Mentoring Matters

Long ago I worked on my teacher certification at a time when the universities seemed dominated by behaviorists, and it appeared intuitive that students would perform up to some lofty expectations if we threatened punishment for failure and offered rewards for success. The model seemed to make sense, because I recognized the model in operation at my home and in the homes of my friends. But Alfie Kohn and Daniel H. Pink have taken the behaviorists to task and maintain that factors other than tangible rewards and punishments motivate human beings and influence their efforts toward intellectual growth and production. Susan Spangler suggests that mentors need to be aware of some key factors that motivate human beings, and she offers guidelines that should help mentor teachers facilitate the growth of prospective teachers in a way that is humane, logical, and effective.

Finding the Golden Mean: Mentors and Student Teachers Working for Success

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In a previous "Mentoring Matters" column, English teacher educator Melissa McClain calls for dedicated veteran teachers to serve the profession by mentoring student teachers. The cooperating teachers who make the greatest positive impact on interns, she asserts, allow student teachers to make mistakes and learn from them, offer constructive feedback, invest in their student teachers' success, practice current pedagogy in their own classrooms, and remain positive throughout the experience.

Column editor Tom McCann echoes the crucial need for positive mentors in his introduction to the article. To McClain's list, he adds another trait of good mentors, the ability to negotiate the "careful balance between providing critical guidance and allowing autonomy" (qtd. in McClain 117). Indeed, the capacity to weather the extremes in teaching is often what gives teachers longevity in the classroom. By adhering to the principle of "the golden mean" in working with student teachers, mentors can help them achieve early success in teaching that will hopefully carry them into long, fulfilling careers as well.

To McClain's and McCann's conversations about mentors, I would like to add three simple guidelines for making the student teaching experience as productive and meaningful as possible for both mentors and their interns. During my student teaching seminar, student teachers and I were discussing how to motivate students, coming back to a book we had previously read and discussed, Alfie Kohn's *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community.* Drawing from Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's research, Kohn proposes three psychological needs that students require to be motivated to learn: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Not surprisingly, meeting these needs can also help make the classroom productive and meaningful for student teachers as well as for students.

Competence

More complicated than it sounds, *competence* consists of "people's strivings to control outcomes and to experience effectance" (Deci and Ryan 243). That means, in Kohn's words, "all of us take pleasure from learning new things, from acquiring new skills and putting them to use" (10). I describe *competence* as satisfaction in doing a job successfully. To be motivated in the classroom, students need to perform tasks that they can actually do, that are "optimally challenging" (Deci and Ryan 242). Students quickly lose interest in tasks that are too easy; they are frustrated by tasks that

are too difficult. The key, then, is finding a meaningful task that is "just hard enough" to be challenging yet doable.

The same principle applies to student teachers. They need to find a balance between taking on too challenging of a schedule and too easy of one. While a veteran teacher may be able to handle 150 students a day in four different courses, a novice will wilt. On the other hand, offering the student teacher only one basic reading class will leave him or her unchallenged. Similarly, if student teachers are expected to take over all the classes on the first day of the placement, they are bound to have problems adjusting. Being forced to observe for the first month, though, will frustrate them. Mentors can promote competence by allowing student teachers to take on classes gradually and by keeping the number of preparations at a reasonable level for a novice.

To feel competent, student teachers also need to feel good about *something* they are doing well. Perhaps their transitions between activities fall a bit flat, but the activities themselves are engaging and meaningful. In this case, a mentor should remain positive, as McClain suggests, and praise the student teacher for the engaging activities while gracefully finding a way to help him or her improve on the transitions. All negative criticism is not helpful, nor is all positive. If student teachers never feel like they are doing well, they will give up in frustration. If they feel as though they are doing everything well, they will never improve their teaching. Finding the golden mean between praise and criticism is essential for success.

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Autonomy

Autonomy has a straightforward definition: to have a voice or agency in determining one's own behavior. Classroom students are motivated when they are given choices in tasks or activities, from which book to read for their presentations, to which literature circle role to perform for the day. The more meaningful choices we offer to students, the more in control of their education they are and the more invested in it they become.

With student teachers, autonomy becomes even more important in their learning process. Some students in the seminar have told me that their cooperating teachers prepare all the lessons and activities, which the student teachers then teach. They have no input on what is taught, when it is taught, or how it is taught. They are, in essence, the equivalent of substitute teachers.

On the other hand, some novices have told me that their cooperating teachers have given them no guidelines whatsoever for lessons. They can teach whatever they want, for as long as they want. While that might sound like a dream job for a motivated veteran, novices are overwhelmed by this situation. They want to know how the material they teach will make sense with the rest of the curriculum. They want to know the kinds of activities students have already mastered so that they don't repeat material.

Without autonomy, a sense of choice and control over those choices, novices will never achieve a feeling of competence in teaching. It is crucial, therefore, that mentors allow their interns guided choices in the material they teach as well as the way they teach it. In this way, student teachers will achieve that "careful balance" between submission and autonomy. Mentor teachers should offer information about the curriculum and the students so that novices are able to make informed decisions about how best to design and execute their lessons.

Relatedness

Most people, particularly the Millenials that are currently student teaching, want to be part of a group or feel a sense of belonging. In the classroom, students who feel an obligation to the community will be less likely to disrupt it and more likely to work for its good, as Kohn theorizes on classroom dynamics. For student teachers, a sense of belonging both to the school and to the profession is important in their development and longevity as teachers. Some of the student teachers I have worked with have told me that their cooperating teachers will not allow them to eat lunch "at the grown-up table" in the faculty room. The student teachers are forced to sit with other student teachers or by themselves. They are confused and hurt by the exclusion, wondering why they are being ostracized.

More fortunate student teachers say that their cooperating teachers have helped them get a faculty identification badge, a school email account, and other appurtenances of faculty at the school. They attend professional development events and have a say in team meetings, treated as though they are faculty members. In the area of relatedness, the need for balance is complicated by the student teachers' dual identities as students and as teachers. As students, they may have assignments and obligations on campus; as teachers, they must assume a professional persona in the classroom. In both situations, the challenge is to figure out who they are supposed to be and where they belong. Supportive mentors will recognize this identity challenge and help novices negotiate it. The more the student teachers can be included and made to feel like "real" teachers, the more they will be motivated to act like "real" teachers, and the stronger their teacher identity will become.

Like McClain and McCann, I recognize the need for positive mentors and have seen the benefits of a successful student teaching experience to both the cooperating teacher and the intern. With these three suggestions, mentors now have a few guiding principles that will allow them to help their interns to fully develop their potential as teachers and leaders in their schools and in the profession.

Works Cited

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Call for 2012 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at www.ncte.org/awards/halle and must be submitted no later than **June 1, 2012.** Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2012 Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada during the Middle Level Get-Together.