Thomas M. McCann and Larry R. Johannessen

The Role and Responsibility of the Experienced Teacher

Relying on research and case studies focusing on the stated needs of new teachers, Thomas M. McCann and Larry R. Johannessen describe a variety of ways that experienced teachers can proactively help newcomers in their schools.

For a local NCTE affiliate meeting, we had organized a forum to discuss the challenges that confront beginning English teachers. A panel that included a high school principal, a college professor, a department chair, and a twenty-five-year teaching veteran promised to offer some insights and hope for beginning teachers in a meeting that we had advertised under the title, "What Makes Novice Teachers Cry?" After we had placed fliers advertising the meeting into teachers' mailboxes on the first floor of the high school, we returned to the third floor where a first-year English teacher was in the hall, crying and being consoled by another novice teacher. The flood of tears was a response to a twelfth grader who had directed some vivid obscenities at the teacher in the process of sharing her disparaging assessment of the teacher's pedagogical skills. Unfortunately, the scene in the hall is probably repeated in one form or another in hundreds of schools every day. The cause of this teacher's grief was apparent, but the sources of challenges and frustrations for the new teacher are many, at a time when good teachers are at a premium and schools cannot afford to lose the teachers they have.

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Investigating the Needs of New Teachers

This incident was the catalyst that led us to begin a three-year project that included interviewing and surveying novice and experienced English teachers to identify the concerns that caused them the greatest difficulty in doing their jobs well and, in some cases, to describe the factors that influenced them to leave the profession altogether. We also wanted to discover what kept good teachers in the classroom, despite tough working conditions.

After forty-four interviews with new and experienced English teachers, we were struck by the varied and haphazard paths that people have followed in becoming high school English teachers. How one develops as a teacher is subject to many factors: the choice of college or university where one prepares, the particular methods classes one takes, the philosophical bent and theoretical frame of the methods instructors, the school placement for completing clinical experiences, the match with a cooperating teacher and university supervisor, and the culture of the school and the department where one begins the first job. Obviously the nature and quality of the combined experiences will be remarkably varied and subject to innumerable chance factors. We marvel that many teachers manage to thrive after completing such a curious course of development.

An obvious and popular plan of action that schools can follow to help beginning teachers is a mentor program. Many schools point with pride to the mentoring program that senior staff have designed to support the induction of new teachers. One first-year teacher we interviewed cautions us that it is the *quality* of the mentoring program that will make all the difference. The new teacher, whom we will call Nora, regrets her experience

with a mentor: "The mentoring program is such a sham. It is the most ridiculous thing I've ever been to. It would actually drive people out of teaching. There are meetings on Friday nights from 5 to 8 and we don't get paid for it. For example, they *read* to us out of the discipline code. My mentor did not want to be a mentor. She hates me; I hate her. I wanted to be with another teacher with whom I have more in common, and a *good* teacher." Nora points to some obvious problems with mentoring programs: If the time required to participate in the program represents an additional burden on the beginning teacher, then the activities become counterproductive. The novices will naturally select mentors whom they respect and can trust. When mentors are randomly or capriciously assigned to new teachers, the novices may resist and resent the mentor program. Nora reports that required, burdensome, and perfunctory mentoring meetings are also likely to discourage the novice.

Accepting a formal mentoring assignment is just one way that experienced teachers can help beginning teachers to make a rewarding transition into the world of teaching. Whether in a formal or informal capacity, there are many steps that an experienced teacher can take to help an inexperienced colleague. We propose here some of the available actions that veteran teachers can take to improve the lot of beginning teachers and equip them to have a better chance of remaining in the profession. Research on the concerns of beginning teachers should guide the activities of mentoring programs and informal assistance that veteran teachers can provide to new teachers (see, for example, Fuller; McCann and Johannessen; McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca, "Responding," *Supporting,* "Why"; Rutherford and Hall). Drawing from a substantial body of research and from our survey data and interviews with new and experienced teachers, we propose six actions that experienced teachers can take in any school to assume a leadership role and support the retention of beginning teachers.

Assist in the Development of the Mentoring Plan

Some consultants who make their living in the training of mentors will report that it is better for a school to have no mentor program at all than to have a bad mentor program. Nora expressed frustration about her school's mentoring program, which imposes threats and penalties if the new teachers do not participate in Friday-evening group "mentoring" sessions. We will not presume to describe the ideal mentor program here. Obviously, however, a model mentoring program would include the opposite of the practices that this first-year teacher reports. Any program would need, at least, to ensure that the new teacher would not be encumbered with additional time commitments and that an inappropriate partner would not be imposed.

Several sources can guide schools in devising a mentor program (see, for example, Lipton, Wellman, and Humbard; Villani). We can imagine many variations on mentoring, but we also think that a meaningful program would include the following features: (a) careful selection and training of the mentors, including training in effective communication and peer coaching techniques; (b) attention to the actual expressed concerns of beginning teachers; (c) special consideration for the inevitable exhaustion and decline that teachers experience after the first nine to ten weeks of school; (d) a program of regularly scheduled contacts between the new teacher and the mentor; and (e) assistance in acclimating the new teacher to the school community. The suggestions below would also be appropriate elements in a school's formal mentoring program and serve as useful guidelines for any experienced teacher to help a new colleague.

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Plan a Multifaceted Induction Process

An effective induction process includes an orientation, inservice training in working with the curriculum, and ongoing, relevant staff development opportunities. Most schools provide some sort of orientation for new staff. Veteran teachers can assume leadership in helping to plan the orientation. The training should go beyond a set of talking heads enumerating the rules, policies, and procedures for the school. Orientation should include careful attention to the questions of the new staff. Our research also indicates that it would be useful to project for the new staff members the cycle of the school year to help each new person to anticipate

difficult times and to recognize that it is normal and natural to feel fatigue and some frustration.

It makes intuitive sense to provide new teachers with detailed curriculum guides and abundant instructional materials. Beginners need more than this. New teachers benefit especially from sitting down with someone who can help them to discover the underlying principles that have guided the curriculum development. When teachers understand the principles that drive the curriculum, they become empowered to make decisions, to adjust existing materials and activities to fit their particular teaching situations, and to unleash some creative energies. An orientation to a particular school and to the professional world of teaching is not the experience of a single day. A meaningful staff development program would support the new teacher's professional growth over the long term and convey the idea that teaching is a craft that the school staff takes seriously.

One can well imagine, however, that a new teacher might hesitate to report troubles to a supervisor for fear that the admission of a need for help might influence a negative evaluation of the teacher's job performance.

Support a Network of Collegial Contacts

Most schools conceive of the idea of supporting the induction of new teachers as a process of having more experienced people imparting their wisdom. The word *mentor* conjures the image of a wizened master guiding the novice. There is certainly value in the mentors and supervisors offering guidance and advice. But the new teacher can benefit from having a broad network of contacts, inside and outside of the school, including peers, veteran staff, and external resource persons. The various contacts in the new teacher's life can serve the many needs that he or she will inevitably have. Lisa reports the help she received in her first year from her colleague in the next classroom: "On a couple of occasions, the teacher who taught next door was able to come over and conference with me. She came over and helped me talk through the case of one student who was racist, which was helpful because it was a scary situation." The newcomer could rely on the conveniently located veteran teacher, even though she was not the designated mentor. The relationship derived from the supportiveness, credibility, and availability of this colleague.

The supervisors in the school have the official responsibility to provide guidance and assistance. One can well imagine, however, that a new teacher might hesitate to report troubles to a supervisor for fear that the admission of a need for help might influence a negative evaluation of the teacher's job performance. In their design of mentoring programs, many school systems are careful to distinguish the role of mentor as one with no evaluation responsibilities. However, if the mentor is someone whom the new teacher admires and respects as a professional authority, it is natural for the new teacher to feel hesitant to admit failures and describe some difficulties to the mentor. Sometimes a new teacher needs to vent frustrations or to tell the story of doubts and challenges to an objective or disinterested other. A sympathetic listener might be another first-year teacher, a friend, a former classmate or instructor, or a family member. As experience grows and opportunities expand, a teacher will make contacts with other teachers from other schools.

Loretta, a first-year teacher whom we interviewed on several occasions as part of our long-term study of the concerns of new teachers, noted that the conversations with someone from outside the school were "therapeutic." Her depiction of the series of interviews was enlightening. We thought of her willingness to be interviewed as a service to *us,* not imagining that our seeking information from her would also serve her needs. In the interviews, we inquired about the teacher's experience, conveying our genuine interest in the nature of the teacher's first year in the profession. We were not in a position to judge the teacher or recommend changes; we simply prompted the teacher to tell the story of her experience. It would be a rare school that actually planned for someone to perform a role similar to the one that the visiting observer performed, but we see great potential in someone taking on this responsibility. Furthermore, the stresses that a new teacher faces are many, and it is unlikely that a lone formal mentor will be able to fulfill multiple roles in assisting a newcomer. In the end, the new teacher would have several contacts, each serving a separate function: supervisor, mentor, peers, veteran colleagues, friends, former college classmates and instructors, and an objective listener or observer.

Monitor a New Teacher's Experiences Formally and Informally

We have experienced working in schools where the supervisors made cursory observations once or twice a year. It is hard to imagine that a supervisor can have a strong sense of a teacher's performance and experience on the basis of a couple of observations. Whether the observations are a formal procedure as part of a teacher evaluation plan or not, having supervisors and mentors observe teachers on separate occasions and engage the beginner in professional conversations about the observations would support growth. We must grant that the observations will be worthwhile as formative assessments only if everyone involved proceeds in a spirit of coaching and support. The observations would need to be planned and accompanied by reflective conversations. Under this model, the teacher being observed would work with the observers to identify the focus of the observations and to specify the data for the observers to collect and the means for collecting them. The teacher and the supervisor would meet to discuss the meaning and significance of the data.

Help New Teachers Anticipate Crises and Explore Courses of Action

Inevitably, the new teacher will encounter some difficulties: an unruly class, an angry parent, a tough evaluation, a curriculum conundrum, and so forth. An experienced teacher can help a new colleague to predict the possibilities. Our research suggests that beginning teachers suffer significant frustration when their new experiences (e.g., a huge workload, an unruly class) are vastly different from what they had anticipated. Bert, a beginner in our study, recalls: "I developed relationships with veteran teachers who either took a liking to me or I really liked what they were doing; I would ask them [for advice]. They had no problem saying, 'Here's a strategy you can use.'" The veterans' willingness to help in a specific situation provided a basis for making sound judgments when the beginner faced other challenges.

It would be worthwhile for a supervisor, mentor, or peer coach to help the new teacher to anticipate tough situations (e.g., censorship challenges, grade disputes, stressful classroom observations) and devise some problem-solving strategies for contending with them. Of course, each challenging situation will have its own nuances and unique complications, but one can usually draw from one problem-solving situation to be able to explore options to respond to a new challenge.

Often, problems and their solutions are specific to a particular school. Perhaps an especially intrusive and powerful group of band boosters triggers a proliferation of fundraising that spills over into instructional time, which becomes an annoyance to the teacher. This problem might be unique to a particular school; the appropriate steps for responding to the problem might be unique to the school as well. In the long run, there might be problems with the intrusion of other unofficial power groups in the community; and while a new teacher might not face a specific projected problem (such as the one with the band boosters), the discussion of possibilities does train one to think about ways to solve problems within a particular organization and to realize that there are resources available to provide help.

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We have also found that using cases with preservice and beginning teachers can be an effective way to accustom new teachers to collaborate with others to anticipate, discuss, and solve problems. Dan Lortie influenced us to learn from the interactive process of case study analysis, and some useful resources provide cases that are specific to the teaching of English (e.g., Johannessen and McCann; Wagner and Larson). Of course, the best that case studies can do is simulate school situations, but the simulations, like those for driving a car and for piloting a plane, can provide opportunities to learn essential skills in a relatively protected environment to equip the beginner for the more hazardous journey.

Encourage Teachers to Connect to a Larger Community of Education Professionals

The faculty and administration in some schools convey the expectation that teachers will be involved in professional activities outside of school. Joining an organization such as NCTE or one of its affiliates

does reveal that one is making a professional commitment. Being part of a network of teachers across a state or across the country suggests that one sees himself or herself as a professional educator who is committed to growing as a teacher and learning more about the field of knowledge.

We judge that the teachers who are most likely to remain in teaching beyond their induction years have a keen interest in developing their knowledge and skills as teachers. They can talk about how they have grown over the course of their initial year, and they can account for the factors that have helped them to grow. First-year teacher Noel reports: "I've become better at creating meaningful lessons, especially in teaching skills in a procedural way. I never knew how to do that at all until I met the department chair here." In some schools, the wealth of talented, positive people in the building serve as models and provide many immediate learning resources. In schools with smaller faculties and more limited resources, or in schools where the culture does not elevate the importance of professional involvement, it is all the more critical for a new teacher to establish professional links outside of the school. In some instances, the only substantive dialogue a teacher has will be with another English teacher several states away or through reading and responding to the material in professional journals. In the end, the school would need to support the effort and recognize that someone's attendance at a conference or investment in a membership is not a superfluous lark but an essential part of professional development.

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Experienced teachers can do a number of things to encourage novices to connect with a professional community. Often, novices simply are not aware of the many professional opportunities that are available. Experienced teachers serve new teachers by making them aware of professional organizations and how those organizations can help teachers to grow and to help their students. Also, experienced teachers can encourage beginners to attend local, state, regional, and national conferences and workshops. We know of one department chair who has limited resources, but he encourages at least one new teacher to attend the annual state conference or NCTE Annual Convention each year and asks that teacher to share with the department what he or she has learned. This tends to build a sense of a professional community and expectation in the department and encourages other new teachers to get involved in the profession.

Simply sharing recent issues of *English Journal* or other professional journals with new teachers is still another way to encourage professional growth. We know of one high school principal who routinely photocopies thought-provoking journal articles and shares them with his faculty to read and discuss. This tends to encourage professional involvement. In short, experienced teachers should model positive professional involvement for novice teachers and invite the activities that enrich their teaching lives and inform their work.

Connections and a Mission

As Lortie points out, teaching can be an isolating experience. This can be especially true in the first year of one's career when the environment is new and everyone in the school is a stranger. While mentoring programs serve to connect the inexperienced teacher with a more experienced teacher, the beginning teachers we interviewed remind us that personal connections of all sorts will help the new teacher to develop and thrive. In some instances, a variety of formal and informal mentor relationships will be helpful; but it is also crucial that the novice has frequent contact with peers, who can seem less threatening and more empathetic.

Taken as a whole, the stories of the beginning teachers reveal histories of hard work and of frequent frustrations, but they also report satisfaction, a will to continue and grow, and a sense of mission because what they do is vitally important. First-year teacher Nora especially impressed us with her sense of commitment: "I think that there is such a need for good people, it's incredible. In some sense it is a fear that if I'm not here, who will take care of the kids? I have reason to get up in the morning. I know

kids have liked English for the first time. . . . I know for some students, I have literally saved their lives."

The keys to helping novice teachers to thrive in their profession are complex, and we have just begun to explore what efforts might be most useful. This much we feel fairly confident about: Experienced teachers would do well to be proactive and not wait for the beginning teacher to approach them for help. Beginning teachers will reveal their frustrations and concerns, and share their joys and triumphs, if their colleagues will listen and assist them without first judging them. The efforts of a community of colleagues will serve to sustain newcomers so that they can grow over time, refining their teaching proficiencies to contribute much to the mission of schools.

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EJ **15** Years Ago

Students and Teachers Learning Together

Was it surprising to students to learn that their teacher reads something other than Puritan literature? Maybe. A more important question is this: Was I surprised to find that engaging literacy experiences are to be had virtually everywhere? Yes, and it changed the way I look at English classrooms. Students and teachers can learn together by drawing from their common culture—as represented in newspapers, magazines, visual media, and music—to make connections between the "required" texts and the values which we live by.

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