I guess that I have probably thought about the induction and mentoring of new teachers more often than most readers of English Journal. Over 30 years and four jobs in public schools, I had the official responsibility to think about the induction and retention of teachers who were new to schools where I worked. For two of those jobs, statements about the induction and mentoring of new teachers were actually written into my job description. I have long had an interest in the retention and development of teachers, although I have never been officially assigned as a mentor. Perhaps the interest derives in part from an appreciation of the important work that teachers do, and from a sense of indebtedness to the many people who have supported me as I have stumbled along in trying to figure out how to be a teacher like the ones I admired.

When I contributed to the hiring of new teachers, I hoped that we had hired newcomers of great potential; but I also worried about their thriving on the job in order to be satisfied or fulfilled with their work in serving the development and best interests of students. Sometimes my mentoring effort was little more than inquiring about their welfare: “How are you doing?” “How was your tenth-period class?” I often encouraged new teachers to attend professional development workshops or conferences such as the NCTE Annual Convention. I’d like to believe that my classroom visits and attempts at facilitating reflective conversations helped a little. But I was largely operating intuitively, making my best guesses about what new teachers worried about and needed.

What Do Beginners Need?

In 1999, when Larry Johannessen and I started work on a book called In Case You Teach English: An Interactive Casebook for Prospective and Practicing Teachers, we began to interview student teachers and early-career teachers about the issues and episodes that caused them the greatest distress. We wanted to represent these tough issues in a series of case studies that preservice teachers could explore as practice in problem solving as they would as professional teachers. In a sense, we wanted the work with the cases to serve as simulated experiences that involved professional problem solving and collaboration. As we moved from exploratory conversations with the beginning teacher to more systematic research, we recognized that beginning teachers were having a bad time of it, contending sometimes with disruptive students, angry parents, insensitive colleagues, and intimidating supervisors. They grappled at times with curriculum conundrums, grading and assessment challenges, and mostly with their sense of who they were supposed to be as teachers. And they fought always against debilitating fatigue.

As Larry and I continued to research the concerns of beginning teachers, their means for coping, and the supports that were likely to help, we saw both a common pattern of issues and some unique problems that caused teachers to lose sleep and fret constantly. We had titled an early version of 2005’s Supporting Beginning English Teachers: Research and Implications for Teacher Induction (McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca) as What Makes Beginning Teachers Cry. At least one manuscript reviewer judged the original proposed title to be too negative, and the reviewer scolded us for suggesting that the experience of teaching might not be entirely satisfying and thereby discouraging early-career teachers from continuing in the field. The last thing we wanted to
do was discourage good teachers from continuing to teach. But that early title got to the essence of the thing: in reality, based on our sample of subjects, there were sleepless nights and tearful episodes. As negative as it was, the title echoed an earlier study by William F. Whyte in which he attempts to explain what makes waitresses cry. We judged that if early-career teachers were finding their jobs so distressful that they would sometimes cry, as we had witnessed ourselves, and it would be important to know what complex of conditions caused the distress so that supervisors and colleagues in a school could provide sufficient support to help beginners to anticipate, avoid, and/or bounce back from such negative episodes.

As our research advanced, Larry Johannessen, Barney Ricca, and I looked to propose some steps to take to support beginning teachers. Barney and Larry treated the problem from a university teacher preparation perspective, while I viewed matters from the position of leaders in schools. There was much that various mentors could do, and we all recognized that new teachers could also do much to help themselves. In fact, our subjects’ reports of their means for coping with difficult situations revealed that mentoring was not the narrow one-on-one responsibility of an accomplished veteran teacher leading the way for a new colleague. Instead, we saw that even before the proliferation of online social media, beginners were tapping into a network of contacts to help them to think about problems and cope with difficulties. They relied on the school-sponsored mentor when one was available, but they also told their stories to friends and family, vented with other beginners, including their former college classmates, appealed to their old professors, and sought advice from experienced colleagues, even when they were not the official mentors. Our mixed perspectives and the early-career teachers’ reports about their coping clarified that mentoring is not an individual effort, but a complex web of efforts, including various initiatives by NCTE and its affiliates to reach out to newcomers.

There is plenty of evidence that new teachers are quite vulnerable, with some reports (Ingersoll and Smith, for example) suggesting that they leave the profession at a rate of 50% over the first five years of teaching. When there is an apparent glut of teachers in many areas, a cynic might ask, “Why should we care?” In some instances, experienced teachers seem less than sensitive about the satisfaction and professional growth of their less-experienced colleagues. A few insist that the newcomers need to learn to swim on their own, just as they did when they were new to the profession. This survival-of-the-fittest attitude would make some sense if teachers who hope to grow and thrive in the profession were jungle animals indeed struggling for survival; but the analogy fails for me, because we all benefit from our less-experienced colleagues’ growing and thriving. In fact, if we care anything for learners, learning, and the mission of schools, we should care deeply that emerging teachers quickly become distinguished teachers.

The Critical Importance of Good Teaching

Teachers today are under attack, and conditions in many schools continue to become increasingly strained. If we were to rely on popular media, teachers are pathetic drones (see Ben Stein in Ferris Bueller), irresponsible hacks (see Cameron Diaz in Bad Teacher), or heroically self-sacrificing, willing to neglect family and partner (see Hilary Swank in Freedom Writers) or to cast aside personal health (see Edward James Olmos in Stand and Deliver) in service of student learning and achievement. Regardless of the way we are depicted in political debates, news reports, and entertainment media, teachers remain the key factor in any effort to improve or reform schools. To my mind, seldom do news reporters or filmmakers get it right when they try to represent what teachers do. If we have been blessed as teachers, we have experienced some occasions when the life in the classroom is exciting, if not dramatic; but the daily business of planning, assessing, discussing, collaborating, responding, and caring is not
cinematic. Nevertheless, teachers do save lives and enrich lives in ways that are not easy to document and difficult to make glamorous. Outsiders who view the work of teachers, and that includes everyone who was ever a student, have little understanding about what teachers actually do and have only a dim view of the impact that good teachers have on the lives of learners. When administrators function merely as instructional managers rather than instructional leaders, they are quick to find the systems and scripts that are relatively easy to organize, check, and manage (Jones). While school managers often chase myriad initiatives and lose sight of the core mission of schools, teaching continues to matter most (McCann, Jones, and Aronoff).

Quality teaching is the single most important factor in school improvement and in advancing learning and achievement. Citing the research of Donald J. Boyd, Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, Jonah Rockoff, and James Wyckoff and Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, Linda Darling-Hammond and David Haselkorn succinctly affirm that quality instruction from well-prepared teachers has a greater impact on student achievement than “the effects of race and parent education combined” (30). The research underscores the importance of teacher preparation, but it also illuminates the idea that teachers require a good deal of support throughout their careers to sustain high-quality instruction. However, the sad tendency seems to be that many school systems and school environments conspire to erode teacher quality.

Administrators who have assumed instructional leadership positions do not always have the vision and capacity to make a difference in schools; but teacher leaders who care about the induction and mentoring of their less-experienced colleagues can make a big difference. Realistically, dangers await the newly minted teacher. There are the obvious dangers of disjointed curricula, assessment challenges, fatigue, angry parents, narrow-minded supervisors, troubled students, poor facilities, lack of resources, etc. But the prevailing danger is that teachers who leave colleges and universities with a progressive vision for teaching in ways that make learning meaningful and engaging for all learners soon backslide to imitate the more conventional ways that they experienced as students or to conform to a local standard that might ease the messy work of planning and assessment for the teacher but reduce the quality of instruction for students. Mary M. Kennedy reports that teachers tend to be “immune” to efforts at school reform (2). In fact, she reports instances when teachers’ commitments to their own instructional scripts or to the instructional scripts established by others push back the openings for inquiry and dialogue.

A Hazardous Journey

Not only is there the danger that teachers with great potential will leave teaching after a short stay in the classroom, but the additional risk that other teachers will stay in teaching, only to follow the defensive practices that make planning and management relatively easy, and assessment more efficient, if not entirely meaningful. Dan C. Lortie notes that after spending 16 or more years as a student in the classroom, teacher candidates have served a long “apprenticeship of observation” that has a powerful influence on how they see the conventional practices of teachers. If the teachers that the candidates have observed over the years represent commendable models, then as new teachers they will have a stock of powerful images from which to draw; but this is seldom the case. It appears that in many instances new teachers fare no better in learning on the job where they fall under the influence of the local school culture. Peter Sмагоринский, Amy Alexandra Wilson, and Cynthia Moore report that “Teacher candidates experience practica in school settings that tend to reinforce the values that teacher education faculty are likely to question; newly certified teachers then enter jobs in those same settings where school administrators hold considerable power to guide their pedagogy back toward the authoritarian norm, one that is further fortified by assessment mandates toward which they must direct their instruction” (266).

So there is a lot at stake: both the retention of good teachers and the advancement of their craft and professional lives so that learners’ experiences in schools are rich circumstances that honor their need for emotional, social, and intellectual growth.
in schools are rich circumstances that honor their need for emotional, social, and intellectual growth. When teachers and learners together find that experiences in school protect their essential human dignity and satisfy their needs to think critically about ideas that matter to them and feel a sense of community with other learners, then teachers will find it nearly impossible to leave teaching, even when resources diminish and skeptics denigrate their work. And many people along the professional journey can contribute to the emergence of a committed, optimistic, positive, and highly skilled teacher.

What Can Mentors Do to Help?

It is possible to look to various books and to the ongoing “Mentoring Matters” column in English Journal for general guidelines for developing a mentor program. But the contributors to this issue’s EJ reveal that there is no standard formula: one size does not fit all occasions. As with any kind of learning, learning to teach is contextualized, and the needs of the beginning teacher might be quite different from one teaching situation to another. Readers who care to help less-experienced colleagues to thrive should be attentive to specific needs rather than generalize from their own experiences. Mentoring involves lots of action along a continuous path: from the preparation at the university to the support of a cooperating teacher to the ongoing coaching and professional development in a school.

Several book-length resources (see, for example, Lipton and Wellman; Villani) provide guidance for those who have responsibility for establishing or managing a mentor program. I focus here in summary fashion on a few key tools and responsibilities for mentors. First, mentors need to be more than the local welcoming committee that places a pot of flowers on the new teachers’ desks and shows them where to find the faculty mailboxes and washrooms. The key effort is to help the early-career teacher to move as quickly as possible into becoming a highly proficient teacher who functions much like distinguished veteran teachers function. This shift does not occur by the mentor transmitting wisdom to the newcomer or by simply telling the new colleague to do what the mentor does. Diane Stephens and her colleagues remind us that we are not likely to fixate the beliefs that guide action because someone told us that something was so (533). Instead, it is through the process of inquiry and discovery that we develop the firmly held beliefs about how learners learn and about how teachers can most effectively teach. These beliefs in turn guide actions.

To support the process of inquiry and discovery, the mentor needs to be willing and able to observe in the classroom, to allow the new colleague to observe in the mentor’s classroom, and to facilitate the extended conversations to help the less-experienced colleague to reflect on the effect of instruction and to make plans for adjusting practice.

Mentors need to be proactive in helping the newer teacher to anticipate the critical episodes that inevitably face any teacher—the challenge to manage a daunting workload while following habits necessary to stay healthy; to recover from disappointments, errors, and disrespect; to form positive relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors; and to connect with other committed teachers.

Mentors can do much to encourage professional involvement. A simple beginning step is joining NCTE and/or one of its affiliates. This commitment connects the new teacher to a network of colleagues and resources. The decision to join a professional association is a critical move that elevates the significance of one’s work. Sometimes mentors encourage less-experienced teachers to propose conference sessions or to submit articles for publication. This encouragement endorses the early-career teacher as a bona fide educator who has ideas worth sharing. Even if the new teacher cannot attend
conferences and workshops, it is important for the mentor to encourage the teacher to connect with colleagues within a school and not remain isolated.

A mentor can also serve a new colleague by modeling procedures for collaborative problem solving. Certainly knowledge is distributed across a school, a department, or a team; a mentor should be able to introduce a less-experienced colleague to the processes that a team of teachers follows to judge the effect of a curriculum, to alter and differentiate instruction, and to design assessment procedures.

Self-Help

Beginning teachers can do much to help themselves. Perhaps the first step is to stay clear of teacher “survival guides” that prescribe practices to keep kids in line, to keep a classroom tidy, and to impress others with the “professional” cut of one’s attire. While a school might assign a mentor to work with a new teacher, many uninvited mentors might step up to influence the newcomer. I recommend a return to the advice our parents gave most of us: Choose your friends wisely. We all need friends, but it is important to associate with other teachers who will support progressive and optimistic tendencies. It is always tough to remain resilient and resist the push of a local school’s culture toward defensive teaching that attends more to test preparation than to teaching for deep understandings of concepts and procedures that are key to one’s discipline. I would look for role models and associates whom George Hillocks Jr. calls “constructivist optimists” (viii).

New teachers worry about a lot of issues, but many worries surround the relationships with others—with learners, with their parents, with colleagues, and with supervisors. The primary relationship is the one that teachers form with learners. Distinguished experienced teachers report that their management of their classes derives from the positive rapport developed with learners. It certainly takes time to build this rapport, but it begins by conveying to students that learning what there is to learn in your classes is important, by ac-
knowing that learners will struggle from time to time, and by affirming that you are available to help when learners need you. Developing any relationship is complex, and I don’t want to trivialize the process of developing a positive relationship by reducing it to a formula. But I do know that a positive rapport does not grow from threats and from promises of possible rewards. Developing a positive relationship with learners will take time and will depend on cultivating a sense of trust and from conveying a sense that the teacher’s actions ultimately attach to the best interests of the learners.

The Cavalcade of Mentors

My recent work in teacher preparation has convinced me that so much of the development of the new teacher will depend on the quality of the mentoring and modeling from the cooperating teacher during the candidate’s clinical experience. I trust that teacher candidates gain much from the classes they take at the university. But it is easy for the classroom practices that we read, discuss, and endorse to be pushed aside when influential partners in schools contradict those practices. From a university perspective, the best situation is one in which the work of the cooperating teacher complements the efforts in the university classrooms. Seldom, however, do the universities provide the cooperating teachers with the training that they might need to function as supportive mentors. I am afraid we place much faith in the good intentions and intuitive decisions of the mentor teachers to provide guidance to teacher candidates. We could certainly be more purposeful in forming close partnerships and in providing meaningful training and support for mentor teachers.

When new teachers start their work in schools, they fall under the influence of a set of other mentors. A school administrator might assign a mentor, whether willing or not. The immediate supervisor certainly should serve a mentoring function. Other informal mentors step up, or the new teachers seek them out. It is appropriate for new teachers to rely on other newly minted teachers, their former classmates, their friends, and their family members for counsel and support. Many of the mentoring encounters occur online through the resources of professional organizations, and sometimes with mentors that one has never met. All of these contributors served a function to advance or to inhibit one’s growth as a teacher. Mentoring and induction, then, is not simply an older and wiser teacher conveying knowledge and wisdom to a younger protégé. Mentoring and induction involves a wide network of contacts who can offer the pedagogical, emotional, and ethical support that all teachers inevitably need.

As I follow the development of many beginning teachers, I see that professional growth and retention in teaching depend on many factors: the university program one chooses, some influential university faculty, the schools to which one is assigned for clinical experiences, the cooperating teachers to which one is matched, the dominant culture in the host school, the supervisors and mentors in the school where one is hired, and the policies and common practices in the school. The path seems rather haphazard. In the end, emerging teachers need to maintain some core beliefs through which they can filter their experiences: for example, that schools serve an important mission to help individuals to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally; that the daily interactions among peers in schools help them to experience democratic processes and prepare them to respect the dignity of others and work for social justice; that all learners are prepared to learn what schools have to offer; that learners can construct and create, not simply recite and re-create. As Smagorinsky notes, if teachers are going to teach in a principled way, they need to think deeply about what they teach, about why they teach it, and about why a particular group of students needs to learn it.

Obviously, experienced teachers have many advantages over beginning teachers. They are aware of various resources, have access to many instructional options, and can anticipate circumstances and effects. These advantages help the experienced teachers to be more confident than their less-experienced colleagues. I have found that when new teachers work in highly collaborative school environments, the beginners gain many of the advantages enjoyed by the veteran teachers (McCann, Ressler, Chambers, and Minor). When planning instruction and assessing the effects of instruction involves collaboration with other teachers, beginners gain an awareness of resources and instructional
possibilities and learn how to solve problems as a member of a team. These advantages encourage a sense of reflectiveness, both in planning and review. Mentors can help new teachers to position themselves in the collaborative relationships that deliver the benefits of experience.

Mentors might serve beginners by pointing out where to get a parking permit, by locating the faculty mailboxes and washrooms, and by rehearsing a parent conference for curriculum night. But the ongoing conversations should include a close examination of the functions of schools and a reflection on the value of the subject we teach. Ultimately, emerging teachers will want to connect with a community of other teachers to promote their own growth and satisfaction and to advance the learning and positive experience of all the learners in their classrooms.

Works Cited


Thomas M. McCann is associate professor of English at Northern Illinois University, where he contributes to the teacher certification program. He taught English in high schools for 25 years, including seven years working in an alternative high school. He has been a high school English department chair, an assistant principal, and an assistant superintendent. His co-authored books include In Case You Teach English: An Interactive Casebook for Preservice and Prospective Teachers (Merrill/Prentice Hall, 2002), Supporting Beginning English Teachers (NCTE, 2005), Talking in Class (NCTE, 2006), The Dynamics of Writing Instruction (Heinemann, 2010), and Teaching Matters Most (Corwin, 2012). He co-edited Reflective Teaching, Reflective Learning (Heinemann, 2009). NCTE’s Conference on English Education awarded him the Richard A. Meade Award for research about the concerns of beginning teachers. He also received the Paul and Kate Farmer Award from NCTE for his writing for English Journal.