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# Introduction

Teaching is one of the few professions that requires newly trained individuals to be given immediate and full responsibility for their work by making teachers accountable for the learning that occurs (or does not occur) in their classrooms. Practicing teaching in the abstract, without students, does not provide novice teachers with the context they need to develop and hone their skills. Therefore, before being licensed as teachers, new teachers must demonstrate their competence in the classroom through their work as student teachers. In addition, many states are enacting probationary status for first-year teachers to ensure that beginning teachers continue to learn and grow as they interact with students and the school community. Thus, the student teaching experience and the first year of teaching are critical times for supporting a new teacher's learning. However, individuals who assume the task of supporting developing educators through the role of mentor are often given little direction or guidance themselves. This book is designed to enhance the mentoring skills of those taking on the role of mentor by reflecting on the process of guiding novice teachers.

## **What Is a Mentor?**

The word *mentor* pops up in many conversations today. Famous athletes may speak of their coaches as mentors. Business leaders talk about mentoring in terms of guiding a newly hired person in the operations of

the company. High schools and colleges often place students in apprenticeship positions with a mentor, giving students opportunities to work with others who are doing the job they hope to have someday. All of these descriptions of a mentor are accurate, and they all are based on a trusting relationship between two people.

This type of relationship can greatly benefit new teachers. Many newly hired teachers often find themselves overwhelmed by the demands of a new job and isolated in a classroom with little time to talk to their colleagues. They may wonder if they are doing things “the right way” and they may feel frustrated when lessons and assignments do not work out as they had planned. Novice teachers often struggle as they work to apply their knowledge in the ever-changing world of their classroom, and many leave the teaching profession after their first year, frustrated and discouraged. The multiple tasks of adjusting to a new environment, dealing with the varying needs of their students, and developing their own confidence while preparing for daily lessons and schoolwide expectations can overwhelm beginning teachers. Gold (1992) suggests that novice teachers need support to develop coping skills so they can handle these demands and develop self-reliance. In light of the fact that 22 percent of all new teachers leave teaching within the first three years (U.S. Dept. of Education 1999), it is vital that professional educators develop the capabilities to support beginning teachers. By working with novice teachers, whether they are student teachers or first-year faculty members, mentors can help strengthen the teaching profession and minimize the number of new teachers who leave the classroom for other kinds of work.

The benefits of mentoring affect more than just novice teachers. Experienced teachers often find that assisting other teachers with their careers and goals develops their own potential and brings about a new level of job satisfaction. The mentor’s professional growth is enhanced through the collaborative focus of a mentoring relationship. The mentor and mentee both talk together about educational issues, and these intellectual interactions, based on the context of teaching, are vital to both teachers’ continued development (Wolfe 1992). Thus, a mentoring relationship provides experienced teachers with an opportunity to expand their own learning and use their teaching expertise in a new way.

## **Why Mentors Are Needed**

Often teachers are given training with the expectation that as a result of attending a workshop or class they will be able to implement a new idea or concept. Professional development does not “take” that quickly, and new

# Chapter 1

## Defining the Mentoring Relationship

Before mentors take on the role of aiding and supporting a novice teacher, it is important that they fully understand how to use their personal vision of teaching in mentoring, how mentors support and aid novice teachers, and what is expected of them as mentors. Reflection on these issues can help mentors provide their mentees with the best support possible.

### A Personal Vision of Teaching

There are as many different styles of teaching as there are teachers, and it is important that mentors find a way to describe their personal view of teaching to their mentees. This is also a good way for mentor teachers to begin a dialogue with their mentees. When mentors explicitly define their vision of teaching, it becomes easier for them to articulate their educational perspectives and philosophies to someone else. Once this can be described, members of the mentoring relationship can come to a shared understanding of what teaching is all about. This dialogue allows mentors to more readily assist novice teachers as they develop their own teaching style.