

## **Betwixt and Between: Liminality in Beginning Teaching**

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*This article discusses what it means to be a beginning teacher from the perspective of four mid-career entrants to the profession. Findings from this ethnographic study suggest that regardless of preservice teacher preparation or school districts' formal induction practices, newcomers experience a dramatic threshold or liminal phase among colleagues that can be disorienting and discouraging. The "as lived" experiences of participants in this study remind us that while beginning teaching can be a fleeting phase of cultural initiation, it also can be an intensely alienating passage that dampens newcomers' enthusiasm to thrive or even remain in the profession.*

### **WHY STUDY BEGINNING TEACHING?**

Most seasoned educators were once new teachers and might regard beginning teaching the same way we look back on our own puberty—an awkward phase that we shudder to think about and are grateful to have outgrown. With formal and informal rituals imposed around beginning teachers as they take up their work in new schools and cultures, starting to teach is very analogous to puberty. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality is useful in understanding beginning teaching as a rite of passage or transitional stage.

Derived from the Latin *limen* meaning "threshold," liminality helps explain how the rite of passage known as beginning teaching, involves the suspension, even temporary loss, of professional identity. This strange state of beginning teachers' betwixt and between status is captured well by Turner's description of the liminal phase of cultural initiation or puberty

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rites: "During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state." Turner explains further, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (pp. 94-95). Liminality is a dramatic cultural phase where the novice hatches awkwardly out of one phase and eventually into another more sophisticated phase and acceptance into the community.

During this liminal stage, beginning teachers are caught between the intense engagement with students in classrooms and the muted compliance tacitly expected of newcomers among other adults in the new school context. Beginning teachers might feel upended by this professional phase for several reasons. First, beginning teachers feel they have "arrived in the profession" after their university and student teaching programs end and certification is conferred. Secondly, they have theorized and perhaps even idealized the profession during preservice and are not prepared for the cultural cold shoulder inside schools once they have been hired to teach. The beginning teachers in this study suggest the rites of passage into professional teaching begin anew in the culture of a new school.

The four participants in this ethnographic study of beginning teaching are all mid-career entrants to teaching, all completers of the post-baccalaureate teacher certification program in which I teach. While participants' narratives uncover their uniqueness as individuals, their "as lived" experiences reveal commonalities about the transition from preservice teacher education to in-service teaching.

Although it was not the original intention of this study to focus on the experiences of mid-career entrants, this common characteristic shared by all study participants offers a special contribution to the study of beginning teaching, since mid-career entrants represent an increasing portion of new teachers entering the profession. Significantly, they have an ability to draw on experiences from other settings in describing schools as workplaces. Additionally, they have perspectives from other careers to help them articulate the interpersonal and professional oddities of induction into teaching.

What happens inside school organizations strongly influences the personal and professional dimensions of beginning to teach. It is crucial for us to understand as much as possible about the factors that collide and converge during liminality in teaching. Bullough & Gitlin (2001) maintain that the process involved in becoming a teacher is "of vital interest to the educational community in part because it is a means by which that community is sustained or reconstructed. But not only the professional community is affected by the outcome. . . . the professional community has a responsibility for building and shaping our collective social being as well; it has broad citizenship obligations" (p. 17). The framework for this study draws from

literature related to school organization and teacher retention, new teacher induction, and teaching as reflective practice in learning communities.

### Teacher Retention and School Organization

Because so many newcomers leave teaching early in their careers, beginning teachers' experiences seem an important data source for clues about why so many of them promptly leave the profession. Ingersoll's organizational perspective coupled with his review and analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement, the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), contribute a useful albeit different slant on the teacher shortage: the problem is not a shortage of teachers; it is a problem of retaining them within the profession. Teaching's so-called "revolving door" sees about 30% of new teachers exit the profession within three years and 40% to 50% within five years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). While some turnover is to be expected, these numbers indicate an alarming and expensive trend that drains financial and human resources.

Ingersoll and others suggest that the organizational system of schools themselves could be the culprit that drives so many beginning teachers away. Schools can be disenchanting workplaces. Such disenchantment relates to a number of factors including low salaries, lack of support from the school administration, school climate, student discipline problems, poor student motivation, and lack of teacher influence over decision-making (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future). According to Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (2004), teachers entering the profession today have more career options than the retiring generation, but they are also facing "unprecedented demands on schools and teachers. The public now expects schools to teach all students so that they achieve high standards—rich and poor, immigrant and native-born, white and minority, special needs and mainstream—and to take on new functions beyond the traditional scope of schools' responsibility" (p. 7).

The very uniqueness of teaching makes schools difficult to organize as workplaces. "Teaching" defies definition because of its very complexity. From an organizational perspective, Ingersoll (2003b) explains that teaching is considered "irregular work. . . . because of education's inherent importance and its inherent uncertainties, the public and school administrators have an understandable need to ensure substantial control and accountability over those doing the work—the teachers" (pp. 140–141). In sorting through the sources of beginning teachers' dissatisfaction, there are many variables to consider. The notion that schools as organized workplaces are culpable in their failure to retain new teachers is illuminating because it locates "a leak" in the profession and a locus for staunching the flow of beginners away from teaching.

Johnson (2004) speculates that teacher retention is one of several factors that could converge for a "perfect storm" that threatens the quality of our nation's schools and future of our nation's students. The other factors conspiring to weaken schools include the anticipated large-scale retirements of veteran teachers, enrollment growth, class-size reductions, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, potential teachers' decisions to pursue careers other than teaching, and the attrition and transfer of many new recruits from schools where the greatest needs exist (pp. 14-15).

### Mentoring New Teachers into Schools

Mentored induction has been regarded as one way to short-circuit some organizational impediments within schools to make the profession more attractive as a lasting career (Drago-Severson, 2004; Johnson, 2004; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). By pairing experienced teachers with beginners, mentoring programs attempt to personalize and ease the transition into teaching and new school organization and culture. Seen as a necessary induction practice to keep and maintain qualified new teachers, mentoring of some kind is required within many districts and across the country.

Mentoring is an important element of an induction program, but mentoring alone cannot be expected to accomplish all the work of a well-developed induction program. One-to-one mentoring cannot offer new teachers the kind of wider support needed to navigate complex school system bureaucracies as well as the complexities and practicalities of their own emerging teaching practices (Carter, 2004; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Bullough & Gitlin (2001) acknowledge that the quality of mentoring offered to beginning teachers "is often uneven" but is "inspired by the recognition that becoming a teacher is the responsibility of the entire educational community, including the university, and that the health and vitality of that community is directly dependent upon its ability to attract, induct, and nurture talented neophytes" (p. 16).

### Schools as Learning Communities

School-based learning communities seem to offer the potential to go beyond mere induction and one-on-one mentoring for newcomers. School-based learning communities can exist in several forms within departments or at grade levels or across an entire school, but they offer viable ways for newcomers to integrate into a school's professional culture. According to McLaughlin & Talbert (2006), ideal teacher learner communities "operate at multiple levels within a school, complementing and reinforcing teachers' work" and contributing "uniquely to teachers' knowledge base, professionalism, and ability to act on what they learn." Teacher learner communities help build and manage knowledge, create shared language and standards

for practice and student outcomes, and sustain aspects of a school's culture that are vital to continued, consistent norms and instructional practices (p. 5).

Learning communities in schools are conceived as communities of practice that actively, routinely meet and reflect on teaching practice and collective work and interests. Such learning communities welcome new teachers but researchers agree that communities of practice would not be healthy if they were restricted exclusively to newcomers or to any other exclusive constituency group for that matter. Wegner, McDermott, & Snyder (2003) explain that forming communities of practice is a delicate balance of discovery and imagination—“ . . . discovering what you can build on and imagining where this potential can lead . . . if you focus only on current networks, you will not cross enough personal boundaries to bring new ideas into the community” (p. 72).

Based on the notion of the teacher-as-reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), school-based learning communities reflect on their work “in action” as it occurs in their teaching practice with students; such communities support ongoing inquiry and continual involvement in knowledge and practice. An “inquiry stance” helps communities of practice avoid the novice/expert distinction that implies novices need more work—a perspective inconsistent with the image of teacher as lifelong learner and inquirer (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). McLaughlin & Talbert maintain that a “cohesive, vibrant teacher learning community” helps “socialize new teachers and administrators by reinforcing norms of practice among faculty and affirming the expectations for teachers’ ongoing learning and growth. . . . and provides the social interaction and informal learning opportunities necessary to incorporate new members and teach them about the standards, norms, and values that guide practice” (p. 8).

The organic nature of school-based teacher learning communities provides sharp contrast to the many rational and necessarily mechanistic controls over teachers’ work described by Ingersoll’s organizational study of schools (2003b). School-based learning communities provide more personally and professionally sustaining alternatives to new teacher induction and mentoring efforts. Such contrasts hint at the dualistic nature of schools as workplaces where beginning teachers take up their new careers.

## METHODS AND STUDY DESIGN

### *Ethnographic Approaches*

Informed by literature related to school organization and teacher retention, new teacher induction, and teaching as reflective practice in learning communities, this study is grounded in the experiences of beginning teachers themselves who described their transitions from a post-baccalaureate university-based teacher certification program into their first teaching jobs. Through inductive observation and naturalistic inquiry, I gathered data on

the experience of becoming a teacher from participants who were in their first and second years of teaching. Asked to describe what it was like to begin teaching, participants narrated their experiences during formal and informal individual interviews, individual written reflections, and group interview. Ethnographic methodology allowed participants in this study to tell their own stories by reflecting and elaborating upon what it means to be beginning mid-career entrants to the teaching profession.

### Study Setting and Participants

Part of a demographic that is growing among beginning teachers, the mid-career entrants to teaching interviewed for this study contribute uniquely to our understanding about what beginning teaching is like and what schools as workplaces are like. According to Johnson, the so-called "next generation" of teachers is more homogeneous in terms of race and gender than the retiring generation, but it is more diverse relative to age, prior experience, preparation, workplace expectations, and career conceptions. Many new teachers are first-career entrants, but an increasing proportion of new teachers are entering at midcareer—a range as high among states studied between 28% and 47% (p. 21).

The four mid-career entrants who participated in this study are career-changers who completed the post-baccalaureate teacher certification program in which I teach. All four had been in my student teaching internship seminars at the university, but at the time of the study, no formal relationship existed among us. While they were still in the certification program, each of the participants had expressed interest in professional development and a continuing relationship with each other, the program, and faculty at our small, private university. One participant had asked expressly about forming a university-based support group for beginning teachers, a request that was the genesis of this study. Another has since earned a master's degree in Curriculum, Instruction, and Supervision.

At the time of the study, two of the participants had been teaching for a year and a half; the other two had just completed their first years. All of the participants are white and teach in central New Jersey communities that might be best described as suburban-rural. The two female participants teach in elementary schools; the two male participants teach in secondary schools. To assure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used and further descriptions of school communities avoided.

### Data Collection and Analysis

I designed this study to explore very early teaching—the experience between preservice teacher preparation and full-time teaching—from the perspective of beginning teachers themselves. Individual case studies, in

which participants described the paths that led to changing careers in pursuit of teaching certification and their first teaching experiences, consisted of informal individual interviews, formal audiotaped individual interviews, and individual written reflections about preconceptions and perceptions about teaching. Other data sources included a group interview about beginning to teach and about the university's support for new teachers. The group interview was prompted by recurring themes that emerged from my preliminary analysis of the individual cases.

Having used multiple methods to generate a variety of data sources across multiple perspectives of the four participants, I was able to triangulate data (Patton, 1990). Interpretive, inductive analysis of the data allowed thematic threads and patterns to emerge from fieldnotes, participants' written reflections, and interview transcriptions. Organizing the data according to themes that emerged from participants' narratives, I used a grounded theory approach to uncover new theory among the data rather than verify existing propositions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

## FINDINGS

Before being hired as teachers, these beginners seemed to possess strong personal identities and confidence about how they might contribute to the lives of students. Past lives, former professional identities, and teacher education coursework combined to give these mid-career entrants well-developed autobiographical narratives that define teaching as a significant vocational choice. Findings from this study suggest that idealism about the profession can give way to disappointment when beginning teachers encounter superficial induction and mentoring efforts and the occasional chill from other teachers in the building. Self-conscious and acutely aware of their emerging—barely perceptible—status as teachers within the school building and the profession at large, these beginning teachers often found themselves in double binds. Not knowing what questions to ask of colleagues, administrators, and/or mentors, they also dreaded negative feedback and feared negative professional exposure. More specifically, these beginning teachers found themselves betwixt and between worlds, with their professional identities feeling disintegrated. Their views, as revealed through their interviews and writings, suggest that beginning teaching can be a fleeting, liminal phase as well as an intensely felt and alienating passage that can dampen newcomers' enthusiasm to thrive or even remain in the profession.

### Called to the Profession

One common theme that emerged from these beginning teachers' autobiographical accounts of their trajectories is the sense of being called or drawn

to the profession. Teaching was not a fall-back career for any of these beginning teachers; rather it was an opportunity that they each felt compelled to pursue. Leigh describes how having a career as well as being a stay-at-home mother prepared her for the decision to enter teaching:

. . . I had several different careers before becoming a mom. I'd been a social worker working in corporate America in a clinical capacity in New York City, and after kids, I was eager to get back to the work world. I had a couple of part-time jobs and found my way to substitute teaching and really felt like there was something I had to offer. It was an extension of my being a mom, but it connected with my previous professional life. It was a place that I needed to strive to be. . . . I had the crystallizing moment walking a bunch of second graders to music class, and I heard myself say out loud, "I need to be here." . . . I did need to be there . . . I felt that it was a place where I could be happy and could contribute.

Leigh emphasizes that she saw teaching as "a place that I needed to strive to be . . . a place where I could be happy and could contribute." Her comments, like those of the other beginning teachers, suggest teaching as a professional destiny. Dale explains:

. . . So I decided I wanted to teach, but it wasn't something I could do right away with getting married and my wife starting graduate school. For about five years, I worked in business; but from day one, I knew I wasn't there permanently. I knew I wanted to teach back then. I just had to wait until the time was right.

Remarks like these corroborate Johnson's findings that mid-career entrants tend to see teaching as a way to do "more meaningful work than their previous employment offered" (p. 24). All the beginning teachers in this study describe teaching as a personally and professionally important destination, one in which they see themselves contributing to the greater good as Andy suggests:

. . . my big thing was engaging kids. If kids were going to be difficult, well my methods would be so innovative kids would want to be here. . . . I really felt that it helped—being a little older and going into teaching having all this life experience. . . . For the first time in my life I was really focused on something on an intellectual level. . . . I thought I was going to be a musician. I still think I'm going to be a musician. . . . I mean you can be smart and focused in your career and also have your art.

Like Andy, all of the beginning teachers describe something of a struggle to answer teaching's call. Whether it was a matter of distinguishing art from



career or managing family responsibilities to clear the way, each of these beginning teachers discuss the individual drive required to make their way into the profession. Deni depicts their determination to continue their journeys toward teaching:

. . . I remember having conversations with my husband about how I'd like to go back and teach. It was just too hard then; the kids were too little, and we really didn't have the money so it wasn't an option, but it was definitely in the back of my mind. Then . . . they needed an accompanist [at my son's school] . . . and I said, "You know what? I think this is my in." . . . I had the unique opportunity of watching three different music teachers teach different classes every period, different ages, different levels, different makeup of every grade level and learned so much just watching them, and watching their management, and thinking, "Hmmm, what would I do differently? Wow, I would love to do this. . . . I need, no, I *have* to do this."

This representative narrative demonstrates not only the beginning teachers' determination but also the personal and professional significance of their decisions to enter the profession. Having accumulated personal and professional experiences that they use to describe and contextualize their emerging teaching identities, their decisions to enter teaching were driven by desires to be of use. For instance, working in human resources for a company based in an urban setting convinced Dale that the biggest contribution he could make to American society was helping young people get an education, especially young people in impoverished urban communities.

In addition to appealing to their desires to make a contribution, the teachers also were drawn to teaching because it seemed to offer creative control and autonomy as Andy suggests:

. . . [O]ne of the reasons I got into teaching was I wanted to be an original teacher; not like the kids had before. . . . I wasn't motivated when I was in high school. Maybe a couple of times here and there because of something that was interesting. So I wanted to bring this approach. Let me do something different, so these kids'll be interested . . . .

The notion of teaching as "a calling" and not just a job invites comparisons to religious vocations. For instance, novitiates in religious occupations often experience a "first fervor" as they enthusiastically take up their work. In the early stages of their ministry, however, newcomers' idealistic first fervor can give way to disillusionment as they confront organizational realities within their new work. The mid-career entrants to teaching in this study seem to have much in common with their counterparts in the religious novitiate, as they give up the strong identities they have previously established for the sake of being "called" into the teaching profession. If they are surprised,

frustrated, and occasionally angry about their inductions, it might well be because they feel the pain on two levels—professional and personal. They feel that both the significance of teaching and their own budding professional identities are betrayed a bit, rendered ordinary, or even rendered invisible by their new school contexts as Leigh suggests:

. . . I imagined a community of teachers, and learners, and people with singular goals and an excitement about the success of every child in a learning community that happened to be all centered in one building. That's what I imagined, but it wasn't like that at all. I walked in and I was announced in a meeting that I would be teaching fifth grade, and that was it. I was crestfallen. . . . I've never been so ignored in my life. And this was my big step into the profession. So I was really naïve. I was filling a slot that needed to be filled and basically if I did it well enough, that was good enough. And that was very uncomfortable for me, very uncomfortable.

Leigh's experiences show how initial fervor can be worn away by the institutional realities of schools as workplaces. Before they were hired, these beginning teachers idealized the profession and their own entrances. Their early experiences, however, disappointed them—but not so much that they wanted to leave the profession altogether.

### A Warm Welcome and Chilly Reception

As they started their new assignments, the beginning teachers expected to juggle simultaneously their students, responsive pedagogy, and curriculum content. They did not expect indifference or the occasional chill that they experienced from other teachers. As they described their experiences, the beginning teachers referred to a lack of community amongst the teachers and administrators in their buildings. Leigh's comments are representative of their responses:

[The] teaching culture was more of an adjustment for me than the teaching. The teaching I kind of figured out. And I have a lot to learn, but what was more difficult for me was the teaching culture . . . definitely surprisingly cold to me. I expected to be more of a part of a team, and I was very much a solo player. . . . expected to be welcomed and I wasn't . . .

This culture of teaching experienced by Leigh, characterized by loneliness and isolation from peers, is not unique to the teachers in this study (Britzman, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003b; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). They found, however, that the commonly recommended solution to combating new teacher loneliness and isolation—pairing beginners with experienced peer mentors—works in only a limited way. For instance, Leigh's mentor was very supportive but

could not ameliorate Leigh's uneasiness with her grade-level team and the culture at large.

. . . She was a formal mentor in that she was assigned with me, and I would have met with her daily if I could. She was teaching language arts at a different grade level and we never saw each other throughout the day because of our different schedules. . . . I would come in early and she would come in early to meet with me. She was my sounding board. From my conversations with her I realized how to ask the right questions and how to handle some situations with students . . . Is this good enough? Is this totally wrong? At the end of the year we found out that the other mentors and mentees either did not meet or did not meet with any regularity, that she and I were the only ones that had a pattern to our meetings.

Sometimes, beginning teachers feel ambivalent about their experiences with mentors. Eager to receive the kind of on-the-job-training (OJT) that she had in other employment situations, Deni realized her mentor could not provide the on-the-job-training she craved:

. . . As I watched her, I almost felt sorry for her because she didn't realize her strengths, what she was good at, and what she had to offer . . . . I felt like she really thought that she was helping me a lot . . . . But she would say one thing, and I'd walk in on my prep to ask her a question and she'd be doing something entirely different.

. . . I felt very isolated, but I think that's the nature of this profession. And this is my biggest beef with it. You go to any job, private industry, you get OJT. They don't want you to come in an expert. . . .

Andy too did not get the support he craved from his school-based mentor. Criticized by his department supervisor for his lesson planning, when he turned to his mentor for support, he felt worse about his place in the school and in the profession altogether:

. . . I was assigned a mentor, who was also the head of the union and we were going on strike at that time, so she was a little preoccupied. We had a decent relationship in the beginning, but then when I was really frustrated and felt like the world was coming down on me, she kind of just said, "Be tough. Get tough. Don't reinvent the wheel." . . . When you're involved in a job situation where people are saying: "Stick it out. Things are going to be better," all you can do is wonder: "How can I get through tomorrow?"

Even Dale, who had a more positive experience entering his first teaching position, had a limited relationship with his mentor. Hired at the last

moment before school began in the fall, he arrived at his new school on the last day of new teacher orientation:

It was a little hectic because I was hired so late. They have a very comprehensive new teacher orientation, but I missed all but the last day . . . For the mentorship process, which you have to go through, I was assigned someone who came in when school first started. We spent a day together, kind of went through the basics in brief, enough to make me competent to survive in the system. And the rest was on-the-job training. I usually don't have a hard time picking up the politics of the job or the etiquette of the school, so it wasn't a problem. Considering that I was hired so late, it was still a pretty smooth transition. Everyone here is very willing to help, and every teacher in my department is always willing to share, help you out, give you ideas.

As indicated by the different stories of the new teachers in this study, assigned mentors—whose positions are intended to ease new teacher induction—can be indifferent, helpful, or inflammatory emissaries of the culture. Though they all might be talented and well-intentioned, the mentors described here seemed to hold only ceremonial roles; they provided little feedback or support to their mentees. Without the support they craved or other shared learning experiences within their new community, the beginning teachers were left to their own devices about gauging their new work in the district. This experience, unfortunately, is typical of the mentoring offered to new teachers in many schools.

### The Chill of Liminality

As new hires and beginning teachers, participants in this study began the intense, quickly paced work of classroom teaching. However, outside their new classrooms and among colleagues, they did not yet feel established in their professional identities. Something within school culture inhibits and silences beginning teachers and reminds them they are mere newcomers. Andy suggests that the coldness is a kind of initiation rite:

What Leigh said about that coldness is true, but—it's not right out in the open. In my situation, they were nice to me, but they gave me the cold shoulder sometimes. By saying, "That's your classroom," they were saying: "You figure it out."

Even when classroom teaching seems to be going well, beginning teachers do not feel secure about speaking up. Their own insecurities and rookie status make them feel vulnerable about consulting others as Leigh and Dale respectively explain:

**Leigh:** . . . I was looking for feedback, but I was expecting it to come automatically and externally, so I didn't seek out much support partially because I think I didn't want to hear that I was doing it wrong. . . . there was very little feedback . . . .

**Dale:** . . . I guess maybe it's protection of myself that I don't ask. Maybe I felt insecure and that I should be able to handle situations. . . . I'm not really sure why. I felt I should have been able to form my own test questions and be confident in them, but I wasn't always confident. I would e-mail or even go to my supervisor because he actually specializes in assessment. When I first started doing that I felt I shouldn't. I should really know how to do this.

Beginning teachers' silence within the new culture seems instinctively self-preserving. Rogers & Babinski (2002) explain that beginning teachers are reluctant to discuss questions or concerns and "struggle desperately as they attempt to grapple with the complexities and contradictions of teaching and their own personal and professional development within the individualistic culture of schools" (p. 44). Working terribly hard yet working without sustained feedback or validation from outside the classroom that their efforts are going well, beginning teachers avoid "making noise" that might signal a problem or incompetence. Andy explains:

. . . I felt beaten down. I felt like I couldn't speak up my first year because at any point I felt they were going to prevent my lifetime certification . . . So I kept a lot inside and would not say very much to my supervisor . . . . And trust me, I wanted to say things . . . . I wanted to tell her off so many times. Or not tell her off, but just speak up and say, "I don't think that you're right." Or, "That's not how I understand it . . . I disagree 100% with what you're saying about teaching."

Deliberately or not, school cultures impose liminality on beginning teachers. Newcomers experience their professional puberty as a kind of probationary period in the teaching community. Provided the trappings of welcome, beginning teachers quickly realize that they are not entirely welcome to come "inside" the new culture. Such liminality can be confounding because newcomers assume the marginality is imbued with significance—which may or may not be true. Wondering whether they are doing well or not, beginners scan the community for signs of approval.

Based on the kinds of messages and feedback he received during the first year, Andy had to decide whether he should leave his first teaching job as well as the profession altogether:

. . . The supervisor really undermined my thinking. I had several ideas that she questioned with: "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?"

What's the bottom line?" I don't know the bottom line! It's my first year! Now I realize, yeah, there was a bottom line but I think you have to teach something first to realize that there's even an ending. . . . To be honest with you, there was really no connection with anybody with teaching. Connections to teaching really came more with this guy who sat next to me during prep period. And I felt like that if he was doing work, he was annoyed that he had to talk to me.

Leigh did not feel undermined as much as ignored in her school and wondered continually what the larger message was from other teachers and administrators.

. . . I'm assuming that that's what the expectation was, because I didn't receive any feedback that what I was doing was anything less than what they expected. . . . I didn't have a sense that they knew what I was doing in the classroom, which made me feel somewhat unsettled because I didn't know what I was doing. I was doing the best I could, but I wasn't sure whether that was good enough.

### Longing for Community

Outside of their own classrooms in the new communities of their grade level, department, or full faculty, beginning teachers also experience their liminality. When they look to professional development opportunities for support, they are often disappointed, like Deni and Leigh, who sense a disconnect between their respective district's professional development initiatives and teachers' needs:

**Deni:** . . . Well, yes, there are professional opportunities there, but they're generally after the workday. In our district you can give a class. You can teach a class to your colleagues. Teachers in fact are asked to do that as part of their own professional development, to go and teach other teachers their strengths and things like that. But it's always after hours. It's always in addition to your workday. And the workday of a teacher is just incredible. It's huge.

**Leigh:** And while we're trying to deal with diversity issues, be aware of abused and starving children and inappropriate sexual talk in the classroom, and the content standards, I don't see us being supportive of each other. I need to be refueled, and the best place for me to be refueled as a teacher is from other people who are doing what I do. . . . You can't force people to be friends. But I think administration can set a tone for collegiality, not just within the teaching itself, but being supportive of each other as peers. We don't have to like each other but we can say nice things to each other or ask each other how it's going and share information. We have a lot of time in our district that is dedicated to staff

development and a lot of that is very concrete . . . and I think it would be helpful to bring out the snacks and just throw us in a room, not necessarily have an agenda.

Even though all the new teachers in this study initially expressed strong interest in a web-based discussion group developed to connect completers of our post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program, none of them ever logged onto the site once their teaching assignments began. As much as they valued preservice camaraderie, their interests and needs were situational once they were within their immediate school contexts. Deni conveys the beginning teachers' need to connect with colleagues in schools where they work:

. . . I think the profession as a whole could do so much to really keep teachers teaching because many teachers . . . respond to the fulfilling nature of the profession, of the job. . . . Just as we need to connect with our kids in order to do our jobs well, I think we need to connect with each other.

More professionally seasoned than first career entrants, these mid-career entrants suggest how discouraging the professional environment can be for beginning teachers. When they looked beyond their own classrooms for support, there were few prospects for communal discussions of practice in which they could participate. They longed for conversations with other teachers in their schools and yearned for inquiry-oriented learning communities where newcomers and experienced teachers alike discuss and problematize issues of teaching practice, knowledge, and learning.

#### ACKNOWLEDGING THE ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHIES AND CULTURAL RITUALS IN SCHOOLS

All of us concerned about education must address the challenge of retaining strong teachers for all kinds of students and all kinds of schools. While it is impossible for teacher educators to predict how our preservice teachers will experience teaching as they take up their work in their first teaching assignments, the literature on new teachers' experiences, confirmed by this study, suggests that they will experience a liminal phase in their new settings in which their professional identities will be forced to incubate. To help preservice teachers deal with this inevitable phase of their professional development, it would be helpful for us to warn them of the expected phenomenon and introduce them to the cultural rituals and organizational hierarchies existing within schools that contribute to their feelings of discomfort.

It is difficult for newcomers to discern the difference between the obvious and clearly prescribed organizational hierarchies of schools and the unofficial and tacit cultural rituals that exist within them. As can be seen from this study, beginning teachers' confusion between the two was not necessarily clarified by their mentors, even as the mentors tried to help induct and nurture the new professionals into the community. Rather, the beginning teachers in this study experienced mentoring as haphazard and disconnected from the larger community. They learned to remain silent and suppress questions and insecurities lest they call even more attention to their professional puberty and expose professional immaturity or incompetence. If we are looking for ways to retain teachers and prevent them from draining away from the profession, we must examine and do something to lessen the confusion created by school culture that opens its arms to welcome beginning teachers yet whispers, "But you are *only* a beginner!"

### Implications for School Organization

In the absence of vigorous learning communities, beginning teachers find themselves in school organizations that ironically divorce professionalism from teaching through disjointed teacher induction and professional development activities. Many current teacher induction efforts are merely administrative procedures lacking roots in any kind of ongoing teacher learning communities. Teachers themselves generally do not have ongoing communities of practice into which they can welcome newcomers. Loosely banded in schools, teachers can only emit a cultural frost that suggests local customs and liminal probation for beginners.

Inside the first years' experiences, the beginner's perspective of teaching is hardly one of an inviting or promising career. Without opportunities to participate in small or large teacher learning communities engaged in ongoing conversations about shared work, beginning teachers cannot get professional traction. Lacking early experiences to witness and engage in regularly scheduled, ongoing communal conversations about teaching and student work, beginning teachers perceive only the isolation of their classroom teaching, the irrelevance of much professional development, and the cultural aloofness of experienced colleagues. Such perceptions do not reveal how intellectually and emotionally exciting a career in teaching can be.

### Implications for Teacher Education

As teacher educators, we can prepare preservice teachers to sustain themselves during their years of teaching by helping them to stay focused on learning—learning how they themselves learn, learning how to appreciate students, learning how to assess students' formal and informal feedback, learning how to appropriately adjust their teaching according to feedback



and assessment, and learning how to discuss teaching and learning with colleagues. Such a focus on learning might help newcomers negotiate the organizational and cultural constraints of beginning to teach.

An inquiry approach is an empowering stance. It suggests helping preservice teacher enter the field by offering more opportunities to practice talking about teaching and by teaching them how to ask questions as well as how to look at their own and student work. These are invaluable investigative abilities that will help new teachers learn from their work throughout their careers. An inquiry approach also suggests helping beginning teachers to understand that the ability to ask questions about their own work in relation to student feedback or performance is generative in many ways. With thoughtful observations and questions, beginning teachers themselves might initiate conversations with new colleagues about work rather than waiting for approval or disapproval. Such a reflective approach to teaching can enable beginners to take the lead in their new work rather than simply waiting to find their places or to feel accepted in school environments.

Whether or not learning communities become district-wide norms for teachers, it is incumbent upon us as teacher educators to help our preservice teachers understand the organizational dynamics of the schools where they intend to cultivate careers. Within these organizations newcomers will experience simultaneously intense bursts of teaching responsibility in their own classrooms as well as tacit expectation of their watchful but suppressed participation in the school community outside their classrooms.

As teacher educators, we can help preservice teachers to prepare for this transitional space in which beginners feel barely equipped for passage into the locally-unique organization and culture of schools. In teacher preparation programs we can prepare beginning teachers to expect the awkwardness and liminality of the early period of teaching, recognize that it can be frightening and uninviting, and understand that it is a ritualistic phase that eventually will dissolve. Preparing beginning teachers in this way may prevent them from being confused into silence when they enter the field or altogether abandon the profession. By fostering a "borderland discourse" during teacher education we can help "preservice teachers to combine their core identities, their student identities, and others with their professional identities and create a new, albeit recognized discourse or professional identity" (Alsup, 2006, p. 45).

As teacher educators help preservice teachers to explore and develop their educational autobiographies in these ways, we must emphasize that teaching has both public and private dimensions; that it entails both personal cultivation and lifelong learning; that teachers' professional identities are always evolving as organic entities; that there is no one moment of professional arrival or achievement; that, rather, there are *many* moments—a career's worth—of potential for evolving professional insights, growth, and identity.

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# THE NEW EDUCATOR

Volume 3, Number 1, 2007

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