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One to Grow On / Three Wishes for New Teachers

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I did not benefit from a teacher induction program in the dawn of my teaching career. My first day of teaching was the start of the second marking period in a rural K–12 school in North Carolina. The principal wasn't present the morning I became a faculty member. He often didn't come to school until the day was well underway and frequently left before it ended. I wandered into the faculty lounge before the bell rang to begin the teaching day. It seemed like a reasonable place to wait until the principal came. Unfortunately, he didn't come before I had to go to my classroom, and it wasn't a reasonable place to do anything!

The conversation among the teachers (who never spoke to me) cast the students as incorrigible and witless. It left me entertaining the possibility of abandoning teaching before I entered the ranks. The school, which I'll call Highview High, had pitifully few resources. Textbooks were scarce, the library collection was slim, and there was no money to spare in the community. We never had a professional development day—no parent meetings either.

And yet, although the year was remarkably difficult, it was remarkably rich for me. I don't recommend trial by fire as the preferred route for inducting new teachers. But I've come to see that three of my experiences that year were pivotal in my development as a teacher and a human being. So here are three things I wish every new teacher could have.

1. A Colleague Who Models the Essence of Teaching

That Mrs. Gardner's class was right next to mine at Highview couldn't have been more fortuitous. Mrs. Gardner had a certain reverence for teaching. Her students' regard for her approached reverence as well. The proximity of our two classrooms meant Mrs. Gardner inevitably saw my missteps as a first-year teacher and knew of my few golden moments. Her words to me were few, though purposeful and potent. She never tried to "correct" me or overplay my small victories. Instead, she modeled how good teachers approach students.

She took her subject area seriously and worked diligently to ensure that her students did the same. However, the most essential thing I saw in her for the 27 weeks our lives intersected was that she had unequivocal respect for every student she taught. A human being always trumped a lesson plan. Her students felt seen, known, valued, and trusted, so they took her class seriously. I knew that not only because of what I saw, but also because of how she treated me. She made it safe for me to learn from her—and from myself.

2. Freedom to Think Creatively

The poverty of resources at Highview actually provided me a wealth of opportunity to be resourceful. I had no scripted text to follow, no pacing guide, no bells and whistles to engage my high school charges. There were no school counselors, no

specialists. There was just me, a barren classroom, and 30-plus students five times a day. I had no idea that some educators might find this situation unacceptable. I just knew that each day I had to figure out how to invite my unlikely learners to get jazzed about ideas that seemed remote from their lives.

Because there was no defined curriculum, I learned to think outside the box. I accepted that I had to be a problem solver. I became a thinker about my classroom—a reflective teacher. Those attitudes and skills have been more powerful in my career than any educational material I've ever seen. Developing them made me a professional in a way no packaged curriculum could.

3. The Right Pal

Loretta Shepherd had taught for a few years in another area before coming to Highview. We were both outsiders in the remote, encapsulated community our school served, and we felt like outsiders, even with students. On many days, we didn't know how to relate to their world, as they frequently didn't know how to relate to ours. It was that sense of teaching in a foreign culture that drew us together, but it was a shared determination to learn to navigate the culture that deepened our bond.

On most days, we shared stories of our work that would have been unremarkable to anyone else in the building. Everyone else, after all, was part of the culture that was so baffling to us. It was important to be able to laugh, cry, or vent together. All new teachers need that release. But after the "cleansing," we always asked, "So how do we make tomorrow better?"

I took for granted that every new teacher had a Loretta in their lives. Only when we both moved on from the school did I realize how hard it can be to find a colleague who both understands your todays and lifts your tomorrows.

With a Wave of the Wand

If I had the magic wand we all covet, I'd not wish for new teachers to have carefully printed and prescriptive guides, nor required meetings that tell them "how we do business here." Of course, I understand the desire to acclimate novice teachers to a school or a district. My first wave of the wand, however, would bring novices opportunities that acclimate them to what it means to be a teacher, to teach creatively, and to share one's growth with another person who seeks to grow as well.

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