Avoiding Burn-out: New Teachers Dialoguing with Experienced Teachers

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Regina Paxton Foehr looks at the serious stress that drives up to half of new teachers out of the profession within five years, and finds one solution in a dialogue between student and experienced teachers that generated a list of helpful tips, and, more important, a feeling of support and collaboration.

I will never forget the telephone call I received from a student teacher and her sheepish voice at the end of her first day of student teaching, its strain giving away her struggle to fight back tears. Trying to sound lighthearted, she stammered out the words:

You'll never believe what happened on my first day of teaching. A fist fight broke out in my class, and one boy was hospitalized with a broken nose.

She had wanted to be the first to tell me, her university English supervisor. Rumors of the fight had spread quickly throughout the large school, and the (Thumbs up) “Go get ‘em Teach” remarks and good-natured smiles of other teachers in the hallway that day had helped only a little to offset the humiliation she felt at such public embarrassment.

Such situations can be the worst nightmares-come-true of any teacher, especially student teachers and new, nontenured teachers whose reputations in the profession have not been established and whose future employability, they fear, hinges upon their ability to uphold professional standards in their teaching and in the atmosphere of their classrooms. They have deep concerns about job security and survival, especially in areas where enrollments are declining. Moreover, among new teachers in particular, the stress of such situations can lead quickly to fractured self-esteem, burn-out, and the decision to leave the profes-
sion. The stress is so great for newly trained teachers, in fact, that one-third to one-half of all new teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond 1990, 5).

With the demands of day-to-day “teaching,” the idealism of new teachers can easily get lost in the reality of responsibilities. Despite an initial love for literature and writing and a desire to instill that love in their students, new teachers sometimes find just getting through the day to be their goal. At a seminar for student teachers who were returning to the Illinois State University (ISU) campus midway through the experience, one student teacher shared her discouragement:

When some of my students are getting high on crack between classes, it’s hard to even think about putting into practice all the things we learned in our methods classes.

Another said,

I’m student teaching in a small rural school where you’d think it would be safe, but we just had a faculty meeting on gangs, and two gang recruiters are in my classes and I’m scared.

As twenty-five-year-old teacher, Ann Marie Radaskiewicz Butson writes:

I became a teacher because I was anxious to share my love of language and literature with young people. But at the end of the day . . . I wonder if I [have] influenced even one of my 130 students today. I was a janitor, a psychologist, a security officer, a secretary, and a social worker. But was I a teacher? The sun sets on another day of frustration and disillusionment. And I have to do it again tomorrow. (Butson 1989, 8)

Most student teachers have high expectations of themselves and believe that they will be able to motivate their students to enjoy learning. But often they discover that instead of being an inspiration, they may be perceived by students as an adversary or an unwanted intrusion. At the end of what she described as a successful student teaching experience, one student teacher contrasted the dream and the reality of the experience:

My eyes were opened. The dream is that your students will be raising their hands and doing their homework for you, but the reality is maybe one person raises their hands or does their homework. The reality is that they say, “This is dumb. This is stupid. . . .” It’s hard work when the kids think you’re a dork.

In addition, disillusionment may occur in other areas. For example, instead of the expected support and mentoring among faculty,
new teachers may experience disappointment over not having their needs taken into account by other faculty members. One first-year teacher said,

You’re low man on the totem pole; all the other teachers have snagged all the new teachers’ editions, staplers, and supplies. I’m not kidding—you’re the new teacher, the one who needs the teacher’s edition, but you’re low man on the totem pole—that I find disturbing.

While crisis situations, fear, disillusionment, and burn-out can happen to any teacher, new teachers are particularly vulnerable. I believe, however, that in many cases, crisis and disillusionment could be offset, or even avoided altogether, if teachers entered their classrooms with access to the wisdom earned through the experience of others in the profession. Whether dealing with student behavior, learning, or other issues important to teaching, those in the profession who are actively teaching usually have the experience to anticipate problems before they arise because they have encountered them previously. Surveys tell us that both first-year and experienced teachers recognize this. They rank direct and immediate access to advice and assistance as most helpful in becoming a more effective teacher (Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1991a, 1991b).

Ironically, however, whether in rural or urban, private or public, large or small schools, new and inexperienced teachers do not always have access to experienced teachers who are willing to help or the confidence to approach the experienced teachers they do know. As one new English teacher in a small-town school confided to me,

I feel as if I was misled during the job interview when all the teachers seemed to work together and care about each other. Now that I’m here, I see that they all just shut their doors and stick to themselves. I feel so lonely.

One reason teachers burn out is that they are burning alone (Berthoff 1990, 368). For new teachers or student teachers, their own vulnerability, their insecurity in their lack of experience, and their fear of looking foolish—or worse, incompetent—can make tapping into the knowledge and experience of other teachers difficult. In particular, early in their teaching experience, when they most need the help of others, many new teachers are so intimidated by experienced teachers that they choose not to intrude on their time by asking them questions. In addition, new teachers are often afraid to admit “weakness” to building administrators who have the responsibility of evaluating them.
The Harvard University School of Education recognizes the isolation and vulnerability that new teachers feel. In “First Aid for First-Year Teachers,” Katherine K. Merseth (1992) discusses an electronic computer network available nationwide to graduates of Harvard University’s teacher education programs who are in their first year of teaching. This computer network, available through Harvard’s School of Education, is set up to support and encourage these first-year teachers. The network links them with each other as well as Harvard faculty and staff, a small number of invited second-year teachers, and other invited guests (679).

This type of network seems to be an ideal way to engage teachers in collaborative mentoring, stress reduction, and problem-solving dialogues. Most new teachers, however, do not have access to such an electronic mail system.

Collaboration as a Solution

I believe, however, that we need also to promote a spirit of collaboration among teachers, preteachers, and student teachers and to encourage them to share and take advantage of one another’s knowledge and experience. At ISU, twice during student teaching, our student teachers return to campus to dialogue about their experiences and to offer support, encouragement, and possible solutions to problems. To engage prestudent teachers in such dialogues, I have asked those in my methods classes, “The Teaching of Writing,” to interview experienced teachers from English and other disciplines to discover and record their advice and suggestions on not just how to survive the student teaching experience, but how to succeed as teachers themselves.

Much to their surprise, after they conducted these interviews, the student teachers reported that the experienced teachers were eager to express their views and were genuinely interested in helping them. I believe that their dialogue provided an important collaborative experience in two areas: (1) in opening up communication within and across disciplines and student/teacher ranks and (2) in producing new and useful knowledge as the preteachers created and shared the results of their interviews with the class. The experience of interviewing gave these prestudent teachers a feeling of being members of the profession and an experience of collegiality with their soon-to-be colleagues and mentors. It also gave them an indication of what other
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teachers consider important in teaching, and it let them know that problems can arise even for experienced teachers.

Participants in the Dialogues
The semester before they began student teaching, thirty students, all senior English education majors, participated in the assignment, each of them conducting informal interviews with from one to four teachers. The approximately ninety participating teachers taught in schools from Central to Northern Illinois, representing large and small, rural, urban, and inner-city schools. Students were told to write down the teachers’ suggestions but to weigh their value for themselves as to whether each suggestion should be taken. After reading the teachers’ suggestions, I found that their suggestions could be organized and listed under seven main categories: Be Professional, Be Prepared, Be Organized, Be Patient, Be a Real Person and Honor Each Student as a Real Person, Be Sensible with Discipline, and Be Aware of Your Own Needs. A copy of the resulting list (see below) was issued to each of the students before each began student teaching. All tips that students submitted to me were included on the list; when tips were given by more than one teacher, however, they were recorded only once.

Tips for the Beginning Teacher

1. Be Professional
   1. Be professional in dress, manner, and attitude from the first minute that you are present in the classroom.
   3. Use language appropriately. Don’t resort to using slang too often.
   4. Speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard.
   5. Don’t be late to class.
   6. Don’t come late to staff meetings.
   7. When dealing with confrontation, maintain your composure.
   8. Know when to compromise.
   9. State your opinion—let others know where you stand.
   10. Have a positive attitude.
   11. Establish a good rapport with parents and administration.
   12. Keep good, strong lines of communication open between you and the parents.
13. Don’t be afraid to call parents if one of your students is having problems in class. Many parents have no idea how well their children are doing in school until report card time rolls around, so they will appreciate your efforts to keep them informed.

14. Don’t be afraid to call or meet with parents. They are probably just as curious about you as you are about them. In fact, knowing them might help you to better understand their child.

15. Call or write parents when their son or daughter does something good or improves in class. Don’t limit communication to bad news.

16. Encourage parents to be proud of their children.

17. Show students that you care about their lives, and show the parents that you care about their children’s progress.

18. When conducting parent-teacher conferences, have handouts ready for the parents that include your philosophy, your grading policy, your attendance policies, and their child’s grades.

19. Get to know the principal of your school. Invite the principal to sit in on your class when he or she has a chance and ask for any suggestions that might improve your teaching. Good rapport with the administration is invaluable.

20. Ask other teachers, even the principal, for advice.

21. Use discretion in deciding which teachers to approach for information. Don’t be suspicious—be observant and selective.

22. Show respect to the cooperating teacher and the other faculty.

23. Cooperate with your colleagues, be willing to ask them for help, and be open to offering your advice.

24. Get to know the custodian and the secretary.

25. Ask for a student handbook and a teacher’s handbook. Be familiar with administrative expectations and procedures.

26. Familiarize yourself with departmental policies.

27. Read the latest research manuals in your field.

28. Attend workshops regularly.

29. Know your rights as a teacher (union contracts/district rules).

30. Know the resources or how to make proper referrals for special education, discipline, etc.

31. When conferencing with students in a private office, always leave the door open.

32. Never touch your students.

33. Remember that the way you solve problems will become a model for your students when they encounter problems.
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34. Never share really personal information with your students. It is important to maintain a teacher-student relationship with them.

35. Devise a detailed rationale. Know and explain why your students should meet your objectives.

II. Be Prepared
1. Do not wait until the last minute to devise unit or lesson plans. Take time to research your ideas before you try them out.
2. Have daily lesson plans well prepared.
3. Always plan more for each class period than you think you can accomplish.
4. Have lesson plans ready for substitute teachers.
5. Have extra activities for students to do in that “left over” time at the end of the hour.
6. Don’t expect every class to react the same to various activities and discussions.
7. Always have examples ready that are relevant to the students’ lives.
8. Always have an alternate explanation.
10. Don’t ever throw anything away.
11. Know how to use equipment such as the VCR and television. Nothing is more embarrassing than ruining such a machine in front of twenty pairs of eyes.
12. Be self-confident. Be able to explain the importance of your curriculum or why the student received the grade he or she did.
13. Know where the fire exits are located. Be familiar with disaster procedures. Be prepared!

III. Be Organized
1. It is important to feel prepared as well as look prepared.
2. Thoroughly prepare lecture notes, mini-lessons, questions for discussion, and class activities each day.
3. If you expect your students to have all of their materials, then your should have yours, too.
4. Clearly state objectives and exactly what you expect on assignments—students need a picture sometimes.
5. The students always want to know what is due and when. Write assignments on the board daily and verbally remind them of due dates.
6. Give students plenty of advance warning regarding assignment due dates, and give students a copy of the syllabus early in the semester. It is also a good idea to mail a copy of the syllabus home to students’ parents.

7. Set grading criteria for letter grades on all tests and essays before giving them to the students.

8. When grading students’ writing assignments, give them a cover sheet with a checklist. Check any mechanical or organizational mistakes the students make on the checklist. This way, the students know exactly why they received the grade they did.

9. To save time and prevent confusion, before handing back student papers, tests, and homework, categorize them by seating arrangement or alphabetize them.

10. In order to avoid the “who-needs-what-paper” dilemma because he or she was absent, keep a file. If a student is absent, put the student’s name on the top of the handout, and keep it for when the student returns.

11. Have students take responsibility for their absent peers. They can collect handouts and assignments and put them in a folder designed for that purpose.

12. Acquire a school calendar so that you’ll know when students have days off and when other important activities are scheduled.

13. Keep a schedule of each class in a plastic cover. If you give a student permission to leave for the library, restroom, or somewhere else, use a dry erase marker to indicate on the plastic cover where the student has gone.

14. Keep manuals in one place.

15. Keep your desk and files organized.

16. Keep two folders for student work for each period you teach, one for papers you have graded and one for papers you haven’t graded yet. This is especially helpful if your students are turning in a lot of papers each week.

17. Be sure to have a record of lesson plans.

18. A good way to organize the material you collect is to keep binders for each teaching unit.


IV. Be Patient
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1. Give students enough thinking time.
2. Don’t tell your students the answer simply because a few seconds have passed in silence. Wait longer, minutes even, before restating the question, but don’t answer it yourself.
3. If students don’t respond to a question right away, or if they express confusion, ask lead-in questions.
4. Remember that students will be absent, so don’t get too frustrated when having to reschedule assignments and activities.
5. Realize and accept that not all students will remain at the same level academically.
6. Listen attentively to students’ problems.

V. Be a Real Person, and Honor Each Student as a Real Person
1. Treat your students with respect at all times. Never embarrass a student or make a student feel bad about himself or herself.
2. Never use sarcasm toward your students.
3. Be firm, but be flexible, when it’s needed.
4. Don’t dislike any student—dislike behaviors or attitudes.
5. Make an effort to include all students.
6. Keep prejudice out of the classroom.
7. Encourage leadership and confidence in all students.
8. Encourage students to dream.
9. Recognize students who do outstanding work as well as those who need to improve.
10. Always let students know when they have done a good job.
11. Don’t be an enforcer or know-it-all. Let the students see the real you.
12. Do not pretend to be all-knowing—we all learn together.
13. Admit when you are wrong.
14. If you make a mistake, don’t give up. Keep trying until you get it right. It is OK for a student to see a teacher mess up—this makes teachers seem more like real people.
15. Do not be unapproachable.
16. Do not follow the “Never Smile before Thanksgiving” rule.
17. Smile. Enthusiasm is an important ingredient for a good learning environment.
18. Maintain a sense of humor with students.
19. Know students as well as you can. Know their strengths and weaknesses.
20. Know the students’ names. This will help establish a good rapport with them.
22. Let students know that if they have a problem, they can share it in confidence with you.
23. Let your students know that you enjoy your job and that you want to be with them.

VI. Be Sensible with Discipline
1. Establish firm ground rules regarding class conduct on the first day of class and stick to those rules. Having a firm discipline policy laid out at the beginning of the school year is essential for new teachers.
2. Always make clear to students what you expect and follow through.
3. Know the school’s discipline policy and adhere to it.
4. Always document discipline problems, especially recurring ones. You may need this documentation when talking to parents or administrators.
5. Don’t be afraid to talk to fellow teachers about problems you are having or to the school counselors—that’s what they are there for.
6. Be sure to let parents know early if there is a problem.
7. Don’t let problems occur more than three times without doing something about them. If necessary, take students out into the hall and discuss problems there or ask the student to stay after school to work out problems.
8. Avoid confrontations in the classroom at all costs!
9. Do not argue with a student during class. Discuss the problem one-on-one after class.
10. Have solid rules and procedures for discipline. Do not send every discipline problem to the principal because it will show that you cannot handle your class. Keep the discipline and the students inside of the classroom.
11. Do not be too strict in class. Do not yell or reprimand students each time they talk out of turn or break the silence. Give students some freedom.
12. In disciplining, don’t approach students from an adversarial standpoint. Let them know that the rules are designed to
provide guidance so that everyone has the opportunity to achieve without any interference from others.

13. Let students know that you have confidence in them, and that you have set high expectations for their achievement. Affirm positive behavior and achievement.

14. Be consistent in the way you deal with students; don’t offer special treatment or excessive punishment to anyone, ever.

15. Respond fairly and wisely.

16. Give the students the benefit of the doubt.

17. If a student is acting up, try standing near the student and make clear eye contact with him or her. Giving the student a stern look works well too.

18. Walk around the class. Move about through their desks and make your presence known. This increases attention.

19. Do not judge your students by your own personal standards.

20. Make the rules and punishments reasonable.

21. Be authoritative, not authoritarian.

22. Set the tone for the day if you go on a field trip. Discreetly let students know that you are still the authority, even though you are in a different environment from that of the school.

23. “Never let them see you sweat.” If they know they can walk all over you, they will.

VII. Be Aware of Your Own Needs

1. Give yourself relaxation or “self” time every day, even if it is only thirty minutes.

2. Take time out to deal with stress when it does happen.

3. Don’t take on more activities than you can handle. Learn to say, “No!”

4. Try to get enough sleep and exercise.

5. Inform your significant others that you will be busy.

6. Read and write for yourself.

7. Strive for excellence, not perfection.

8. Respect yourself. Respect for others will follow.

As the class discussed the teachers’ suggestions, students frequently expressed appreciation for a suggestion that they themselves had not previously considered. In some cases student teachers shared the lists with their cooperating teachers. The teachers seemed to appreciate that our students were getting some practical suggestions from
experienced teachers, in addition to the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge from their coursework. In at least one case, after a cooperating teacher showed a high school administrator the list of suggestions, that administrator, who was from a school of about 2,000 students, made copies of the suggestions to give to new teachers at his school. Thus the interview assignment became the impetus for dialogue to take place at many levels: student teacher to student teacher, student teacher to teacher, teacher to administrator, and administrator to new teacher.

I believe that this activity helped the prestudent teachers in several ways. It engaged them in considering and confronting issues that they might otherwise not have considered before they entered the profession. Such consideration and confrontation can serve as “an ounce of prevention” instead of the usually painful “pound of cure.” The activity also engaged them in meaningful dialogue with other professionals on issues important to the student teachers. These dialogues would probably not have taken place except among the most outgoing of student teachers, if the student teachers themselves had not been assigned to interview experienced teachers. The dialogues became a way for student teachers to recognize, hear, and honor their own and each other’s voices. It allowed the students to produce collaboratively, as part of an academic group, what was for them new knowledge. And finally, the list they created then served as a text for their current and future reference, to remind the student teachers of ways to navigate the teaching experience as they began what can, at times, be a daunting experience even under the best of circumstances.

Note
1. Thanks to the efforts of Deborah Loest, then a student in the class but now a first-year teacher at Morton Junior High School, Morton, Illinois, the list was typed in time for student teaching.

References

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