

## Examining Learning To Teach through a Social Lens: How Mentors Guide Newcomers into a Professional Community of Learners

By Chris Street

The need for mentoring new teachers is well supported by current literature (Bolin, 1988; Clifford & Green, 1996; Daloz, 1986, 1999; Duke, 1992; Elliot, 1995; Gordon, 1991; Jonson, 2002; Maynard, 2000; Mullen & Lick, 1999; Portner, 1998, 2002). Despite the growing appreciation among professional educators, teachers unions, school districts, and university researchers of the need for effective school-based mentors, many new teachers still report a “sink or swim” experience as they enter the profession. Not surprisingly, about one third of new teachers in the United States leave the profession within the first three years (Gordon, 1991; Jonson, 2002; Portner, 1998). Rather than seeking a prescriptive method or program for mentoring new teachers, what may prove helpful is a deeper exploration of the social and cultural learning experiences of new teachers. For each teacher is learning to teach

in a highly social and dynamic space. Understanding the social learning experiences between new teachers and their more experienced school-based mentors may help inform those who are charged with guiding new teachers.

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The work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who view apprenticeship as a central feature of learning, has been explored by British researchers (Maynard,

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2000), but has received limited attention by researchers interested in the mentoring and early learning experiences of preservice teachers in the United States. It is through the related lenses of apprenticeship and social learning that this study reports the results of one professional development project aimed at shedding light on the question of how to effectively guide new teachers into the teaching profession. Specifically, the following questions were asked:

1. How did the participants define mentoring?
2. How did the participants perceive mentoring to take place within their particular settings?
3. What factors contributed to the development of mentoring relationships?

### A Social View of Learning To Teach

One well-developed alternative to individualistic theories of learning is the sociocultural theory pioneered by Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and his followers (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1986, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). This social constructivist view of learning takes into account that human learning and development are intrinsically social and interactive. This emphasis on the complex dynamics between individual and social situation argues against the dualistic position of individuals and the social world as being separate. In fact, according to Vygotsky, the two are inseparable.

Rogoff (1991) has taken Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) idea of cultural learning and explored the concept in terms of the metaphor of apprenticeship. Rogoff's (1991) apprenticeship model, for example, is especially well-suited for considering how new teachers come to learn in schools. This view of learning can be applied to new teachers, who are negotiating a complex set of social relationships while learning in complex school settings. When novice teachers first set foot in schools, a great deal of support and guidance is provided. This intensive scaffolding is designed to allow newcomers to establish a baseline level of confidence and competence in their new setting, so that as they develop as teachers, their ability to solve problems independently will be enhanced. Without the ability to work closely with school-based mentors and discuss issues of practice, new teachers may never develop the ability to later solve problems independently. Thus, social transactions (Rogoff, 1991) between new teachers and more expert mentor teachers are crucial, as newcomers begin to see themselves as members of the teaching profession.

Rogoff (1991) envisions learning as including the participation of a novice learner in a jointly constructed activity in which an expert assists the novice by providing guidance, feedback, and explanation, enabling the novice to internalize the cultural ways of performing the activity. Rogoff suggests that it is "through repeated and varied experience in supported routine and challenging situations," that learners "become skilled practitioners in the specific cognitive activities of their communities" (p. 351). In this view, learning is a joint activity between a beginner and an expert, with

the expert guiding the novice in this jointly undertaken cultural activity by providing demonstrations, giving explanations, and offering support.

### Learning To Teach as Situated Learning

Lave and Wenger (1991) have written that there is no activity that is not situated. They locate learning in increased access to participating roles in expert performances. Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process they call "legitimate peripheral participation." By this they mean that learners participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the practices of the community. Given this orientation, Lave and Wenger view learning as a "special type of social practice associated with the kind of participation frame designated legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)" (p.18). For Lave and Wenger, "if learning is about increased access to performance, then the way to maximize learning is to perform" the task at hand (p. 22). As such, the notion of LPP provides a window into the interactions between new and experienced teachers, their notions of themselves as learners and teachers, and the relationship between pedagogical knowledge and the practice of sharing that knowledge with students. From this perspective, the ways in which new teachers enter a community of practice is tied to their evolving identities as teachers. They are acquiring the ways of being a teacher, or of learning the ways to enter a distinctive community of practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

New teachers require the assistance of more experienced peers as they enter the profession as student teachers. In fact, student teachers are faced with the challenge of carrying out two crucial tasks when they learn to teach: they must simultaneously perform the skills associated with teaching while learning to teach. In effect, novice teachers are learning to do the job of teaching while teaching. This aspect of learning on the job certainly supports the notion of the situated nature of learning to teach (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They are, in effect, admitted as legitimate peripheral participants into a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As such, the role played by mentor teachers in helping novice teachers with those aspects of learning to teach that the university is not able to accomplish becomes crucial.

### Mentoring Student Teachers

Current research in mentoring suggests that the relationships established between student teachers and mentor teachers are of central importance to the professional development of new teachers (Clifford & Green, 1996; Elliott, 1995; Hawkey, 1997; McNamara, 1995). Mentors act as instructional models, as sources of advice, and as sounding boards for concerns or fears about teaching; they also challenge student teachers to think more broadly about their practice, assist beginning teachers with the practical aspects of everyday teaching, and guide student teachers' professional development (Daloz, 1986; Elliott & Calderhead, 1993).

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Because the purpose of mentoring relationships is to socialize new teachers into the profession, they are, at their heart, teaching/learning relationships in which the participants are cognitively and affectively changed by their participation (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Elliott, 1995; Hawkey, 1997). Examining mentoring relationships from this perspective has led a number of scholars to draw upon contemporary learning theory, especially the work of Vygotsky (1978), as a means of understanding the nature of the teachers' professional development. Clifford and Green (1996) have pointed out, for example, that learning to teach is a mediated activity that depends upon social interactions. Mentor teachers provide support and guidance as student teachers acquire practical and professional skill. Moreover, Lave and Wenger (1991) have argued that novices learn through legitimate peripheral participation in the activities of the profession (as in student teaching), and Tharp (1993) has noted the importance of assisted performance to professional development.

Elliott and Calderhead (1993) have pointed out that good mentors must both support and challenge student teachers during their field experiences in the schools. As newcomers to the teaching profession, novice educators require the support of their mentors to assist them in dealing with the challenges provided by their teaching contexts. Without an adequate balance between support and challenge, student teachers are unlikely to learn from the mentoring experience, may not learn to reflect upon their profession or their own practice, or may withdraw, all of which hinder profession growth (Elliott & Calderhead, 1993).

Helping student teachers examine their own practice is especially important because how novices interpret school experiences is often heavily influenced by their own set of attitudes, values, and beliefs (Maynard & Furlong, 1988). Certainly research (Calderhead, 1988; Lortie, 1975) suggests that the experiences, images, and beliefs that new teachers have of classrooms, teachers, and schooling have an impact on the kind of teachers they will become. This important influence on practice can be mediated by effective mentors who instill in their protégés the skills of reflective practice (Schön, 1983). McNamara (1995) has argued, for example, that the quality of mentoring shapes student teachers' capacity to reflect on teaching strategies and to incorporate them into their own practice. Reflecting on their attitudes, goals, and early teaching experiences with the help of a mentor allows new teachers greater insight into their practice, and thus, more control over their professional identities.

### Program Components

The Effective Mentoring in English Education (EMEE) project aimed to understand how new teachers learn and how mentor teachers can support their learning during the student teaching semester. Fifteen exemplary English language arts teachers (eight middle and seven high school) and the student teachers assigned to them participated in the project by documenting their mentoring experiences. The semester-long project took place in Texas and was a collaborative endeavor

between a leading research university and middle and high school teachers from local schools. Nine different middle and high school campuses were represented.

#### The Participants

Fifteen experienced teachers and the student teachers assigned to them participated in this mentoring project. Teaching experience among the mentor teachers ranged from 4 to more than 20 years. Regardless of years of teaching experience, all mentors were invited to participate in the study based on their reputations as stellar teachers and effective mentors of new teachers. Participants were identified and recommended by colleagues who had extensive experience working with the invited mentors.

#### Data Generation and Analysis

The research method used in this study was naturalistic inquiry. Three major beliefs form the rationale of the constructivist paradigm: the belief that reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 1998), that multiple realities exist, and that these realities are best studied using holistic methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of qualitative methods was critical, especially because the study design called for in-depth descriptions of specific people, places, and relationships. With such methods, a rich picture would emerge, vividly outlining the events these participants found significant regarding their mentoring experiences.

This research process was collaborative and involved a series of monthly meetings. These meetings were organized to provide opportunities for all participants to examine the process of learning to teach. For example, the student teachers and mentor teachers shared professional resources, developed partnership maps (visual representations of student teacher/mentor teacher relationships), brainstormed effective observation strategies, and identified areas of teaching strength and weakness as part of their work together. They examined the roles and expectations they had for each other and shared perceptions of their professional development. As an ongoing part of the project, student teachers and mentor teachers also kept dialogue journals, charting the evolution of their teaching relationship. Each participant was interviewed at the end of the project across a range of topics from their philosophy of teaching to their definition of mentoring, and the pairs were videotaped holding a conference about the student teacher's progress. In addition, student teachers attended weekly seminars with their university supervisors in which they had opportunities to share experiences and discuss issues related to student teaching. As a way to present their experiences to other teachers, each of the participants composed a reflective essay about an aspect of their mentoring experience. Throughout the semester, the project aimed to create opportunities for student-mentor pairs to examine how they learned and how they assisted others' learning. These multiple data sources allowed for ample data triangulation (Erlandson et al., 1993).

For three days, university and school faculty worked together sorting and

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organizing joint experiences into a series of findings about the role of mentoring in learning to teach and the specific practices that these mentors and student teachers found effective. This process closely paralleled Wagner's (1997) conception of the "clinical partnership," in which practitioners and researchers work together to increase their understanding of mentoring relationships (p. 131). In this mode of inquiry, "questions and issues around which the research is organized — and subsequent reports of research findings — reflect cooperation and negotiation between researchers and practitioners" (p. 131).

Data collected throughout the study were analyzed using a variety of qualitative methodologies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Patterns in how the mentoring pairs' relationships formed and evolved were examined. Data were analyzed using emergent category designation (Erlandson et al., 1993). Two provisional categories were established: mentoring issues and instructional issues. Further analysis of the data allowed the participants to identify three broad themes that described their experiences: (1) helping student teachers survive their beginning teaching experiences, (2) establishing relationships based upon dialogue and reflection, and (3) building professional partnerships. Cross-case analysis focused on the similarities and/or differences between the individual mentoring pairs.

For this study, both the categories that the mentors and student teachers developed for the professional development guide and the various artifacts (e.g., journal entries, reflective essays, partnership maps, lists developed during meetings) that they associated with each of these categories were examined. The participants' artifacts were analyzed in order to discover emergent patterns within each of the categories. Finally, these emerging patterns were examined in relation to other studies of mentoring.

## Results

With respect to this study, the concepts of support and challenge played a significant role in the participants' interpretation of mentoring. For example, as new teachers began to assume responsibility for classes, mentors supported them by making a place for them in the classroom community. As the student teachers gained confidence, they engaged their mentors in dialogue intended to seek out, support, or wrestle with particular challenges. These conversations often evolved into collaborative dialogues that were supportive and challenging for both mentor and student teacher. In addition, within the broad category of challenge, the participants' examples appeared to emerge from the context, rather than from any specific act on the mentor's part. This finding suggests a variation in Daloz's (1986) framework that can be explained by taking into account Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, which addresses the importance of context in professional growth. In the following sections, the experiences of the mentoring pairs are discussed in conjunction with current literature in order to provide both the

pragmatic experiences of these participants as well as the ways in which current research sheds light on these experiences.

#### Social Support from Mentors Helps Ease the Transition of Newcomers into Teaching

The new teachers in this study showed patterns in their transition to professional teaching: attention to school environment, worry over management issues, and anxiety about curricular decisions (Head, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1992; Huberman, 1993). Tosh, a student teacher, voiced many of these concerns while seeking support from her mentor teacher:

What does "collate and staple" mean and how do you make it work? Where do you find the replacement bulbs for the overhead? Where can you buy shoes that are comfortable at the end of a ten-hour day (and that still match your meager two-skirt, mix-and-match, new-teacher wardrobe? How do you effectively explain a book seminar to a recently integrated ESL student? When two 16 year-olds begin squaring off for a fight in the classroom, what exactly do you do? How do you get a class of 33 students across campus for an all-school assembly? How do you teach spelling to blind students?

Tosh's example exemplifies the astonishment common to new teachers beginning their careers. She was not only concerned about creating interesting lessons, she was concerned about surviving.

Huberman (1993) has characterized the beginning phase of teacher development as "a period of survival and discovery" during which teachers must grapple with the complexities of teaching (p. 3). During practice teaching, the student teacher seeks support from a more knowing other — her mentor teacher. Daloz (1986) and other Vygotskian scholars (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1986, 1991; Tharp, 1993) suggest that establishing social contexts that support the learner are integral to the acquisition of professional skill. In fact, in a recent study of new teachers, Maynard (2000) discovered that what the new teachers wanted "above anything else was to be made to feel welcome" (p. 21). Many mentor teachers support student teachers through establishing trust and acceptance (Maynard, 2000), through introduction to the school environment, and through access to craft knowledge (Daloz, 1986; McIntyre & Hagger, 1993; Vinz, 1995).

To provide social support and ease the transition into legitimate peripheral participation, many of the mentor teachers welcomed their student teachers to their classrooms and schools. The simple action of providing a desk, a filing cabinet drawer, or an introduction to students, principal, and staff were seen as supportive gestures that welcomed the student teachers. These introductory gestures are important, because for novices like Tammy, all initial teaching tasks are unfamiliar. She described her experience:

As for my part so far, I'm still working on the names of both students and faculty; there are so many all at once, but I'm getting there. I'm now getting to the point where I'm more comfortable in my new environment.

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This dialogue journal entry, shared with her mentor, served as a reminder that what many veteran teachers take for granted is a challenge for newcomers. As Tammy indicated, developing relationships with faculty and staff is an important first step for student teachers because these relationships provide additional professional support within the community of practice (Maynard, 2000).

In addition to welcoming gestures, many of the mentor teachers brought their student teachers into the community of practice by establishing supportive communication patterns. Because time constraints limited the amount of dialogue that occurred between the mentors and their student teachers, the use of dialogue journals served as an effective way to begin or continue conversations between mentoring pairs. The simple but deliberate act of writing down thoughts and experiences afforded these professional partners the time and place to think about teaching, often leading these mentoring pairs to powerful and continued discussion about issues of practice.

Many people consider journals private diaries kept to record innermost thoughts and feelings. However, in the case of a professional dialogue journal, thoughts and feelings concerning teaching are used as points of discussion between professional partners (Bolin, 1988; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Portner, 2002). New teacher Jessica initially noted this point with some hesitation: "I have kept a personal journal since I was nine, but I have only rarely showed entries in it to anyone — so this concept of a 'dialogue' is a new one for me." Both she and her mentor, Mary, slowly realized the benefits of writing in the dialogue journal, as Mary recounted:

Sometimes it seemed like, God one more thing to do, but it served a lot of different purposes. It served a purpose of being able to remember to say something that you were afraid that you'd forget during the course of the day. One of the things I think is most important about a journal: anytime it is important enough to put it on paper, it has more weight.

Although at times an inconvenience, in the long run both partners perceived that the dialogue journal was an effective tool in establishing their partnership. This was true of the other partners in this study as well. Participants came to believe that not only did the dialogue journal enable dialogue to occur at convenient moments, but it essentially became a written record, a history of the professional partnership.

Effective communication — by pen and by speech — was especially meaningful to these beginning teachers. Sharyl, a mentor teacher, offered these words of encouragement to her student teacher, Melanie: "We must view these bad days as learning experiences, not as reflections of our personal worth." In a similar way, Lorie supported her protégé, Kristin: "As you learn with, from, and alongside your kids, you'll stumble, but suddenly — perhaps after the 57<sup>th</sup> stumble — you'll realize you have achieved the status of 'teacher.'" In addition to recognizing the many ways they could support novices, these experienced teachers realized the tremendous effect their words had on newcomers. New teacher Kerri underscored this important aspect of the mentoring relationship:



We talked so often in my education classes about creating a safe, trusting learning environment. You have created this for me. Support is crucial in this field. I had a fabulous support system and am so thankful for the positive reinforcement I received, especially on one of those days.

As this novice teacher acknowledged, mentors' advice and suggestions have a strong and lasting impact on the development of the novice teacher.

These teachers exemplified how more experienced teachers can support learners within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). As more capable peers, they established a means of assisted performance. By sharing their insights and feelings about teaching (Portner, 2002), mentor teachers provided opportunities for the student teachers to gain perspective, to explore alternatives, to negotiate practice, and to share experiences. Providing such support, however, is not always easy; mentor teachers also struggled with ways in which to support their student teachers and to make their practice explicit. Tom, a mentor teacher, described his struggle:

Preparing to mentor a teacher this spring I put introductory rules neatly in a folder and even had my discipline packet ready. I was prepared to model, discuss techniques and contingency plans, predict student reactions, and prepare Jason [student teacher] for what might happen with war stories from my past. Yet, teaching has to be adapted and changed. I have to move away from instructing toward mentoring, modeling, and moderating.

Tom's example illustrates Rogoff's (1986) argument that "in order to communicate successfully, the adult and [learner] must find a common ground of knowledge and skills. Otherwise the two people would be unable to share a common reference point, and understanding would not occur" (p. 32). For Tom and his student teacher, Jason, this inability to connect resulted in an ongoing struggle with classroom management. He did not understand Tom's classroom procedures until near the end of the semester. As a result, Tom questioned his own practice and pursued a more supportive, explicit, and structured mentoring stance — a stance that, when working with future student teachers, would allow for open communication, connection, and support.

The experiences of these mentoring pairs consistently indicated that successful mentor teachers connected with their student teachers, found common ground, and made their practical and intuitive knowledge accessible to the novice teacher by modeling reflective practice. For example, mentor teacher Frank shows how he learned an important lesson from a student named Pearl:

Pearl was in my senior class last year. A bright girl, who didn't say too much in class or at least to me or to anyone but her band buddies in the class. Yet, Pearl was a very good writer, insightful, sensitive, and highly fluent. Problem was, she didn't turn in her work very often. In the spring, I had put up with enough procrastination. I was really angry. I don't like to call parents. So I called Pearl out into the hall, sat her down on the bench in front of the assistant principal's office, and told her that I was going to call her family right now, and I wanted her to be listening to the

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conversation when I talked to them. That's when the tears began. She started spilling the details of her family life. And through the tears she told me how much my comments and support had meant to her. I was moved and touched. I had no idea that anything I had ever said to her had reached her.

Sharing personal anecdotes like this one was an important element in establishing supportive mentoring relationships and was commonly observed among the mentoring pairs. For example, Mary, a mentor teacher and English department chair, shared her thoughts about the mentoring process with her student teacher, Jessica. Using their dialogue journal, Mary reflected upon her positive experience with mentoring. As a result, Mary invited Jessica's input. Together they questioned the possibility of incorporating mentoring activities into the English language arts department at their high school. Daloz (1986) has referred to this type of exchange as "sharing ourselves" (p. 220). He explained that as mentor teachers reveal aspects of their teaching selves to student teachers, the student begins to recognize and to understand the tangle of practical issues that they may encounter as teachers.

Through the process of sharing themselves, the mentor teachers modeled reflective practice and allowed the student teachers access to craft knowledge, "thinking which underlies experienced teachers' classroom practice" (McIntyre & Hagger, 1993, p. 96). Moreover, McIntyre and Hagger (1993) have explained that mentor teachers do not easily articulate craft knowledge: the depth and complexity of mentor teachers' practice is enunciated by their actions. Access to craft knowledge was integral in supporting student teachers as they developed their emergent practice and attempted to join the professional community of educators as full and legitimate participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

By providing access to craft knowledge, giving explicit instruction in teaching, and by introducing student teachers to the school environment, these mentors developed supportive learning environments. Student teacher David realized how much he had learned from his mentor:

Expecting quandaries about lesson planning, pacing, and effective teaching practices, I was sometimes baffled and scared. As I watched my mentor teacher, I had to revise my expectations of the role of a teacher daily. What I, as a teacher, am supposed to know and do surprises me. Evaluating and changing my perception of the role of a teacher became the focus of my learning-to-teach experience.

David articulated a critical aspect of mentoring: using others within the community of practice as resources. This social support structure takes on even more importance when considered from a Vygotskian vantage point. The social process by which learning is fostered creates a bridge that extends across the learner's zone of proximal development, so that what one is incapable of accomplishing alone can be achieved successfully with a more capable peer. In the context of mentoring, the supportive social encounters that are afforded through the zone of proximal development provide the means by which the student teacher begins transition into a community of practice

(Lave & Wenger, 1991). Supportive mentoring relationships helped the student teachers define and negotiate the forms that their legitimate peripheral participation would take and, as a result, shaped the course of their learning-to-teach experience. These new teachers benefited greatly from mentors who established clear expectations, gave them helpful pedagogical advice, and established a sense of teamwork, but they also recognized that if they were to develop as successful teachers they would also need to feel challenged by their mentors (Maynard, 2000).

#### The Context of Learning-to-Teach Creates Many Challenges for New Teachers

Though at times these mentors, both directly and indirectly, posed the kinds of challenges described by Daloz (1986) — setting tasks, engaging in discussion, setting high expectations, and offering other practices — it was more common for the context of the learning-to-teach situations to offer challenges for these student teachers. In this sense, the context and the student teachers' negotiation of participation in it minimized the need for mentors to pose challenges (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Maynard (2000) discovered, the role of challenge in mentoring relationships is a tenuous one. The new teachers Maynard studied expressed a desire for their mentors to be more critical of them; this was contrasted with the fact that many of the mentors in her study "appeared to believe that their role was essentially to provide emotional support" (24). As Maynard discovered, as new teachers gained experience and learned from both their teaching contexts and their mentors, the student teachers and their mentors began to engage in mutually challenging dialogues.

One of the greatest challenges posed by learning-to-teach was classroom management. As noted earlier, student teacher Jason struggled with student behavior; the following comment from his journal suggested the breadth of this concern:

Misbehavior is my hardest vocabulary word; what it means depends so much on the context. I felt overwhelmed by discipline problems that may not have been problematic for an experienced teacher, and my apprehension created a classroom climate of discomfort for my students and for me.

While Jason struggled more than many of the other student teachers, they all raised questions about managing their classrooms. For example, Melanie initiated a dialogue with her mentor teacher Sharyl about three boys in her fifth period class who failed to complete assignments. A few days later, one of these boys was involved in a classroom incident that Sharyl handled. Having watched how Sharyl dealt with the boy, Melanie commented in her journal: "You told him straightforwardly what was going on, but you told him in a way that showed you cared and gave him dignity." In this instance, Melanie learned about managing students' behavior — an issue she defined for herself and that arose from her teaching context — by observing and analyzing her mentor's methods.

Learning to respond appropriately to students and establishing constructive relationships with them also challenged the student teachers. Kerrie, for example,

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noted that she initially found herself “unsure of how I should respond to a question or comment.” She wondered if knowing how to respond “just came with experience.” However, as the semester progressed, she reflected on her changing understanding of relationships with students:

I feel like I am still walking the line between being friendly and fair. On the other hand, I have gotten over that urge to be best buddies. More than anything, I want students to know that I expect them to act responsibly.

For Kerri, not being “best buddies” did not mean becoming distant or unfriendly. Instead it meant finding ways to earn students’ respect and communicate her expectations to them. The process of establishing productive relationships with students posed an ongoing challenge for the student teachers, one that they discussed with both their mentor teachers and university supervisors.

In addition to management issues, practical concerns about planning and pacing also arose from the specific teaching contexts of the student teachers. One student teacher, Tosh, raised many questions about planning a unit on *Lord of the Flies*: “How many weeks should we plan to cover it in? Do they read at home or should we read it in class, or both?” These questions raised practical issues for which student teachers, new to the classroom context, had to make decisions as they assumed classroom responsibilities. In addition, they consciously drew upon their mentor teachers’ craft knowledge to make these decisions.

The diverse student populations the student teachers encountered also presented them with challenges. Tosh, for example, completed her student teaching in a classroom with two blind students which required that she develop lessons that would accommodate both her sighted and visually impaired students:

At the end of the first week, I had to devise a plan to be able to include and accommodate these students in the way that I knew it could and should be done. What that eventually meant was written lesson plans a week ahead of time and copies of all handouts, tests, warm-ups, and directions for the Texas School for the Blind and Visually impaired coordinator.

In her journal entries, Tosh regularly posed questions for her mentor teacher, Jennifer, aimed at helping her figure out how to address all of the students in her classes. In a similar way, student teacher Tammy completed her student teaching with gifted-and-talented middle school students. She initially assumed that these students would be less challenging to teach than other students. However, she discovered over time that all students pose their own challenges, writing: “Ultimately, I realized that these magnet students are regular kids. They suffer and they struggle; sometimes they conquer and sometimes they fail.”

Finally, student teachers raised issues that challenged their own thinking and their mentors’ thinking. For example, Pam, a preservice teacher, wrote the following questions in the dialogue journal she shared with her mentor, Kim: “You know what I want to know. How do you know when you are an effective teacher? Is there

some way to tell? How do I know if my teaching will help them or stick with them?" As someone just entering the profession, Pam was trying to figure out what it means to teach well. Kim's response both modeled reflective practice and challenged Pam to keep asking questions:

I wish I had specific and absolute answers for you, but I don't. I often go home wondering if what I'm doing in class is going to help the kids in the future. I think you're an effective teacher when your students are happy and enthusiastic about what they're doing, when students ask for help or extra time to work on things, when they run up and show you what they have done.

Kim both took up the challenge that Pam's questions raised and extended the challenge by refusing to give answers even as she shared her own thinking. The opportunity to mull over these issues seemed to be an important part of the student teachers' professional growth. In fact, these new teachers greatly valued mentors who provided them with the necessary space to think through the many challenges that arose during their teaching experiences (Maynard, 2000). Rather than being told what to do, many new teachers reported that they had been allowed to "decide for themselves which solution was most appropriate" (Maynard, 2000, p. 26). Through such experiences, student teachers were able to broach broader issues of teaching and learning and work to enlarge their own perspectives.

Other challenges arose from student teachers' observations of their mentors' teaching. Though it is common for mentors to observe new teachers in the classroom, it is not as common that a new teacher will be invited to observe his or her mentor in the classroom. This is a shame, because there is "much that can be learned from both scenarios" (Portner, 2002, p. 21). For example, student teacher Jessica learned about the complex interplay between a teacher and her students as she observed her mentor, Mary, begin a discussion of *The Sound and the Fury*. Rather than plan every move of the discussion, Mary opted for a more student-centered strategy with her senior Advanced Placement students that left Jessica confused: "Where were her overheads, her notes, her Faulknerian facts?" she wondered. "Why wasn't she racing around creating exciting and powerful lessons to capture students' interest and touch their souls?"

In response to Jessica's concerns, Mary mused, "We'll just see what happens. I want the students to discover the book themselves. I'm going to let them ask and answer their own questions." During the discussion, students demonstrated their ability to raise questions and form interpretations of the text through the questions they asked or comments they made to each other: "Is Luster a dog?" "Don't you see Benjy thinks they're calling Caddy when they're really calling for a golf caddy." "Why is Quintin so obsessed with Caddy?" "Faulkner's use of italics sometimes confuses me." During this lesson, Mary demonstrated a way to structure more student-centered lessons not by telling but by showing. As a consequence, Mary indirectly introduced Jessica to a new way of thinking about teaching, and Jessica was observant enough to understand the lesson she was learning.

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These practical and pedagogical concerns illustrate the challenges posed by the context in which the student teachers were learning to teach. As they attempted to take on the many roles of the practitioner, the context challenged them because they lacked the experience more seasoned practitioners bring to bear on a setting or a task (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Their questions and assessments, made in conversation with their mentors, appeared to be the means by which the student teachers drew on their mentors' experiences to understand or respond to the specific challenges with which they were struggling. Their requests ranged from the practical to the philosophical and appeared to be encouraged by the reflective activities that the EMEE project entailed. This questioning process was useful and valued by both mentors and new teachers, because experienced teachers generally enjoy being asked about the decisions they make every day as teachers (Portner, 2002).

As these mentoring partnerships evolved, mentors and student teachers often engaged in conversations in which they challenged each other. Though this did not occur with all of the mentoring pairs, it was a common characteristic among the most successful relationships. As Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest in their social view of learning, the more expert members of learning encounters are also influenced by the experience. For the pairs who developed into truly professional partnerships, learning was "distributed among coparticipants" (p. 15). In many cases, the mentoring pairs acted as "collective enterprise[s] in which distinctions between teacher and learner, expert and novice, become entangled or even indistinguishable" (Mullen, Kochan, & Funk, 1999, p. 20). For example, during a planning conference, mentor teacher Mary Lee and her student teacher Tammy challenged each other as they jointly planned a poetry unit for middle school students. Mary Lee began the conversation by outlining how she saw the unit shaping up. However, Mary Lee's goals were not entirely clear to Tammy who responded, "Let me get an idea of what your general overview idea is." As they planned the last few weeks of the year, they developed a give-and-take conversation that enabled each of the teachers to challenge the other. Interestingly, it was Tammy who took the focus of the unit planning in novel directions, commenting, "I taught a whole lesson last semester on poetry in lyrics." As Tammy explained the lesson she had taught, Mary Lee listened carefully and responded, "I love this," discussing Tammy's ideas in connection with other activities she had used previously with her classes. Through this conversation, mentor and student teacher challenged each other to extend and expand practice.

Tammy and Mary Lee's conversation suggests the evolution that many of the mentor and student teacher pairs experienced during the EMEE project. What began as a clearly experienced/novice relationship moved progressively toward a collaborative partnership. Maynard and Furlong (1993) have described this process as an evolution from apprenticeship to guided practice to co-inquiry. While not offering this process as a stage model, these authors have suggested that mentors and student teachers continually adapt to the student teachers' needs and the challenges that they face during student teaching. In this study, one mentor teacher, Grace, defined this process as learning to dance:

We started off slowly and awkwardly, circling each other, trying to memorize the moves. As time passed and we became more comfortable with each other, the steps improved but still lacked the natural beauty and grace of experienced partners. Realizing that it would take us several more weeks to become premier dancers, we were lucky to have the equivalent of private lessons: we traveled together to Chicago to the NCTE convention. During the trip, I came to know Wynne on a more personal level. . . . Because we were now more comfortable with each other, the dancing became more relaxed and the rhythm more pronounced.

This metaphor underscores the importance of dialogue in mentoring relationships and its function as a mediator of learning for the new teachers. By listening, questioning, and responding to the student teachers' moves and their challenges, mentors appeared to engage the student teachers at the juncture of what student teachers understood about teaching and what more they wanted to know. This decidedly Vygotskian role for mentors places the mentor at the center of the learning process, helping the student teacher mediate between what they have already learned and what they are learning as they engage in classroom experiences.

## Conclusion

During one of the EMEE project meetings, mentor and student teacher pairs constructed partnership maps, visual displays that in some way characterized the significant aspects of their mentoring relationships. Donna and Amy created a picture of a student teacher parachuting from an airplane. A banner streaming from the plane was labeled "risk-taking," the ribs of the parachute were named "support," "trust," and "communication." This image captures the sense of support and challenge that emerged from this group of mentors and student teachers. Through their supportive gestures, mentors invited student teachers into the community of practice, provided them with a safe place to wonder or worry, and allowed them to take risks. By contrast, challenge spurred the student teachers' professional growth by providing new and alternate perspectives and encouraged them to build their own practice. Taken together, the two concepts worked hand-in-hand to promote the student teachers' professional growth.

In this sense, mentors simultaneously supported student teachers' beginning practice and provided specific answers to the challenges experienced by the student teachers (Elliott & Calderhead, 1993). The results of this study indicated that it was the school-based mentor who was "seen as the main source of 'cultural knowledge'" (Maynard, 2000, p. 28). However, unlike previous discussions of mentoring and the role of challenge in preservice education, these mentors and student teachers identified specific contextual challenges with which student teachers struggled and for which mentors needed to provide support. These contextual challenges occurred across pairs but were constructed differently within them. These variations highlight the ways in which the mentor teacher and student teacher pairs both shaped and were shaped by their perceptions of their teaching contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Mentors and student teachers seemed to create a socially shared space through which they could negotiate and define the student teachers' participation. In this way, support and challenge were interwoven and intricately connected to the specific mentor teacher and student teacher pairs.

### Implications for Teacher Educators

This study supports other recent research (Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Maynard, 2000) that highlights the close relationship between students' affective considerations and their learning-to-teach experiences. Comments from the new teachers often indicated how mentors made them feel. In sum, it was the specific social relationships with mentors that mattered most to these new teachers. Access to these relationships became possible because of the collaborative partnership established from the onset of the EMEE project. Through discussions, group activities, reflections, writings, and conversations, the EMEE participants engaged in "jointly defined work" (Wagner, 1997, p. 131). This work resulted in collaboratively constructed interpretations of mentoring that considered the perspective of all participants: researcher, mentors, and student teachers. What was significant about this inquiry process, however, was the time afforded to all participants who contributed to the project. For example, this research suggests that mentors mediate the experiences of student teachers through dialogue and reflection. The EMEE project made available precious time to talk, share, observe, and reflect.

Support of the newest members of our teaching community is crucial, because over the next 10 years, more than 2 million new teachers are expected to enter the profession (Portner, 2002). This need for continued support of new teachers is urged by the Commission on the Transition to Teaching, who argue that teacher education programs should continue assistance and support throughout at least the first year of teaching (Duke, 1992). This support system proves crucial to the long-term retention and growth of successful teachers (Reese, 1995). The mentoring experience appears as the perfect time for new teachers to devour the many styles, philosophies, and approaches that experienced teachers call their own, especially in light of Dewey's (1938) reminder that "appropriate educational growth must always create the conditions for further growth" (Daloz, 1999, p. 242). Clearly, the EMEE project shaped the kinds of relationships that evolved and nurtured the student teachers' growth.

McIntyre and Hagger (1993) have written that schools "lack the conditions necessary to facilitate thoughtful reflection and learning by teachers" (p. 88). They further argue that time and places for reflection are essential to teacher development. A supportive context, such as the one established for the EMEE participants, "will allow educators... to develop their professional skills, research knowledge, and capacity for human connection" (Mullen, 1999, p. 14). I would add that in order to incorporate these mentors' and student teachers' insights, schools and universities will need to create the space in which mentors and student



teachers have the time to negotiate participation and identify needs as the newcomers struggle to join the professional educational community as full participants. To champion the importance of mentoring relationships is to acknowledge that the transition from student to teacher can be a profound experience for both members of the professional partnership.

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