

STAGES OF MASTERY

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A variety of literature describes how individuals make the transition from student to professional educator. Most teacher educators expect the transition to be a rather lengthy process incorporating several years of training and practice. One theory suggests a five-step process for the development of expertise in any area (Trotter, 1986). These stages are: 1) Novice, 2) Advanced Beginner, 3) Competence, 4) Proficient, and 5) Expert.

It generally takes 10 to 15 years to move from novice to expert, no matter what the field. It just takes that much time and experience to accumulate the necessary knowledge and skills. For educators, as a candidate moves through the undergraduate program, he or she will generally move through the first two levels and start work on the third. It generally takes several years of experience to become fully developed in the competence stage. Finally, only a very few teachers, even those with decades of experience, ever move into the proficient and expertise levels. The following narrative provides an overview of the knowledge and skills developed at each level.

Novice Stage

The first stage of attaining mastery is the novice stage. At this point the individual's task is to **learn to recognize specific objective facts along with fundamental concepts and specific rules of action**. Prospective teachers are supposed to get an overview about what it is to be a professional educator. They begin developing some initial skills, acquiring an initial vocabulary, and obtaining some initial ideas about what teaching is all about. Their initial understandings are still incomplete at the end of this stage. It is not intended that they will have a clear vision of the profession by the end of this stage and are not supposed to have the complex skills to take charge of the classroom by that time. However, it is expected that students will begin to develop a cognitive map or one piece of a cognitive map about what it means to be a professional educators.

At VSU, there are six courses that provide introductory information important to those entering the field of education:

1. Investigating Critical & Contemporary Issues in Education (EDUC 2110)
2. Exploring SocioCultural Perspectives on Diversity (EDUC 2120)
3. Exploring Teaching & Learning (EDUC 2130)
4. Computer Tech for the Workplace (ACED 2400)
5. Fundamentals of Psychology (PSYC 2500)
6. Human Growth and Development (PSYC 2700)

Advanced Beginner

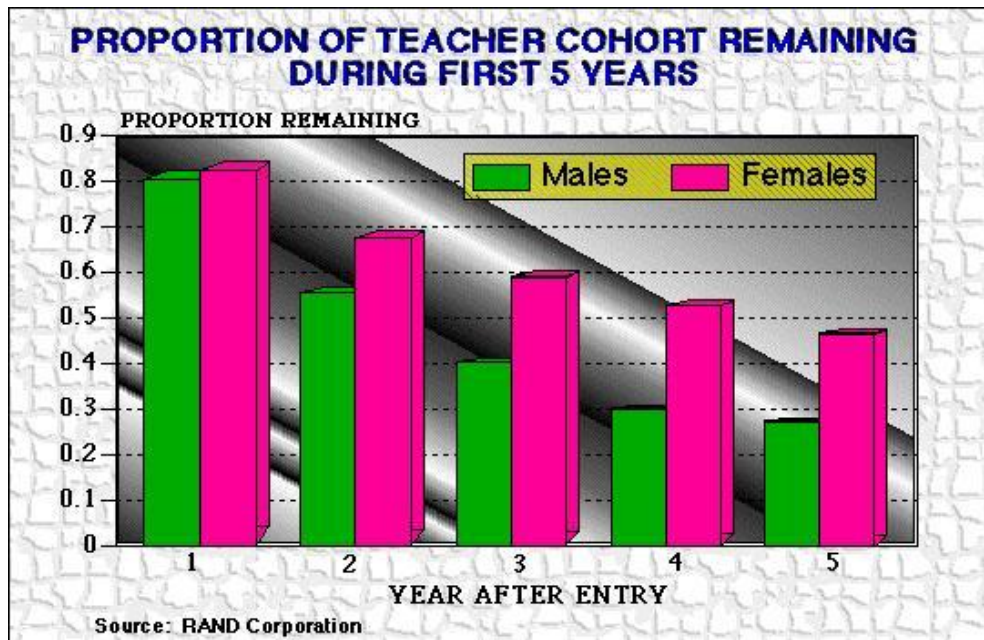
The second stage in the process is the advanced beginner stage. At the advanced beginner stage preservice teachers are **adding to their knowledge of facts, they are recognizing previously undefined facts, obtaining more information relative to the teaching-learning process, increasing their knowledge of relevant vocabulary, concepts, and principles**. As they go into the advanced beginner stage, they begin to understand that what they have been taught to that point is a good first approximation of a very complex set of understandings necessary to function as a professional educator.

This stage continues your development in your undergraduate program and involves 3000- and 4000-level courses in your major. Your undergraduate training ends with a student teaching experience. However, moving through the advanced beginner stage requires more than simply completing college courses. In order to successfully move into the next stage, that of competence, a considerable amount of classroom experience is required. That is, one does not become a competent professional educator without a significant amount of hands-on teaching-learning experiences. One does not become a professional educator by taking college classes alone; there must be engagement in the teaching-learning process. For this reason VSU teacher education programs provide students with a variety of field experiences throughout the training period. This is a critical component of becoming a professional educator.

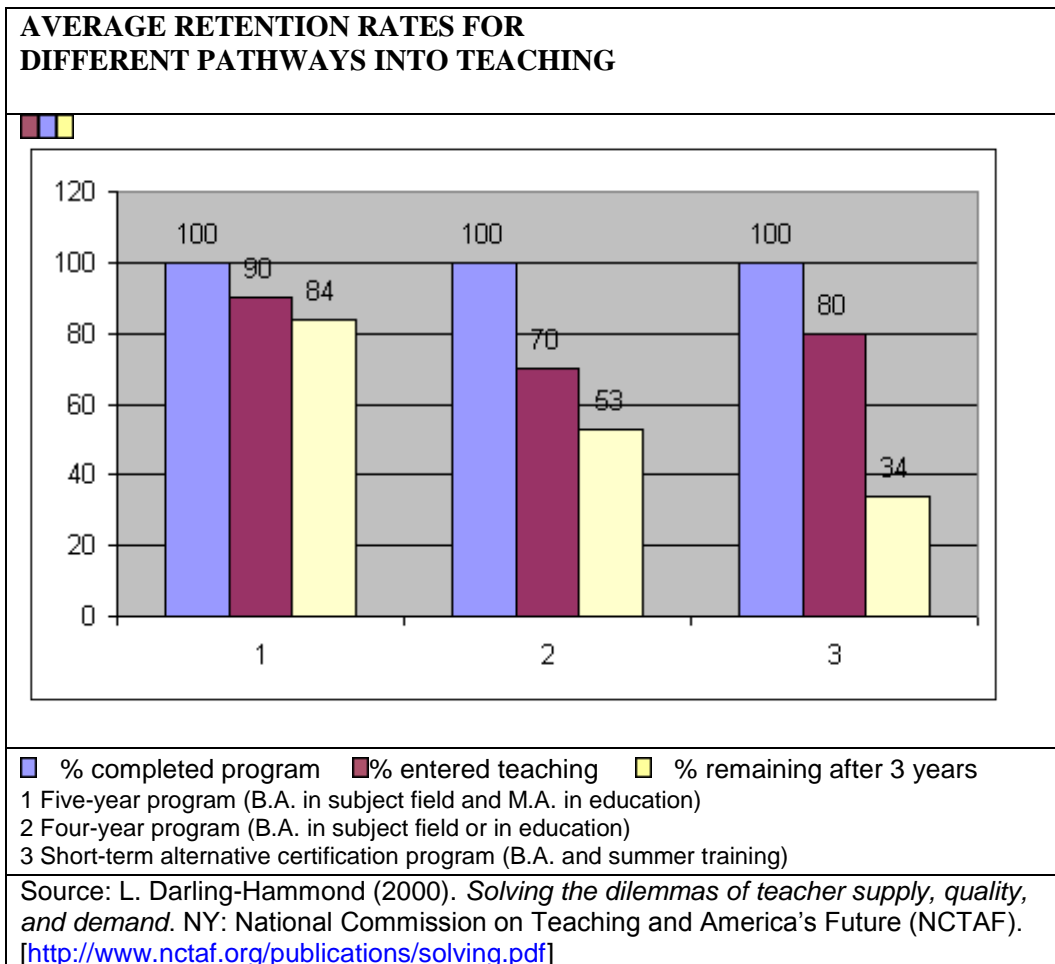
Competence

The third stage is competence, the point at which an individual becomes qualified in his or her desired area. For teachers, the first step generally means completing a Bachelor's degree in education and meeting initial certification requirements. Competence is really the minimum that level that individuals should obtain in order to act as a professional educator. At this stage the individual is **beginning to recognize more context-free principles and concepts as well as situational elements**. In other words, the teacher has some understanding of concepts and principles that hold for most learners in a variety of situations and other principles and concepts that apply only in specific situations. Most importantly, the individual begins to acquire the ability to problem solve. That is, the individual begins to say "This is what has been previously recommended by others in order for students to be successful. I tried this, but the results are not what I wanted. What do I do now?" This is very different from the procedure-following approach that might be expected from someone in the advanced beginner stage.

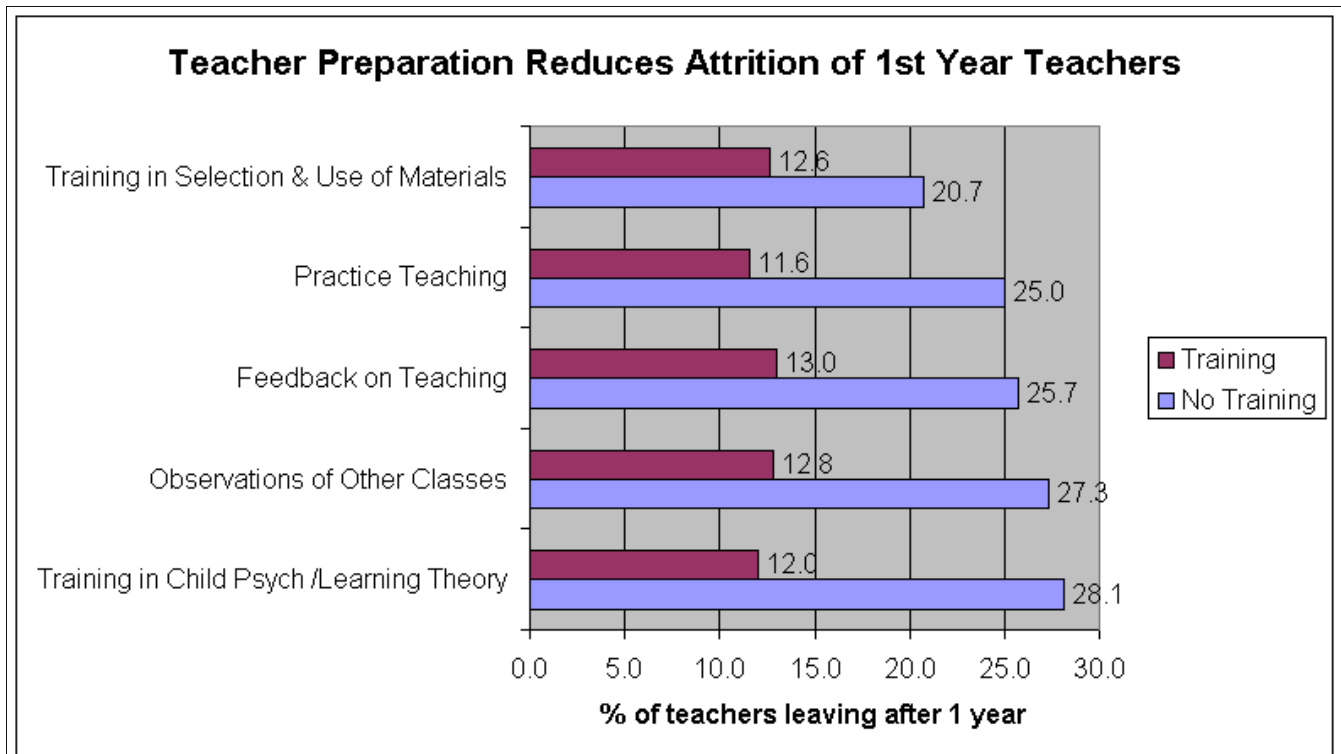
When graduates accept full-time employment as a professional educator, they will most likely be in the advanced beginner stage. It generally takes 2-5 years of one-the-job training (and, in my opinion, additional training such as that obtained in a master's degree program) for a person to become a competent professional educator. Many teachers never achieve this level because they do not gain enough experience. The figure below shows that 50% of women and 70% of men leave the profession before they gain five years of experience.



More recent data suggest that retention is better for individuals who complete a master's degree and worse for individuals who complete an alternative certification program.



More specifically, the types of preservice coursework and learning experiences lead to reductions in teacher attrition after the first year of teaching.



Source: Darling-Hammond, L., & Sykes, G. (2003, September 17). Wanted: A national teacher supply policy for education: The right way to meet the "Highly Qualified Teacher" challenge. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 11(33). Retrieved September 2003, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n33/>

Proficiency and Expertise

The next two stages in the development of mastery are proficiency and expertise. These individuals are generally recognized as being among the best in their chosen fields. Only a small percentage of professional educators ever reach this stage. These are the teachers one normally thinks about when we remember the teachers who had the most influence on us.

In the stage of proficiency an individual **can identify the important elements of the task very quickly and easily. He or she has a fluid style that is used to implement decisions based on intuitive understandings--understandings that come out of a wealth of experience.** These understandings are so internalized that sometimes these individuals cannot even state with precision the basis of the thinking. This is the stage that an individual's style begins to be expressed and the person's experience (rather than school training) begins to be a major factor in performance. Most people at this stage have acquired a mentor who can guide the individual beyond the general education available through coursework.

At the expertise level--and these are really the stars of the field--the individual is **operating in an experienced-based manner similar to that achieved at the proficient stage, but more holistically.** This means that he or she is not focusing on simply one or two elements, but is able to comprehend and work with a variety of patterns. For most individuals in a field operating in

the stage of competence, get cognitive overload and frustrated if they try to focus on more than one or two variables at a time. People who are operating at the stage of expertise can handle a large quantity of information and give a very fluid, natural performance. The major difference between individuals in the stages of proficiency and expertise is that what individuals in the latter stage do almost always works. Individuals in the stage of proficient still make mistakes; those in expertise provide almost perfect performance.

We feel very fortunate when we have the privilege of engaging one of these teachers. We may only interact with a handful in our entire education experience. These educators are widely recognized as superior. They are also likely to be mentors for educators who desire to become like them.

Reference

- Trotter, R. (1986). The mystery of mastery. *Psychology Today*, 20(7), 32-38.

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