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THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A TEACHER: STUDENT TEACHERS DISCOVER CLASSROOM REALITIES

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Teaching is important work, presenting meaningful opportunities to encourage and influence. As English teachers we love Shakespeare's plays, and we find delight in a compelling essay or in a moving poem. And we know that the classroom can be a rich, rewarding environment. Experienced teachers, however, acknowledge that some rigors of teaching often overshadow the joyful intensity of literature and the splendid nuances of language. Classroom realities become part of the student teachers' world as they discover that the complexities of teaching involve more than appreciating literature and talking about poetry.

As a university coordinator of a secondary English Education program, I teach methods courses and supervise student teachers. Working with students during the internship reminds me of my own years as a high school English teacher and of the transformations necessary when moving from being a student into the role of becoming a teacher. Much learning occurs as student teachers experience a new environment—new demands on their time, new applications of their content, and new levels of stress. They learn that professional growth presents challenges. One of my goals as a teacher educator is to help preservice teachers understand the personal and professional realities they will encounter during the student teaching experience. Through this article I explore the process of becoming a teacher and share the perceptions of my student teachers.

At the beginning of the internship, student teachers' idealism and enthusiasm run high. They have completed their coursework and are ready to demonstrate their skills. The following journal entry

from one of my student teachers reflects untarnished joy early in her internship:

I was full of dream-like eagerness to have my own classroom, my own students. I dreamed about giving fascinating and intellectual lectures to wide-eyed students who were eager to learn and full of questions—all of which I could answer in-depth and brilliantly. I thought of interesting and friendly teaching peers who all loved their jobs as much as I did, professionals who wanted nothing more than to share their ideas with me. I dreamed about pleasant and cooperative parents wholly immersed in the education of their precious children. I was respected, loved, and embraced by everyone. I thought teaching would come naturally to me and my lessons would always go smoothly. –V.V.

A major awakening, however, occurs when student teachers begin to accept classroom responsibilities and have more interaction with students. Student teachers learn that the teacher's day is regulated by a rigid schedule, lots of paperwork, and the realization that the needs of some students are hard to meet. Soon the preconceived notions about teaching English—students love literature and enjoy writing—are replaced by the reality that English is not every student's favorite subject. As Christenbury discusses in *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts*, teachers have to understand that "many students are terrified of writing....Many don't read frequently or fluently or with a whole lot of understanding" (12). The message for student teachers is clear: your goal is to motivate students who may be uncooperative and disengaged. Through their journals, student teachers explore this reality and discuss strategies for coping with difficult situations:

My idealistic view of teaching shattered after the paperwork started pouring in, parent phone calls started coming, and lesson planning became overwhelming. I have become realistic about what I can

accomplish with my students and how I can balance the demands of this job that has become my life. I realize that I need to look each day for those rewards that come few and far between. –K.K.

A student was entirely unreasonable with me today in class. She was very insistent on maintaining a rude, defiant, disrespectful attitude. To remain calm, I had to use all of the techniques I learned in class. I am concerned that the unpleasant interaction with her will influence my judgment when I am grading her work. –D.L.

For the second time this week, a majority of my 12th grade literature students failed to complete a simple homework assignment. This lack of effort frustrated me greatly. I sternly addressed the class and told them how disappointed I was. I could feel my temper flaring, but I remained calm and thought about the situation for a moment. There was no way that I could change the fact that they had not read the assignment. All I could do was move on. –B.B.

Student absences are aggravating. There are three girls who are absent regularly from one of my classes. One girl has been absent for nine days in the past four weeks and another skips first hour almost every day. Of the three, only one has a legitimate excuse for her attendance problems, and I have to spend time preparing make-up work for all three students. It really frustrates me because they are missing so much. Getting their work ready was annoying until I learned to create a notebook for assignments. –E.J.

Once student teachers master classroom routines and move through the early stages of learning to teach, they become introspective and are eager to evaluate how they are doing with their lessons. Becoming self-reflective often means that

student teachers question their competence in the classroom, diminishing their confidence and causing self-doubts. Experienced educators, however, know that “teachers do tend to be their own worst critics, but reflection, self-awareness, and self-assessment are critical to professional growth and enhancement” (Cockman 24). Through supportive mentoring, student teachers learn that self-evaluation is vital to making good decisions about best practices in the classroom.

During the internship student teachers discover their own strengths and weaknesses. Through trial and error they begin to develop the skills needed for success in the classroom, and they experience a sense of pride in the work they are doing. Very significantly, though, they learn the importance of maintaining good health and emotional balance as the following journal entries reveal:

After a bad day last week, I got into my car and cried all the way home. That experience, however, was followed by a more successful experience today, showing me how important it is to look at each day as a new day. If I would have come to school with a bad attitude, the students would have reacted to it and I would have had to face more problems. As I reflect on what happened, I know that these experiences have been a valuable lesson. –L.C.

I don't want to be my students' friend, and I won't lose sleep at night if some of my students don't like me or think that I am too hard. However, I do want to create an environment where I have a relationship with my students. I want to be part of my students' lives, and they will become a part of mine. –V.M.

I must learn to ask for help when I need it, and I have to learn to trust my own instincts. –Y.C.

Staying healthy is a problem when I am in a classroom filled with students who are sick. I have had a pretty bad cold since last week and it really is dragging me down. I have been going to school and doing what I am supposed to do, but my energy level is way down and I'm exhausted by the time I get home, so I usually end up just crawling into bed. I've noticed that I have less patience and understanding with students when I am not feeling well. –K.W.

In addition to keeping themselves emotionally and physically balanced while meeting the demands of the classroom, student teachers must grapple with awkward, unfamiliar situations involving teaching colleagues. Student teachers soon recognize that they are newcomers, guests in a building filled with educators who have developed their own strategies for navigating the system, techniques that may be negative or positive, traditional or innovative. Student teachers must learn strategies for effective interpersonal interactions while becoming comfortable with the professional atmosphere within the school. This is not an easy task because the changing climate in schools over the past several decades has created complex situations within a school that are “especially difficult for English language arts teachers, for ours is the subjective discipline, the human humane discipline, whose aims and goals center on human behaviour and human values, and whose dimensions are difficult to describe and assess” (Tchudi and Tchudi 253). One student teacher felt uncomfortable listening to the lunchtime conversation of a teacher who took great delight in “nabbing” a student plagiarist who produced a cut-and-paste term paper. Another student teacher wondered why new teachers were expected to park their cars in the back of the parking lot while veteran teachers claimed the right to the closest parking spaces even though they arrived later than others. It's true that student teachers may question how the system works when they observe the politics of individual schools, but this experience should

encourage newcomers to listen and learn while saying very little. In the following entries, student teachers identify their concerns about interpersonal relationships:

I found it very interesting to see all of the teachers' emotions come out during a department meeting. The topic was student assessment and the issue focused on using departmental final exams. I also can see why there is an unspoken rule about new teachers keeping their mouths closed. Attending this meeting gave me an inside view of how things work. –S.H.

Despite the positive relationships that I have developed with several of the school's special education teachers, I have felt a sense of friction with them at times. On a few occasions during the last week, I have had trouble digesting their attempts to justify students' poor performance, students who are capable of satisfactory performance yet become lazy because they depend on their support teacher's help. One teacher asked me (in a pleasant way) to reconsider my “choice” to give a special education student a failing grade. I didn't say anything, but I asked my cooperating teacher for guidance. –B.B.

I am actually tired of hearing about all the “truths” from older teachers. This does not make me idealistic but rather more realistic. I have heard the obstacles that teachers face, thought about the meaning of education, listened to others' experiences...and then moved on. – E.F.

When student teachers accept more responsibilities, they learn to dismiss concerns for their own egos. Their perspective becomes more mature as they understand the need to overlook the occasional insensitivity of students and to focus on good teaching. This means being open to the cooperating teacher's suggestions while

demonstrating a genuine commitment to doing a good job in the classroom. Of course, this is not always easy for student teachers because of the very nature of their position: as “students” they are learners, but as “teachers” they are leaders. Student teachers are in a precarious position because they are novices who must demonstrate mastery, balancing compliance and assertiveness (Koerner, Rust, and Baumgartner). Educators acknowledge that student teachers are in a demanding situation, yet the internship is a vital part of professional development as the following student teachers reveal:

After teaching my first lesson, I was surprised by all of the positive feedback I got from my cooperating teacher. However, that soon changed. As I started to get more experience, he found many areas that needed work. He mentioned such things as writing the name of the story and the author on the board or calling on all students, whether their hands are raised or not. And he felt that I should be walking around the class, up and down the aisles as we read the story. His comments were useful and constructive, but I felt discouraged because I started on such a positive note and now he thinks that I am not doing such a great job. I went home frustrated and deflated, but I did a lot of thinking. The next day I made a point to specifically address the things he had corrected because I wanted to improve my teaching but also because I wanted to show him that his advice hadn’t fallen on deaf ears. –D.L.

I am often reminded of all of the factors that go into teaching. Try as we may to think things through, it is always the voice of experience, of reflection, which speaks the loudest and the wisest in these areas. I need to constantly reflect on my assignments and on students’ progress. And I need to be introspective about myself as a teacher. – J.G.

A very obvious “problem child” was experiencing more difficulties than usual this week. That is, he seemed to be muttering, looking around, fidgeting, tearing the plastic off his binder, and not participating. His outbursts were disturbing. My cooperating teacher revealed that she tries to accommodate him as best as possible because he has extreme emotional/behavioural problems. While she admitted to me that he made her feel uncomfortable, she never let him know that. As a teacher I intend to adopt the same type of professional, yet concerned demeanor that my cooperating teacher had toward this student. She maintained the same expectations for success from him as she did from the others. I learned to approach problem students tactfully. –E.F.

As student teachers gain more experience in the classroom, their expectations become more realistic. Their lessons become better focused and more effectively presented as they develop their ability to work with students and to plan for any contingency. Through experience they learn the importance of being organized and well prepared. Very importantly, though, they learn the value of being flexible and caring. They share their suggestions:

Develop a good memory. Remember things that your students tell you, experiences they have related and especially remember their names! A good memory of these facts can bail you out of a lesson that no one is responding to. The other day I was trying to explain a feeling of excitement in relation to tone of voice, and I remembered that a particular student loves his “phat stereo.” I was able to add that point to our discussion and he responded almost immediately. – K.V.

I like to discuss current events in relation to the stories we are reading in class. When

teaching the classics, I don't expect students to pick up on the many layers of meaning. I strip the story down to its most basic message, and then allow students to make connections to their own lives. I encourage students to make connections with events in the news as a way of better understanding literature. –E.F.

Don't underestimate your students' abilities. Students seem to thrive while working on different assignments at once. Perhaps I underestimated their ability to multi-task. I was surprised that even lower ability students seemed to enjoy the varied activities. I now see that moments of student boredom may be created by my own low expectations of their capabilities. –Y.C.

Cooperating teachers have a significant impact on a student teacher's experience. Educators acknowledge that the relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher is a major factor in determining the quality of the internship, noting that the best relationship is a symbiotic partnership—a balance that meets the needs of both parties through open dialogue and realistic expectations (Shantz and Brown 1999). How do cooperating teachers view their role as mentors for student teachers? Although some note that working with a student teacher may produce moments of anxiety, most acknowledge that the time and effort devoted to mentoring a new teacher makes a worthwhile contribution to the profession as well as to their own development as educators. According to research reported in *Teacher Education Quarterly*, many cooperating teachers acknowledge the growth they have experienced, commenting that supervising a student teacher has been “primarily invigorating” because they have been exposed to new teaching ideas, encouraging them to expand their own strategies. These teachers describe that they have become more reflective, better prepared, and more organized in their teaching (Arnold 2002). As evident, working with a student teacher provides

professional benefits for cooperating teachers even though it can be a demanding task.

The university supervisor plays a key role in the internship by providing support for both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher. Often seen as a negotiator, the supervisor tries to close the gap between the student teacher's expectations and the realities of the classroom, recognizing that a successful relationship between a student teacher and the cooperating teacher requires effective communication. Supervisors know that a common complaint from cooperating teachers is that the student teacher fails to listen and implement suggestions, a situation requiring the supervisor to be straightforward and direct when talking with the student teacher about this problem. In the same respect, when student teachers want more autonomy in the classroom, the supervisor serves as an intermediary during a three-way discussion, encouraging the cooperating teacher to develop a timeline for working toward the increased freedom the student teacher seeks. Understanding that cooperating teachers operate under certain constraints, supervisors will encourage student teachers to develop realistic expectations and to acknowledge the guidance offered by cooperating teachers.

Student teaching is a time for learning, a period of experimentation and initiation. Cooperating teachers and university supervisors do not expect student teachers to be perfect, but they do expect dedicated effort and honest reflection. Most student teachers recognize the need to “conform to a significant degree to the expectations and practices” of their cooperating teachers (Beck and Kosnik 99). This reality may mean that some student teachers may not have the opportunity to be as creative or innovative as they may have envisioned, but this should not cause difficulties between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher. In some cases student teachers question their cooperating teacher's philosophy or teaching style. If this occurs, the student teacher should remember that talking in an open, professional manner with the cooperating teacher helps to resolve differences that may surface.

Of course, this open communication requires listening and a willingness to understand the other person's position. Experienced educators know that student teachers may make "premature or unfair judgments" about their teaching situation because they lack experience (Wadlington, Slaton, and Partridge 336). There may be areas of concern, but student teachers need to recognize that the cooperating teacher holds the ultimate responsibility for the classes and is not always able to be flexible about the content or methods.

Veteran teachers acknowledge that new teachers can remedy most weaknesses through experience and dedicated effort. They also know that when a student teacher lacks enthusiasm for teaching, the results are evident immediately: poorly planned lessons, a lackluster classroom performance, and a weak connection with students. A successful student teaching experience requires a commitment to teaching and "more study and preparation than most students think possible" (Callaghan, Clark, and Kellough 428). The following suggestions from cooperating teachers provide valuable insight into their expectations when they work with student teachers.

- Make student teaching a priority. The demands on your time will be considerable, so try to monitor your outside responsibilities.
- Develop a sense of "teacher thinking" when planning. This means to think through every aspect of your lesson: When will the books be passed out? How much time does this activity take? How can I explain this concept? What examples can I provide? What will we do tomorrow?
- Make sure that your goals for a lesson are clear in your own mind and then connect your activities to the goals. Avoid purposeless, time-filling exercises by having a good idea of what you want students to achieve.

- Listen when I am offering feedback on your teaching and follow through on the suggestions I make. Avoid justifying your actions when I explain that your approach needs to be modified.
- Don't take it personally if I ask you to change your lesson plan. I recognize your efforts, but understand that my decisions are based on what works best for the students.
- Let me know what you are thinking and doing. Talk to me first if you want to become involved in a project with another teacher. It's a poor reflection on our relationship if I learn of your activities from another source.
- Talk to me about your concerns and listen to my advice. If a problem surfaces, do something about it. It's not a good sign when a student teacher fails to take action to correct a problem we have discussed.
- Try to be flexible and understanding. Remember that even though I may have years of teaching experience, my lessons are not always perfect.
- Listen carefully and ask questions when I explain how things work in our school, but avoid assuming that you know it all because there will be some surprises.
- Be courteous to everyone – secretaries, administrators, other teachers, and custodians.
- Maintain a positive outlook even though you will face some frustrations. Keep in mind that you are in a learning situation.
- Be open to the realities of teaching. Enjoy the sense of fulfilment you will experience and remember that teaching is important work!

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