to volunteer for committees, knowing that teachers' input was badly needed in school-wide decision making, but this was getting out of hand. For the umpteenth time that year, she thought about transferring to a school where a four o'clock departure time was the norm. What would it take to keep her at Craggy Point, she wondered? If she could afford a baby sitter to pick up her daughter, it might help.

The Drive Home

Bell felt exhausted while driving home; it had been another long day. As a mentor to first-and second-year teachers, her job was often overwhelming because she saw firsthand all the difficulties they were struggling with—and yet she still had to provide concrete strategies and be a cheerleader, even on the most cheerless days.

Today she had been working with two of her mentees at Greenridge High School. Juan was hanging in there. He had a consistently laid-back demeanor and was able to take most things in stride. Bell continually marveled at his optimism, particularly because he had left a much more high-paying job working for a local computer engineering company to teach math. He

often laughed about this decision, explaining that all his friends and family thought he was crazy, but that he was tired of doing work that felt soulless. He seemed to love the kids with whom he worked, even when they were impossible, and the boys in particular seemed to really look up to him. Bell was constantly pushing him to organize his unit planning a little more and think about how to use assessments to really design lesson planning, but she wasn't too worried about these things—she knew they'd come with time and experience if Juan decided to stick with teaching.

Bell's other mentee, on the other hand, had her a little more worried. Marie was a young woman just out of university. She taught social studies and was full of idealism about the power of education. Marie had confessed on a number of occasions that she spent all her time thinking about lesson planning and trying to figure out ways to get her students to engage in making their community a better place.

Today had been particularly hard on Marie. When Bell first came in, before Marie's first period of the day, Marie looked exhausted. Her eyes were puffy, and her clothes looked a bit rumpled. Marie had immediately apologized. "I might not be at my best today. I'm sorry. I got way behind in my lesson planning because I was trying to finish getting those research papers graded. So I had to stay up late writing the lesson plan for today." And to top it all off, Marie explained that her boyfriend had gotten mad at her because she never had any time to spend with him anymore. So they had gotten in a huge fight.

As Bell had looked over Marie's lesson for the day, it seemed surprisingly solid given everything that had happened. But as class wore on, Bell noticed that Marie seemed to crumple. The students were sleepy and disinterested, even though they were working in small groups to discuss the issue of homelessness, a topic that many students had expressed an interest in before. Marie pushed the students gently and tried a variety of strategies to get the class talking, but most just sat slumped in their desks.

After the students had left, Marie broke down crying to Bell. "I'm not sure how much longer I can do this!" Bell had tried to be enthusiastic and supportive, but she saw the exhaustion in Marie's eyes. How could she get Marie to stick with teaching?

The Dilemma

Teacher attrition looms large among the problems facing today's public schools. At some urban schools that serve children of poverty, as many as 41% of the teachers leave, year after year (Smith & Ingersol, 2004). Some move to other schools, but many leave the profession altogether. MetLife Fellows Rebecca Hollander and Nell Sharf (2002), on whose research this case is based, found that new teachers are overwhelmed. They used illustrations such as an octopus and a frazzled juggler to symbolize the multiple pressures they experience.

Teacher attrition exacts a toll in many ways—financial, instructional, and organizational. According to a study by Futernick (2007) from the Center for Teacher Quality, teacher attrition cost California \$455 million in 2000. Its negative impact becomes a self-perpetuating cycle when the work accomplished by a staff has to be recreated each year because of turnover. High numbers of teachers leave the profession after three years, especially in schools with a low-income population. Those schools have a turnover rate of 15.2%, while low-poverty schools have a turnover rate of 10.5% (Ingersoll, 2001). When the variable of minority enrollment is added, the number of teachers leaving climbs to 16.8 %. The effects of the turnover rate are compounded as students are passed from inexperienced teacher to inexperienced teacher each year, and educational equity erodes further.

There are a myriad of factors affecting teacher turnover. These factors are synergistic and cumulative. In other words, the reasons for teacher attrition build on each other; the effect of each challenge is compounded by the presence of other challenges. Conversely, beginning teachers who receive support in a variety of areas, including mentoring, administrative backing, professional development, lower class size, adequate compensation, rather than just one area, are 23% more likely to remain at high-poverty schools for more than three years (Smith & Ingersol, 2004). The scenarios above are real experiences of real teachers. They are representative of the factors that drive up the attrition rate.

Since third-year teachers' students score from 3% to 6% of a standard deviation above first-year teachers' among similar populations, it is clear that experienced teachers do have an impact on student success (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2007). Retaining strong, experienced teachers is a critical factor in reducing the achievement gap.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can schools effectively allocate resources in a way that supports teacher empowerment and encourages them to see themselves as valuable members of the school community?
2. How can school and district administrators and mentors best support their new, energetic, yet unpolished teachers?
3. How can districts and schools use assessment measures to truly encourage excellent teaching?
4. How can teachers be actively involved in designing curricula and making decisions at their school in a way that doesn't add to an already heavy workload?
5. How can the most low-performing schools attract and retain excellent teachers?

References:

- Futernick, K (2007). *A possible dream: Retaining California teachers so all students learn*. Sacramento: California State University.
- Kane, T.J., Rockoff, J.E., & Staiger, D.O. (2007). *Photo finish: certification doesn't guarantee a winner*. Education Next, winter: 61-67.
- Smith, T., & Ingersol, R. (2004). What are the effects of induction and mentoring on beginning teacher turnover? *American Educational Research Journal*, 41, 3. p. 681-714.