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# BEGINNING TEACHERS AND THE EMOTIONAL DRAMA OF THE CLASSROOM

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*As a teacher educator, the author believes that he must prepare teachers to go forth into schools with a deep understanding of the subjects they will teach, an appreciation for how students learn, and a repertoire of instructional strategies that will help them make learning come alive for their students. As they develop these skills, they must simultaneously work on resolving four inescapable challenges: First, they have to figure out what it means to be a novice. Second, although teaching is intellectually challenging, it is also chock full of emotional drama. How students negotiate the emotional terrain of teaching is a critical element of their experience. Third, the author thinks about how a primary challenge for teachers is to secure the genuine attention of students. Fourth, the author considers what it means for young teachers to take care of their health and spirit amid the stress that marks the 1st year of teaching.*

**Keywords:** *conceptions/constructions of self; emotions; reflection; teachers' knowledge and beliefs*

Each year at graduation, I watch the student teachers in the Smith College teacher education program hustle across the stage, shake the president's hand, grasp hold of their diploma, and stride off, gown whipping in the breeze. They not only have graduated but also cross the stage as freshly licensed teachers in the state of Massachusetts and come September, most will stand before students as a 1st-year teacher.

This year, the first two students to cross the stage grab their diploma, turn to the audience, and pump their fists like Rocky Balboa. A colleague sitting next to me sniffs, as if their exuberance somehow diminishes the ceremony. I only grin at the energy and verve I have come to know so well. These two, like so many other beginning teachers, have come to teaching to serve the young, to stir up minds, and to make a difference in the world. They exude idealism, passion, and purpose. Bob O'Meally (2003) has

a poem titled "Make Music With Your Life" that I often share with my teachers-to-be; it begins

Make music with your life  
a  
jagged  
silver tune  
cuts every deepday madness  
Into jewels that you wear

My student teachers respond to this poem because they have come to this work to "make music with their lives." They believe that the act of teaching can transform lives "into jewels." They come to teaching believing in its utter dignity despite the scuffed public status that teaching has come to occupy in our culture, with its stagnant salaries and public distrust. This year as I watched them march through the pomp and circumstance, I was absorbed by a version of the editors' question: What can I, as a teacher educator, do for my student teachers so that they

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can set forth to make music with their lives as beginning teachers? In so many ways it is an overwhelming question. Teaching demands such an interactive array of skills, knowledge, dispositions, and techniques that devising an inventory of explicit achievements, tasks, and knowledge for them to accumulate feels utterly inadequate. Instead, I find myself more comfortable answering the question by suggesting that I strive to invite my student teachers to explore an orientation or stance on what it means to be a teacher. By stance I mean something like Robert Fried (1995) suggested: "A philosophy, an attitude, a bearing, a way of encountering students based on a set of core values about kids and their learning potential" (p. 139).

In particular, I invite students to develop a stance to four inescapable challenges facing those who begin to teach. I examine those challenges here. First, I consider the challenge of being a novice. Second, I describe how the 1st years of teaching are chock full of emotional drama and I think about ways we can help our teachers-to-be negotiate the challenges of learning about themselves. Third, I think about how a primary challenge for teachers is to secure the genuine attention of students. I call this the "cool hunt." And last, in a context where 50% of our beginning teachers leave in the 1st years of teaching, I consider what it means for young teachers to take care of their health and spirit amid the welter of stressors and demands that mark the 1st years of teaching.

### THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A NOVICE

As I ponder these questions, one of our program's most promising teachers-to-be walks purposefully across the stage. She carries herself with an easy confidence earned by what has been a lifetime of accomplishment. A remarkable student, a talented athlete, a musician with a flair for the dramatic, she brings some natural gifts to her work as a teacher. All year, I have watched her work with fierce determination to share her passion for ideas with young people. Yet as she walks away from the podium, I feel a pang of regret because I do not think that I was able to reach her with what I believe is the first

and most enduring lesson I hope my beginning teachers learn: Come to this work with the spirit of a novice.

Perhaps my favorite definition of the work of teaching comes from the acknowledgements of Bill Ayer's (1995) book *To Become a Teacher*: "Since teaching is always a search for better teaching, I am still in a fundamental sense becoming a teacher. I am stretching, searching and reaching toward teaching" (p. xiii) Teaching is such an up-and-down affair, so contingent on a stew of fragile human variables, so dependent on both careful planning and spontaneous improvisation—that we must treat our teaching as if it is an ever-evolving draft.

To do one's work with the spirit of a novice suggests humility and implies an eagerness to seek counsel in mentors and solicit feedback from others. Perhaps it is merely the brashness of youth or the confidence borne from a life of ceaseless accomplishment, but as I watch her stride across the stage I suspect that her impatience with uncertainty will suffocate what she most needs to grow as a teacher: a commitment to inquiry and a willingness to learn from error. Too often her ambition was to be right the first time and to hear feedback as personal critique.

As she passes out of sight, I feel for her. Making peace with the uncertainty of teaching is no easy task. Beginning teachers feel so vulnerable and besieged, so encumbered by expectation that it is often difficult to retain perspective. It is natural to want to make "beautiful music" from your teaching from the outset, but the yearning to do so must be a learner's yearning: through reflection, I will grow into this work; I will solicit feedback; I will come to this work ready to ask open and honest questions of my teaching; I will approach my work with the ethos of someone learning to adapt and grow into teaching.

An ethos toward continuous learning is necessary but not nearly enough. Beginning teachers need skills and tools that help them process and organize what they are learning from their experiences. In the Smith student teaching program, we introduce students to an array of tools and experiences designed to provide students with feedback about their teaching. They

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develop surveys and questionnaires to solicit feedback from their students, keep reflective journals, engage in highly structured peer observations with other student teachers, present examples of student work using a range of protocols, and work systematically with videotapes of their classrooms.

We emphasize that teachers must become skilled at learning from the predicaments and circumstances of practice. I often find myself paraphrasing James Hiebert to my students: "Teachers are not always learning. Often it takes all of their energy just to get through the day. But all teachers learn some of the time, and some teachers learn much of the time" (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002, p. 3). Our goal is to help our beginning teachers become those teachers who have the state of mind and concomitant skills to learn "much of the time."

### THE CHALLENGE OF EMOTIONAL DRAMA

As my graduates march across the stage, I think back toward our first meetings together last summer. Those first sessions are a brew of intense emotion and anticipation. My student teachers articulate a range of compelling aspirations that describe what motivated their desire to teach: "I believe that teachers can change the life trajectory of children." "I want students to love English and find magic in the study of writing." "I believe teaching and education is where we can do civil rights activism today." By and large, my student teachers describe a deep and abiding belief that as teachers-to-be, they have been called to join the ranks of teachers because they believe it is what Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) described as a "passionate vocation." They have come to our program to express this passion: a passion for children, for subject, and for making a difference. Passion by its nature is combustible. It connotes fervor, zeal, and an emotional energy that can sometimes manifest as raw, chaotic, and impulsive.

Understanding, negotiating, and monitoring the intense emotionality of teaching is a primary dimension of beginning to teach (Bullough & Draper, 2004). Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) rightly framed the issue as teaching "draws on every ounce of emotion teachers

have." Classrooms, in particular, are awash in emotional energy and teachers must employ a range of "emotional intelligences" that include discerning one's emotional makeup, reading emotional cues, responding to charged emotional situations, monitoring our own fluid emotional cartography, and managing the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995). The inner journey novice teachers experience is especially intense, conflicting, dynamic, and fragile. In the end-of-year reflections all beginning teachers write, the most common phrase is some version of "an emotional roller coaster." Helping student teachers negotiate the zig and zag of their emotions, contend with the emotional lives of their students, and understand how what is happening inside of them shapes how they teach and how their own students perceive them is a critical element of supporting our new teachers.

In working with this dimension of their experience, I am aware that my beginning teachers often view the challenge differently, and I feel buffeted by their wildly discordant needs. On one hand, I can palpably feel them looking toward me. "OK Sam, I'm ready. Hand over the rulebook." And as our year together progresses, versions of this refrain emerge: "When will you and our mentor teachers stop hoarding the operating manual?" I empathize with this sentiment. When I first began my high school teaching career, I remember looking hungrily at the lesson plan books of my veteran colleagues with starving eyes, "If I only had their lesson plans, I could make a difference with these kids." Resisting their desire to speak and think about teaching as a series of skills and techniques that need only be applied correctly is an important element of working with my student teachers. Because they begin teaching with such robust beliefs, they become frustrated and impatient with their inability to "transform lives" or consistently "stir imaginative conversation." As I watch them encounter these frustrations, I hear them process it as a failure of the right method or technique. Their sensibility aptly describes the general ethos of the profession. Contending with the personal and emotional layers of teaching falls outside the

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bounds of conventional teacher development because these qualities are often construed as being located in the realm of the private and personal (Boler, 1999; Hargreaves, 2001).

One of the ways that I try to reframe the question about what it means to learn to teach is to ask student teachers to interview their students on this question: "What can I do as your teacher to help you succeed?" Invariably the responses that come back to the beginning teachers focus on the ineffable qualities of a teacher's personal makeup: "I want a teacher who knows me well enough to know when I don't understand something because I might be too embarrassed to ask for help." "I want you to know me." "I want you to not just *stick to* the subject and take time to joke and tell stories. That helps me learn when I know you're a person not just a teacher."

These quick takes from high school students embody an essential principle: When beginning teachers stand before students, they are not merely enacting a curriculum or behaving according to prescribed protocols but also are individuals with an emotional makeup and way of being that irretrievably shape how others will experience them. My beginning teachers quickly learn that students will study their vulnerabilities, moods, and emotional triggers with the attention to detail of a jeweler drilling pearls.

In working with these issues, I try to invite my students to engage in activities such as mapping the emotional energy of their classroom. The maps that my student teachers chart reveal swirls of frustration, fear, excitement, anxiety, confusion, and a myriad of other affective sensations. It is important that they note that the emotional context of their classroom is more dynamic than static, and they often describe feeling "blind" to much of what is happening in the classroom. As one student teacher described during seminar, "I'm so anxious and my mind is racing so fast that it's impossible to focus on what students are feeling."

My student teacher's self-insight signifies an accurate awareness of her situation. The intensity of her own emotions dominate her experience and hinder her capacity to be present and attuned to the emotional register of her class-

room. This is a nonoptimal combination, but one that aptly describes the reality of most beginning teachers.

New teachers experience a dramatic range of intense emotions and passions. There are multiple evokers of intense emotion: the public scrutiny of standing in front of a classroom; the fear of not being liked and respected by students; the vulnerability that comes with awareness of how students, administrators, and cooperating teachers routinely judge your performance; the anxiety that comes when you are teaching a subject where your own understanding is incomplete; or the discomfort that comes from having to make rapid-fire and uncertain decisions, whether in disciplining a student, correcting a student, asking a question, or adapting a lesson on the fly. Conversely, beginning teachers also experience a range of positive and thrilling emotions when a lesson goes well, or a student offers words of appreciation, or they discern a breakthrough on the part of the class or an individual student.

Arlie Hochschild (1983) framed the demands faced by individuals working in emotionally demanding work contexts as "emotional labor" and described it as the hard work that comes with negotiating your own emotional life within the institutional work demands. On some level, the novice teachers I work with experience their work as emotional labor, but I am more inclined to characterize it as *emotional drama*, a term that emphasizes both the peaks and valleys that are experienced, as well as the sense that beginning teachers must experiment with various roles of being a teacher. They "try on" much like an actor in a drama the role of their mentor teacher, or strive to reproduce images of the teacher that they harbor from what Lortie (1975) described as their apprenticeship of observation, or experiment with versions of what it means to be a teacher drawn from texts or materials they encounter in their program.

What can we do to help our novice teacher negotiate the emotional drama that marks those 1st years of teaching? I believe we must find ways for our students to make sense of what is going on inside of them by providing time,

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structure, and approaches that invite intentional focus on how the inner landscapes of our life interact with the dense, tangled, and charged work of teaching. This involves cultivating discernment, encouraging self-exploration, and providing opportunity to discover where one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors come from and how one's actions in the world are shaped by the meanings attached to those beliefs.

My understanding of this realm has been deepened as a result of my work with the Courage to Teach Retreat program, a professional development organization founded by Palmer (1998) that seeks to invite educators to explore the connection between the inner life and the work they do in the world. Using a retreat model, the program focuses neither on pedagogical technique nor organizational reform but on using personal stories, poetry, solitude, and dialogue to examine the exchange between one's inner landscape and the way one conducts one's professional life. For example, educators participating in a retreat will spend considerable time reflecting deeply on a question such as, What aspects of your identity and integrity feel most supported and engaged by the work you do?

The core lesson that I have incorporated from my work with this organization is an appreciation of how valuable it is to provide the structure for teachers to consider how personal values, beliefs, attitudes, and vulnerabilities shape our practice, inform our judgments, and play out in our teaching. Palmer (1998) described it as the process of learning to "listen to one's inner teacher" and developing the authority that he suggested is granted to people who *author* "their own words, their own actions, their own lives" rather than inhabiting a scripted role at "great remove from their own hearts" (p. 33). Goleman (1995) identified self-awareness as the keystone of emotional intelligence. Authority, confidence, and the capacity to be available for others and responsive to changing context derive from the capacity to attend to the ebb and flow of one's internal state.

As I watch my graduates amble off the stage, I know how deeply they felt this 1st year of teaching. In the words of the poem, there was much

"deepday madness" in their lives. They faced fundamental challenges to their authority, their sense of competence, and their framework of identity. I hope that I provided them opportunity to think and talk through the emotional drama of that 1st year and begin to evolve a sense of themselves as authentic, grounded, and genuine teachers.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE COOL HUNT

It is nearing the end of the graduation and one of my student teachers strides over to the president wearing scarlet thigh-high boots under her stern black graduation gown. I grin watching this soon-to-be beginning high school English teacher. I turn to a colleague sitting next to me, "She's going to be a terrific teacher." My colleague turns to me and nods, "She sure is dramatic." It was not the moment for a fuller conversation, but her promise derived less from her style and flair and more from her ability to deeply listen to and understand what her students were thinking, feeling, and attending and use that knowledge to excite students about her subject matter. She possessed and embodied what I have come to call the "cool hunter" repertoire.

Each year I ask my students to read Malcom Gladwell's (1997) article in the *New Yorker* titled "The Cool Hunt." Gladwell reported on an industry of market researchers who trawl through malls, urban neighborhoods, and parks to seek out what is attracting and capturing the attention of youth. They are hunting what fascinates and intrigues our youth. Their motive is to take this information back to product designers who will translate it into sneakers, clothes, and advertisements that will sell because they engross youth. The article launches us into a conversation that I consider to be critical: What attracts and sustains the interest of our students? What bores them and shuts them down?

I believe that beginning teachers must recognize that the youth they teach are unabashed and savvy consumers who ably discriminate between offerings and say yes to some things and no to others. The youth in our schools have

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come of age at a time when vast segments of the economy and media vie relentlessly for their affection, interest, and ultimately, their pocket-books. Although it might be enticing to consider your students as naïve, emerging minds, it is probably more apt for beginning teachers to look out at their students as full-fledged shoppers accustomed to making choices about to whom and to where they allocate their attention. I invite student teachers to imagine their students holding that quintessential artifact of our time: the remote control. Would they blithely click past what is transpiring in your classroom as if you were a talking head on CNN? What would get them to lay the clicker down and devote focus to the academic activities you have developed?

I believe that beginning teachers need to have an orientation to their teaching that recognizes what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) viewed as the key challenge of instruction: "The task of education is one of socializing through seduction. The success of the school depends on how effectively it can engage the students' minds toward its objectives. Can it generate interest, motivation, and focused attention?" (p. 202). This approach pivots on the principle that if our youth are engaged, they will work harder, be persistent, see obstacles as opportunities rather than impediments, and continue to learn when not forced to do so to fulfill their intrinsic need to understand. Orchestrating entertaining and interesting experiences for our youth should not be misunderstood as the end; learning and achievement are the end. The marketers and advertisers understand how to seize the attention of our children. They devote enormous resources to discerning the tastes, dispositions, and preferences of our youth. Beginning teachers must tenaciously compete for the genuine attention of their students.

How can beginning teachers compete against the iPod and the daydream? In a prior research study (Intrator, 2003), I shadowed high school students for more than a year throughout their academic classes in an effort to understand when students found genuine worth and value in their academic experiences. Those teachers

that were most successful in securing the sustained concentration of students possessed two key attributes that beginning teachers can develop. First, they established a positive classroom environment and formed trusting relationships with students. Second, they possessed a flexible and deep understanding of their subject matter and continually sought points of intersection between their subject matter and the interests of their students.

Fostering constructive relationships with students is too critical a factor in being a successful teacher to leave to mere serendipity. Beginning teachers can learn to create one-on-one time with students; learn about and practice different approaches to listening, such as active listening; develop coherent plans for classroom and management grounded in clear expectations and fairness; learn about the developmental patterns of the age group they are teaching; educate themselves about the context, neighborhood, and culture important to their students; and reach out to families to expand their knowledge of their students. Each of these elements is complex but critical to developing and maintaining a constructive bond with students. Again the connection to students is an end in itself and an asset in learning about what attracts and sustains the interest of their students.

What made my student teacher with the red boots so ready for her own classroom was her ability get her students excited about literature and writing. She drew on deep content knowledge to develop curriculum that sparked interest and worked hard on communicating her own passion for the subject matter.

We work at developing ways to translate the subject matter frameworks into engaging curricular experiences for students. For example, one of the first assignments I give to my student teachers is to write a letter to your students explaining what is beautiful, powerful, and exhilarating about the subject matter you teach. I encourage them to find language that will explain what is tantalizing and beguiling about math, or English, or biology.

Student teachers often come to class the next day having written an essay describing the ele-

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gant complexity of their subject matter. Their ideas are sophisticated, the language often intricate, but when I tell them they have to go to school and read what they have written to their students, they shudder, because they have written a letter to their college professor and not to their students. They have written what I describe to them as an inhospitable invitation and I encourage them to rethink the framing of their letter. What would the teenagers in your classroom find intriguing, compelling, invigorating, comical about the subject you teach? It is a leap of the imagination, but what could you do to convince them that you have something “cool” to offer?

### THE CHALLENGE OF TAKING CARE OF SELF

Finally, beginning teachers must learn to take care of their own health and spirit. Several years ago, I interviewed a veteran teacher from South Carolina about her work. She struck me as the embodiment of the very best teachers I have known. She spoke reverentially of the mystery and complexity of learning and how she struggled to understand the “rivers of her students’ minds.” She spoke with concern and respect about her colleagues and how she learns so much when she has time to talk and work with them. She spoke wryly of the “thrill ride” of teaching and how her everyday work is filled with moments of glory and despair. And she talked with sadness about the heavy pressure that pervaded her school because of the fascination with scores on standardized tests.

At the end of our conversation, I asked her if she had anything else she wanted to add. She paused and then said, “One more thing. Maybe the most important thing.”

“Like the old saying, ‘If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.’ If you get a teacher in the classroom who’s not happy then look out little children.”

In this one remarkable homespun image I believe this veteran of many years in the classroom captured an essential first principle of teaching and learning: Any teacher, particularly a novice teacher, cannot teach children well if they are demoralized and overwhelmed. In fact, it is worth lingering on its cold inverse: If our

beginning teachers have no strategies for retaining their enthusiasm, rejuvenating their energy, bouncing back from the inevitable dark day, then our children will suffer. High-impact teaching hinges on the presence, energy, and skills of the teacher.

The last graduate walks off, diploma and teaching license in hand. This is a moment that unsettles me as a teacher educator who has come to know and respect my novice teachers. They are driven by a noble sense of mission to go forth and “make music” with their lives. I hope they remember they are only beginners. I hope they stay in touch. There is so much more I wish I could have taught them, but in my heart I know that what comes next is the most critical juncture. They are ready to riff a solo in their own classroom, but “making music” with their life will hinge on whether they can find a “band or orchestra” of other adults in their school that can usher them into this great profession in ways that honor what it means to be a novice, can negotiate the emotional drama of teaching in ways that builds self-awareness and authority, can attract the genuine attention of students, and can provide them with an appreciation of what it means to tend their own health and spirit.

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