

# Building Our Professional Capacity

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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

In this issue, we present articles on the Focus Topic, "Building Our Professional Capacity." The submissions for this issue were blind reviewed by two education experts, in addition to staff from *The Language Educator* and ACTFL. We thank Adriana Melnyk Brandt, Assistant Professor, College of Education at Dixie State University, and Jessica Haxhi, Supervisor of World Languages for New Haven Public Schools, for writing an introduction to this important topic.

It's no secret that keeping qualified world language educators in the classroom is a challenge we face as a profession. According to Ingersoll and Perda (in press), as presented to the 2017 ACTFL Assembly of Delegates, 44.6% of educators who leave the profession have five years or less experience, and 11.9% have less than one year of experience. More than half of the educators who leave do so because of "dissatisfaction," generally related to student discipline challenges, poor salary and benefits, classroom intrusions, lack of influence and autonomy, and dissatisfaction with administration. To this list, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) add inadequate pre-service preparation, and lack of support and mentoring in the first few years as additional barriers to educator retention.

Yet bemoaning the issues doesn't address our challenge in a constructive way. Our goal in this framing article is to focus less attention on the "what," and more on the "why and how." A first step in addressing the "why and how" is to apply a principle of effective teaching to our challenge: develop strong relationships. We chose the word *relationship* instead of *partnership*, as *relationship* more clearly conveys the essence of productive *partnership*: that each individual brings something to the connection, and this connection is characterized by trust and mutual support.

Why focus on relationships? Contemporary research points to lack of social connection as a detriment to one's health, and that extends to our professional lives, as well. Physical, emotional, and curricular isolation can lead to disconnection—and, as we see when we view teacher attrition numbers, can result in a premature exit from the profession. It takes a village to recruit, train, and keep a teacher; strong relationships are key to accomplishing this monumental task.

In the sections that follow, we share ideas about how each of us, regardless of our roles in the broad language community, can take action to positively impact world language educator recruitment and retention.

## What Can Teacher Educators Do?

In this section, the term "teacher educator" refers to college and university faculty who work with pre- and in-service world language teachers. These faculty may be drawn from world language departments, teacher education faculty, or some combination of both. Teacher educators can help with retention in many ways:

- **Help placement directors identify and train quality mentors for practicum experiences.** Often, practicum and student teaching placement directors do not know the most effective models and mentors for world language teachers because they are not language educators. Meet regularly with placement directors to discuss requirements for observation and practicum teaching. Provide a list of go-to world language mentors and coaches in your area. Help train effective in-service teachers to develop strong mentoring and coaching skills. Offer incentives (e.g., tuition assistance, professional development workshops) to build mentor capacity and to thank them for their work with new teachers.

- **Plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences.** With the many responsibilities expected of today's teachers, it can be difficult for teacher educators to prioritize and sequence skill development. Think about pre-service teachers' most immediate needs. Future world language teachers should have a high level of speaking proficiency on topics of interest and relevance to their future students, and should be mentored by those who have experience interacting with students at the K–12 level. Are teachers prepared to interact effectively with their students and to manage challenging classroom dynamics? Are they prepared to use the target language in real time on a range of topics and to make language comprehensible for their learners? Teachers are less likely to make it to the curriculum development and leadership phases of their career if they aren't effective in teaching actual lessons to real students. Put teachers' needs first in curricular decision-making for both language and methods courses.
- **Listen.** A consequence of teacher educators' expertise is that they often feel pressure to be the ones giving and sharing. See yourself as a valuable part of the K-16 learning continuum and engage as a learner yourself. Create space to listen to what university students, student teachers, and mentor teachers have to say. Conduct focus groups or set aside time for informal conversations. Reflect on the issues and trends that emerge so that the learning experiences you create continue to be fresh and relevant to the teachers you serve.
- **Be explicit about how to stay connected.** Explain to pre-service teachers what resources are available for their professional development (e.g. Twitter, Pinterest, ACTFL publications, language-focused podcasts and webinars, professional organization conferences and workshops). Allow pre-service teachers space to explore these resources, and to develop plans for their continued learning and growth once they leave your programs and enter their own classrooms.

### What Can Leaders of Professional Organizations Do?

In the language education field, professional organizations are generally membership organizations and have as their mission to support members' needs and continued learning. These organizations may be language-specific or all-language-inclusive, and operate at the local, state, regional, or national levels. Individuals who are involved in shaping the organizations' activities should consider these strategies for recruiting and retaining language educators:

- **Reach out proactively to new educators across your states and communities.** Assign regional representatives to contact schools and locate new language teachers. Reach out to new educators and let them know that support is available. Offer professional development opportunities specifically geared to the needs of new teachers at a reduced cost.
- **Create a mentorship/partnership program.** Many world language teachers are singletons, often serving as the only teacher of a given language in a building or within a district.

Pair these teachers with colleagues from neighboring schools or communities to provide a support structure, both during and beyond the first few years of teaching. Encourage pairs to meet or communicate regularly.

- **Facilitate opportunities for unstructured sharing and learning.** Often the most powerful relationship-building and connection-making happens beyond the confines of a structured learning experience. Organize events such as potluck dinners, conversation afternoons, or other informal gatherings where world language teachers can share concerns and brainstorm solutions.
- **Connect teachers to free resources.** Most professional organizations offer access to free resources, such as publications, webinars, podcasts, and blogs. Additionally, many grassroots efforts (e.g., Twitter hashtags of #langchat and #earlylang, Path2Proficiency on Facebook) help teachers stay informed of trends in the field and to connect to other professionals on topics of mutual interest. Teachers new to your organization will likely want to understand membership benefits before investing their money; share the good work through some useful freebies.
- **Recognize new teachers for their efforts.** Many state-level language organizations have awards designated for future or new world language teachers, which provide important recognition for early career professionals. Honor the work that new teachers are doing in a formal, systematic way. In addition to granting awards to future/new teachers, send letters of recognition to their principals, superintendents or headmasters, and boards of education.

### What Can Supervisors and School Administrators Do?

At the school level, teacher recruitment is a year-round commitment in which world language supervisors (if available) and school administrators play a key role. Administrators should encourage experienced educators who are both highly effective and positive promoters of the institution to become mentor teachers for student teachers. This is one of the most important pipelines to the profession. Schools and districts should maintain relationships with local universities to provide communication channels with pre-service teachers, or invite them to professional development offerings in the schools in order to build initial interest and relationships. The best recruitment and public relations strategy for any district, school, or institution is to maintain a strong, visible world languages program that surrounds its teachers with curricular, instructional, and practical supports and graduates students with real-world language proficiency.

Once recruited, new educators require constant support from supervisors and school administrators to succeed and stay. Even the most prepared teachers from a university program can be quickly discouraged by difficult experiences in their particular school. In K–12 settings, ideally, a strong relationship between the district supervisor (if there is one) and school administrator(s) would provide wraparound, coordinated support for all teachers, both new and experienced. Together, they would:

- **Treat new teachers as the precious commodity that they are.** Give them a schedule and class sizes that allow them to succeed. Be patient with their questions and frustrations. Assume they know nothing about the policies and procedures specific to your school and get them training and clear supporting documentation to understand how to comply with any requirements.
- **Provide mentors for new teachers who know how to navigate the school,** even if world language teachers are not available. Have a checklist of items that the mentor teacher should go over with the new teacher. Recognize the mentors with stipends or special recognitions, and/or time at conferences.
- **Provide mentors who have experience in world languages.** Work with other school districts to collaborate if necessary, or contact ACTFL. If an experienced teacher wants to try something new, consider connecting that teacher with a mentor for that purpose.
- **Value the knowledge of experienced teachers.** Offer differentiated professional development options and leadership roles to help everyone keep learning and feel valued.
- **Provide opportunities for all world language teachers to build relationships with colleagues in other schools,** even if it is just to observe for a day. Make sure they know about any social events the school is holding for all teachers.
- **Build their confidence.** Encourage all teachers to participate in shared-leadership professional learning communities (PLCs), or staff surveys. Ask them to share new technologies they have been using or a great lesson with colleagues.

### What Can We, As Experienced Colleagues, Do?

Colleagues can assist with recruitment by presenting at conferences, speaking positively about their school, and sharing postings of positions with their peers outside the district. Once an educator begins a new position, colleagues can be the reason a teacher stays at a school, or the reason they want to leave. Colleagues should provide the support necessary for the new teacher to feel valued and be a valuable resource for a department. Here are ways colleagues can encourage educators to stay at their institution:

- **Help them with the little things.** Make sure the new educator knows how to use the copier, access your institution's email and internet systems, find supplies, eat lunch, deal with student issues, follow all procedures and file all forms, etc.
- **Ask how they are doing and if they need anything—often.** New or even experienced educators are often too shy

or intimidated to ask for help when they need it. Offers of assistance are much appreciated.

- **Listen to their questions and complaints with kindness and patience.** Talk to them about how you deal with the challenges of teaching. Encourage them to focus on the positive.
- **Be their advocate, if necessary.** Now and then, you may need to assist a new educator with difficult situations or colleagues by speaking up if he/she is not comfortable doing so.

### What Can New Educators Do?

New educators, whether new to the profession or new to an institution, can and should take an active role in their own progress and likelihood of longevity. The relationships and support described above can also be initiated by them. New educators should pursue supports and professional learning that suits their needs, personality, and time constraints, such as:

- **Focus on the positive.** Every teaching day has ups and downs, joys and failures. It's important to reflect on the failures and look for ways to improve, but it's also necessary to celebrate the small victories of each day and pat yourself on the back for a job well-done.
- **If you aren't sure what to do, ask.** Ask about curriculum, syllabi requirements, grading procedures, etc. Ask a colleague to read over any written communications to parents, students, or even to your administrators.
- **Take every opportunity to build relationships.** Attend school social events, sports events, teacher collaboration meetings, new teacher orientations, etc. The relationships you build are key to your long-term feelings of satisfaction and success in the building.
- **Get to know your students and let them get to know (some aspects of) you.** Great relationships with students mean better classroom behavior and engagement in lessons. If you're comfortable, share some family pictures, or rave about your favorite sports team, hobby, or music. Draw clear boundaries around what you do and don't share, but allow your students to see some of your personality.
- **Keep learning.** Use free resources available through ACTFL, regional and state organizations, the Internet, and social media (such as Twitter hashtags of #langchat and #earlylang).

While the professional roles we occupy may differ at times, we are linked together through our passion for and commitment to learners' proficiency and intercultural growth. To keep our links intact, each of us must take an active role in our professional growth and longevity, whether it is to reach out for help when we need it or to be a support to others when we have time and energy to give. When we view ourselves as part of something larger than our individual classrooms, we can do great things—but, this only happens when we build relationships, collaborate, and keep one another afloat. We encourage you to play your respective part in keeping our profession healthy and robust. Learners' success in language depends on you.

### References

- Ingersoll, R., & Perda, D. (in press). How high is teacher turnover and is it a problem? Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
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