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# Mentoring Matters

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Beginning teachers typically enter schools feeling like foreigners, coping often with the jolting disorientation of not knowing where to find basic things such as restrooms, copiers, and mailboxes. They also struggle to pick up on the routines that others seem to have mastered with ease. At the same time, the culture and territory of US schools should seem familiar, and practices in one school can be simple variations on practices common to almost all schools. Imagine, however, teaching in another country, where the classroom landscape looks familiar, but the daily routines in the school and in the community are not routine at all. Under such circumstances, it would be helpful to have some guidance and support from more experienced colleagues, both to find the resources necessary to teach a particular lesson and to complete such mundane tasks as filling a prescription or navigating through bureaucratic channels. Spencer Salas and Scott Kissau reveal some common and distressing experiences of international teachers in US schools, and they urge our understanding and support to improve the experiences of our international colleagues, who can contribute significantly to our schools.

## It's Just Like Dido Said: Improving the Experiences of International Teaching Colleagues

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Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco

—*Virgil's Aeneid, Book 1, line 630*

In the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Trojan fugitives arrive on the shores of Libya seeking refuge. Dido, queen of the Tyrians, grants Aeneas and his men the hospitality of Carthage—welcoming them famously with a phrase a rough contemporary translation for which might be, “I’ve been in your shoes—and I’ve got your back.” What Dido said is something to remember when looking for ways to support international teaching colleagues. A study by the National Education Association reported that in 2003 there were approximately 10,000 foreign teachers working in US K–12 public schools on non-immigrant work or cultural exchange visas (Barber). More recent data, how-

ever, suggest that number to have more than tripled (Wolfe).

Despite the growing presence of international teachers in US classrooms, relatively few middle school or secondary school English educators have had similar experiences living and teaching on foreign shores in a foreign system. It's not that we are unwilling, as Dido put it, “to help those in need”; it's that we don't particularly know how or where to begin. International colleagues have the potential to contribute greatly to the perspectives of our students, institutions, and ourselves in understanding what it means to be part of a larger, global network of education. In this column, we argue that mentors should consider what it feels like to be new to a school and to a community, and how we might better support our international colleagues at a professional level—and, perhaps even more importantly, at a personal level.

Contemporary praxis for English education has underscored the relation between mentoring and the professional trajectories of preservice and inservice K–12 teachers—how having a colleague's back, especially a newcomer's, might benefit that individual's professional experience and the profession at large.

Discussions have considered, among other things, the grass-roots dynamics of teacher research groups in the co-construction of complex teacher knowledge and reflection (Fairbanks and LaGrone) and more top-down approaches such as the role of principals in the success of teacher induction (Bickmore and Bickmore). Certainly, in today's "corporate climate" (Smagorinsky, Gibson, and Bickmore) of K–12 education, teachers, wherever they are in their professional lives, can benefit from knowing that someone, especially an administrator or peer, is there for them. That said, it is easy to assume in US schools that our colleagues are US born and raised. In our experiences, this assumption is no longer valid—English education has taken on a global dimension and more of our colleagues are coming from distant shores. So, the need for administrative and collegial support of new teachers becomes even more critical when one considers the growing number of international teachers found in our K–12 classrooms (Associated Press; Barber).

International preservice and inservice teachers have complex and specific needs. Differences between their lived experiences with K–12 education in their home countries and the *modus operandi* of US schools might take the form of understandings about assessment, teacher-student interactions, classroom management, pedagogical models, and the language of teaching and learning (see, e.g., Amengual-Pizarro; Chambers; Hutchinson and Jazzar; Kissau, Yon, and Algozzine). Perhaps the most challenging

piece for our international colleagues is not having any prior experience working in the United States or understanding the US classroom: the dilemmas our international colleagues face are often highly personal.

We recall driving a colleague at the University of Georgia to Atlanta for an interview with Homeland Security. He was in the final weeks of his graduate internship for advanced licensure. A native of Columbia, he had entered the United States on political asylum in the 1990s and the process for reviewing his application was coming to a close. The month preceding the hearing, he was prescribed painkillers to relieve the anxiety he was experiencing about the pending interview and the idea of having to return home.

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That same semester, one of our research participants, a Polish native teaching basic writing at a local two-year college, was also in the conundrum of "what to do next" as the romantic relationship that had brought her to Georgia almost ten years earlier failed and the series of visas that had allowed her to study and work in the United States was coming to a close. Even if our colleagues and we were aware—to varying extents—

of her dilemma, we did little to communicate that the choice she was faced with (whether to stay or leave) was a hard one. At the end of the semester she disappeared, and we suspect our colleagues joined us in regretting never saying anything to her (see Salas).

Some years later, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, we began talking about these specific instances and others. One of us—a Canadian working in the United States on an H1 visa—had recently received a bill for more than a thousand dollars from a recent trip to the emergency room—and this with his Blue Cross/Blue Shield policy coverage. As his symptoms had not been life threatening, a visit to an urgent care facility seemed a viable option. Having only recently immigrated to the United States, he confessed that he wasn't aware of the difference between the two—no one had told him.

The experiences of these three colleagues all point to the complexity of the lives of international educators working in the United States, a complexity that comes in addition to the daily conundrums they encountered as preservice or inservice language and literacy educators. We suppose that one could argue that all professionals face parallel challenges alongside their jobs and, in our case, our classrooms. However, unlike those of us who have a lifetime of extracurricular support networks more or less readily available to come to our aid, international teachers are oftentimes alone with few human resources to support them in daily life. Moreover, the discourse surrounding what it means to be a professional—especially in US

schools—often promotes the idea that teachers are a proverbial “giving tree,” ignoring their own well-being for the sake of their students’ good until they are nothing but stumps for others to rest on (see Johnson, Bruce, and Graham).

While professional paradigms of resiliency and tenacity are hard to shed, we believe that if English educators are unable or unavailable to offer solutions to the dilemmas that our international colleagues encounter outside of the classroom, at minimum, we might offer empathy. That is to say, even if we cannot provide our international colleagues with hospitality on a grand scale, we can open the hospitality of our collegiality. Even if we cannot imagine what it might be like to be in their places, we can clearly communicate that we honor and respect the professionals they are and are still becoming—and being and becoming so far from home.

Dido’s story ends in tragedy. But ours doesn’t have to. Even if we don’t deeply understand the

experience of living in a foreign nation, we can do what we must to ensure that our international teaching colleagues feel that we truly “have their backs.”

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