"Coming Into My Own as a Teacher": Identity, Disequilibrium, and the First Year of Teaching

JENNIFER S. COOK

Rhode Island College, Providence, RI, USA

This study examines the experiences of ten first-year English teachers in various school contexts in two Northeastern states. Through a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing, teachers were interviewed at the end of their first year of teaching. Commonalities in teachers' experiences include former teachers' influences on their teacher personae, negotiating their authoritative role in the classroom, understanding how and why to set boundaries with students, and demonstrating resilience and resolve in the face of multiple challenges. Implications for teacher education and induction programs are to address the disequilibrium of the self in early teaching experiences and to model habits of mind that promote "productive disequilibrium."

Recent studies have examined the emotional, psychological, and social complexities of becoming a teacher in the context of teacher education and preparation (Intrator, 2006; Lasky, 2005; Smagorinsky et al., 2004; Webb, 2005). These ideas are not new (Jersild, 1955). But, despite over fifty years of our knowing better, Lortie's (1966) image of the first-year teacher as Robinson Crusoe, stranded on a desert isle, persists as a controlling metaphor for the experience of beginning teachers, with the struggle to exist—alone—at the center of the story.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first-year English teachers through the lens of phenomenology in order to better understand the nature, or the essence, of this phenomenon—the first year of teaching English. I have investigated what it is about the first year of teaching that makes it such an infamously trying time. In addition to my central research question here, "What is it like to be a first-year English teacher?" I explored several other offshoots of inquiry in this study, such as (a) how novices come to see themselves as teachers, and (b) how new teachers experience their own learning and development "on the job."

Using a phenomenological perspective in carrying out this study allowed me, as a researcher, to become grounded in each teacher's experiences and to interpret, categorize, and theorize from their reconstructions of their experience. According to van Manen (1990), one of the leading practitioners of this methodology in the field of education, we can only uncover the essence of an experience through a study of "the particulars as they are encountered in lived experience" (p. 10). Drawing from the work of Stark (1991), who used a phenomenological lens through which to better understand the nature of the first year of teaching, I, too, strive to engage in research that "leads me to create conditions that may re-form what *to begin* and *to be* a teacher means…". (p. 295)

Stark's (1989, 1991) study has particular relevance, as it delves into the complexities of teacher identity, of coming to understand the role/s of a teacher, and of crafting a public persona as a teacher. Her findings (1991) led her to ask: "How do teacher educators encourage…teachers to experience teaching as *being* as opposed to teaching as *doing*?" (p. 307). Stark's concept of teaching "as a way of being in the world" (p. 307) is connected to the way in which many of my participants were able to see teaching as a part of their new identities.

As novices come to know themselves as teachers, they wrestle with a variety of emotional and psychological—even existential—questions: Who do I want to be as a teacher? What sort of authority will I be? What kinds of relationships will I have with my students and colleagues? Because how teachers teach is in direct dialogue with who they are and where they teach, many beginning teachers find themselves simultaneously working on two projects: struggling to change who they are in the context of what they do (Featherstone, 1993). Ultimately, these two "projects" capture developmental processes that are universal to teachers—the process of teaching and the process of becoming a teacher.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviewing from a phenomenological perspective was the methodology I used in this study (Seidman, 2006). In-depth interviewing allowed me to sit with and listen to teachers and their stories, helping me to better understand "the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman,

2006, p. 4). I interviewed each of my ten participants three times with each interview lasting 90 minutes. This three-interview series (Seidman, 2006) was semi-structured; each of the interviews had a focus or theme: The first, "Tell me about your life up until you became an English teacher this year;" the second, "What is it like to be a first-year English teacher?; and the third, "Given what you have said in the first two interviews, what does it mean to you to be a first-year English teacher?"

During the interviews, I took notes to serve as reminders and cues. I wrote down details such as quotes that resonated with me, names of people, images, a follow-up question I had but couldn't ask at the moment. To prepare for subsequent interviews with each participant, I reviewed my notes to scan for salient topics or emergent themes. I did not listen to the recordings of the interviews until the three-interview set had been completed. This follow-up method, I believe, allowed me to responsibly prepare for the second and third interview and to further explore, with each participant, stories and issues they themselves had introduced in the previous interview.

By relying on my notes as preparatory tools, I was hoping to stay "in" the interview with the participant, as opposed to moving to a deeper level of analysis of, say, transcription or transcript review and coding. I made a conscious effort to treat each participant and his or her series of interviews as a case unto itself, treading the fine line between seeing the uniqueness of each person's experience and recognizing themes and patterns in peoples' experience of a phenomenon.

Participant Selection

Ten first-year English teachers participated in this study: two men and eight women from middle and high schools in Massachusetts and New York. I used Patton's (1990) strategy of "purposeful sampling" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) in selecting my participants.

My sample size for this study was based on several considerations. I wanted a sample of first-year teachers that represented various pathways to teaching. Additionally, I wanted to interview first-year teachers for whom teaching was their first career as well as those who had come to teaching as a second or third career. This sampling criterion gave me a range of ages in my participant sample, as well as a range of contexts in which the teachers teach (rural, urban, suburban).

I initially set out to identify a participant sample that would reflect "great diversity," and I encountered many dead ends in my search for a diverse pool of first-year teacher participants. The lack of ethnic minorities in my sample represents, to some degree, the small percentage of teachers of color who choose to pursue a career in teaching. According to the National Education Association's "Status of the American Public School Teachers 2000–2001" study, 90% of teachers surveyed

in their nationally representative sample of 1,467 teachers were White, about 5% African-American, and the remaining 5% other minority groups (NEA, 2003). The lack of minorities also represents the demographics of the geographic areas where I focused my research (Table 1).

The ten participants in this study provided me with a rich, connected array of beginning teacher experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) use "redundancy" as a benchmark for determining when a sample selection is adequate for the particular inquiry a researcher is investigating: "when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units" (p. 202). When I started to find parallel stories and experiences in the teachers' narratives, I knew I had selected a representative, purposeful sample from which I could identify "important common patterns that cut across variations" (Patton, 1990, p. 182).

Analysis

After the 30 interviews were completed, I read each teacher's verbatim transcripts and immediately wrote a three-page "first thoughts" profile of each participant. This was my initial attempt to synthesize and make sense of each teacher's experience. These profiles were an important first step in data analysis because it allowed me to isolate the recurring themes and patterns in each teacher's transcript. These first-thoughts pieces were crucial in helping me to winnow over 300 pages of transcripts and in helping me to see commonalities that cut across the teachers' stories of their first year of teaching.

As a continuation of my process of refinement and collapsing, I crafted summary sheets for each participant, in which I narrowed the themes that emerged from each teacher's verbatim transcript. Using the constant comparison method, I looked for shared experiences across cases, intending to show patterns and relationships among my participants' experiences as first-year teachers. Patton (1990) describes this culmination of the research process as creating "a new vision of the experience" (p. 410). Part of crafting a new vision of the first year of teaching was the challenge of organizing the salient themes into a framework that recognized the sites of disequilibrium and negotiation for teachers during the first year of teaching.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gallagher and Stahlnecker (2002) have discussed a view of teacher development that is grounded in the notion of disequilibrium, the state of imbalance that is inevitable when a new teacher enters the school as a workplace and the complexity of human relationships within schools. Teachers can experience their disequilibrium

Table 1: First-Year Teacher Participants.

Name	G	Age	Location	School	Teacher Prep.	Ethnicity	*SES
Tori	F	24	Eastern MA	Urban high school	Graduate, M.Ed.	Chinese-American	Father: M.D. Mother: high school Father is a physician. Mother stays at home to raise children.
Barbara	F	43	Western MA	Suburban high school	BA English, no teacher prep.	European-American	Father: B.A. Mother: high school Father was a company vice president. Mother stays at home to raise children. Barbara is a homeowner and single parent to four children.
Cathy	F	25	Central NY	Suburban middle school	Graduate, M.S. in education	European-American	Father: high school Mother: high school Father works for a bottling plant. Mother is a family educator.
Maria	F	23	Eastern MA	Urban high school	Undergrad B.A. English education	European-American	Father: B.S. Mother: Associate's degree Father is a CPA. Mother is an administrative assistant at a school.
Valerie	F	23	Eastern MA	Urban high school	Undergrad B.A. English education	European-American	Father: high school Mother: high school Father is a crew leader for the Department of Transportation. Mother is a bookkeeper for several retail stores.
Andrew	M	25	Northern NY	Suburban high school	Graduate M.Ed.	European-American	Father: B.S. Mother: high school Father is a quality control inspector for an aerospace company. Mother is a nanny. Andrew and his wife own a home.
Sarah	F	27	Eastern MA	Urban middle school	Graduate, M.Ed.	European-American	Father: B.A. Mother: B.A. Father works in the financial sector. Mother stays at home to raise children.
Meredith	F	28	Central MA	Suburban high school	B.A. English, no teacher prep.	European-American	Father: high school Mother: high school Father was an electrician. Mother is a hair stylist.
Rebecca	F	29	Western MA	Rural technical high school	Graduate, M.Ed.	European-American	Father: Ph.D. Mother: B.A. Father is a college professor. Mother is a high school teacher. Rebecca and her partner own a home.
Ian	M	50	Southern NY	Suburban high school	Graduate, M.A.T	European-American	Father: Ph.D. Mother: B.A. Father was an engineer. Mother stays at home to raise children. Ian owns a home with his wife; they are parents to two children.

*SES is determined by the highest degree attained by the parents, occupation of parent/s, and home ownership (Merola, 2005).

as either productive or unproductive. The mitigating factor is their ability to modify their existing schema to make room for new ideas and experiences.

Productive disequilibrium (Gallagher & Stahlnecker, 2002) serves as the theoretical framework for the findings of this study. This idea was introduced to the field of education as one of the tenets of Piaget's theory of cognitive development and as an assumption behind the theory of constructivism. The notion of disequilibrium has been used in the field of psychology, though it is more often referred to as "cognitive dissonance" (Kegan, 1982). It is also used in the sciences (Kauffman, 1995) to frame the manner in which complex organisms thrive in transitional regions between order and chaos. Across fields, the theory of disequilibrium or dissonance maintains significance as the dialectic force that pushes us to redevelop, reconfigure, and reimagine our schema.

As Kegan (1982) describes below, a state of disequilibrium often has profound affects on our identity and sense of self.

> …[During] those times in our lives when the specter of loss of balance is looming over the system…These are the moments when I experience fleetingly or protractedly that disjunction between who I am and the self I have created…the moments that Erikson refers to hauntingly as 'ego chill.' The chill comes from the experience that I am not myself, or that I am beside myself, the experience of a distinction between who I am and the self I have created. (p. 169)

Kegan's (1982) description highlights the significance of disequilibrium in novice teachers' developing identities. As beginning teachers move from their preparation into practice, what they believe about teaching and learning is called into question by the complex realities of schools. It is at this intersection—this "transitional space"—of a new teacher's ideals and the realities of schools that the initial state of a teacher's disequilibrium occurs. Most beginning teachers experience this type of disequilibrium, and it is whether or not it is productive or unproductive that makes the difference in their development as teachers.

RESULTS

The results that follow reflect some of the developmental and psychic challenges of becoming a teacher. These sites of disequilibrium, represented by the themed sections below, are presented against the backdrop of the novice teacher's changing public persona. The themes that emerged in relation to the novice teacher's disequilibrium are: (1) Imitation as Apprenticeship, (2) Negotiating Issues of Authority, (3) Creating Boundaries but not Walls, and (4) Resiliency and Resolve.

These themes are all related to a beginning teacher's newness and inevitable "on the job learning," as well as to her inevitable circumstance of having to renegotiate her relationship with the world, with others, and with herself in light of her new professional identity. For reasons of length, I have narrowed the data to only

present three to four participants' voices per section, though I have tried to provide at least one representative quote from each of the ten participants in the study.

Imitation as Apprenticeship: A patchwork of iconic teachers

Each of the ten teachers I interviewed spoke at length about teachers of their own who they aspired to be like in some way. Through recollecting, the first-year teachers were reconstructing bits of their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). Lortie's theory has been reified again and again in the literature, most recently by Intrator (2006), "[novice teachers] 'try on,' much like an actor in a drama, the role of their mentor teacher, or strive to reproduce images of the teacher that they harbor from…their apprenticeship of observation…". (p. 235)

Lortie (1975) contends that the apprenticeship-of-observation does not prepare prospective teachers for what he calls "the inner world of teaching" (p. 65), though I found that their experiences with their own teachers *did* have a considerable impact on their understanding of what it means to be a teacher and on their notions of themselves as teachers. New teachers necessarily have to envision themselves as *something* in their first years in the classroom. And, their own teachers serve as significant touchstones in the psyche for what "Teacher" is and means. As one of the participants in this study put it, "I feel like I'm still trying to aspire to be like the teachers that I had in high school" (Maria).

Cathy is an eighth grade English language arts teacher in Central New York State. Here she recalls her most impressionable teacher:

> …I had one professor who completely changed my life…He was my English composition teacher…He sat down with me and said, "You know, you really have some potential here as a writer."…No one had ever said that to me before…And it was at that point that a light went on…It was like all of a sudden stuff started to click for me…I hated English in high school. [I] majored in it [in college]. Now I'm teaching it…At that point I really did start to view teaching as something that's very powerful, that's able to transform someone's life because [he] did that for me.

Sarah, who teaches seventh grade writing in an urban middle school in Eastern Massachusetts, recalls her first inspirational teacher. By attending to his students' writing and encouraging their growth as writers, this teacher's legacy provided Sarah with a touchstone for who she wants to be as an English language arts teacher.

> … It wasn't until high school that I enjoyed writing…I had an excellent [English] teacher in high school. His name was Mr. Kraft… he was so encouraging about writing. He brought us to poetry

> festivals and creative writing festivals…He was probably one of the
> most inspirational teachers that I ever had…[He] was the teacher I
> would want to model myself after…

Rebecca teaches high school English in a rural, technical/vocational school in Western Massachusetts and had a similar experience with a high school English teacher.

> … My ninth grade English teacher…was fabulous…sophomore year
> she invited me to do a lesson on Things Invisible to See in her ninth
> grade class…I remember feeling really proud of doing that and really
> liking it…That was pretty influential and…I've sent her a couple
> notes about how much she influenced me…

Finally, Maria, who teaches high school English at a large, urban high school in Southeastern Massachusetts, recollects teachers from her past to whom she looks as models.

> …I think about my freshman history teacher, my geography teacher,
> and he's who I want to be…Just that I respected him so much…I
> wanted to do so well for him and it mattered. And my drama teacher
> and junior English [teacher], I want to be like her…It's teachers that I
> want to be like, little bits of them, and the respect they had for me that
> I want the students to have, the interest they sparked in me that I want
> to spark in students.

From this sampling, you get a sense of the impact that former teachers had on these participants. As Feiman-Nemser (2003) points out, beginning teachers piece together the past and the present in the formation of their teaching personae. There is no doubt that their own schooling experiences—and those impressionable, iconic teachers—have an effect on beginning teachers' inner worlds of teaching, on their vision of a good teacher. And, as they meld their past with their present, these beginners draw on those recollections in an attempt to internalize and define who they are becoming.

Teaching & Performing: Negotiating Issues of Authority

> …The new teacher is constantly on stage and urgently needs to
> develop a performing self with whom he or she can live comfortably.
> (Featherstone, 1993, p. 101)

Seven of the ten participants in this study used theatrical language ("actor," "mask," "director of the play") to describe their efforts to develop an authoritative, public persona. Andrew, an English teacher in a suburban, regional high school in Northern New York, describes the roles he has to play during the course of a school day.

> …I have different groups of kids where I have basically different
> personalities, and that's where being the actor comes into play…I
> have to change in those three minutes between periods sometimes
> from being a hard guy to being a nice guy, simply because I know
> what works with what particular group…

Andrew's statement shows us his sense of the emotional and psychological complexity of the classroom and the need to be sensitive to the context of each class.

His description of his change of character between classes disrupts the "cumulative cultural text" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) of the teacher persona that is static and rigid. Andrew's understanding of being a teacher is to be someone who can play multiple roles, much like an actor who is considered versatile and amorphous, rather than someone who is typecast in a fixed role.

Perhaps one of the more difficult roles that first-year teachers have to play is that of an adult authority figure, an aspect of Andrew's identity as a teacher that he has had a difficult time reconciling. As one who rebelled against authority as a student and who was expelled from high school for doing so, Andrew describes his new role as "ironic" and as a kind of "karmic cycle…where I was so anti-authority as a kid, now I have to be the authority figure and fully realize the whole ramification of that." Andrew has come to understand his authoritative role by seeing it as a mask that he puts on from time to time.

> …So, there's this sense that being an authority figure is something
> that you can put on, it's like a mask or anything else, a personality
> that you can put on for a short period of time. And sometimes it's
> necessary. And, in that sense, that's what it's about, the necessity of it
> rather than wanting to do it.

In this comment, we can see the intersection of Andrew's past with his present, the intersection of his core identity with his teacher identity. Tori, a teacher in an urban high school in Eastern Massachusetts, experienced a similar tension during her first year of teaching. As a student who, like Andrew, once questioned the legitimacy of the authority figures in her life, she now finds herself struggling to put on the "mask" of authority.

> ...There's a part of me that is still very anti-establishment and [anti-]
> authority, but then here I am trying to be an authority figure in front
> of these students… And it's like, "What do I know?" I don't think I
> was quite confident in my skills…I think a lot of it was the age
> difference [with my students]. It was too close…I always have to get
> into that mentality…"I have to be a serious, professional teacher
> here." And I'm working with colleagues who are the ages of my
> parents. I need to have my act together.

Tori's struggle seems to be embedded in her personal process of maturing and taking on an adult life. It is also embedded in her gender, her age, and her ethnicity. While Andrew is 25 years old, male, married, a member of the Army National Guard, and a homeowner, Tori is a 23-year-old woman, single, with her first, full-time, salaried job. Having gone from her undergraduate program straight to graduate school in teacher education, Tori is not only struggling with her developing teacher identity but also with her developing adult identity. She is trying to negotiate who she is in the world as an adult while negotiating who she is and what she does everyday as a teacher and colleague. In this sense, Tori, like many young, beginning teachers, is experiencing tension on two fronts: as a newly responsible adult and as a teacher and authority figure.

Here, Tori explains how her ethnic identity has affected her relationships with students in a school with a majority African-American population.

> …I think being Asian is a very interesting factor in my relationship with [students] because they recognize that I represent the establishment in some ways, but they also recognize that I'm a person of color. And so I think they're willing…they're more open to express certain opinions with me than they would be with a white person… though, they do recognize that part of me that has these middle class values, that's where I come from.

This excerpt provides a window into the complexity that Tori's ethnicity and class has had and continues to have on her authority as a teacher in her school. As an English teacher in a multiethnic urban school, Tori has come to realize the contradictory nature of her authoritative position as it intersects with her race, gender, and culture. As she negotiates her roles as a teacher and an authority figure in an urban high school, Tori continues to struggle with how being Chinese-American and a woman—identifiers that carry with them the cultural text of being "docile" and "submissive"—plays into her school and classroom persona.

For Andrew and Tori, age, gender, and ethnicity are factors that they recognize as having an impact, as barriers or pathways, on the teacher they are becoming. For Rebecca, the performative aspect of teaching makes her feel at home in her classroom and seems to supercede any issues she has with being in an authoritative role. Rebecca's description below may also explain her "outlier" status in this study; she was the only teacher in this sample who did not describe the kinds of disequilibrium that the others did.

> …Maybe why I like being a teacher is because I'm not involved in any other kind of performance. It's my outlet. It really is the same skills that you learn [in theater class], from projecting…to knowing when you can be silly…to commanding attention through your behavior or voice…if you aren't the star of the show in the classroom, then you're the director of the play…It doesn't feel like two

completely different things, performance and teaching, because I see teaching as a performance. What's good about that for me is I feel comfortable in the role as a performer.

After just one year in the classroom, Rebecca understands the delicate role that the teacher plays in setting the tone of the classroom, from day to day and from minute to minute. She also has a firm grasp of the different roles a teacher can play, from "starring in the show" and entertaining students to keep them engaged, to facilitating students' work from the sidelines as a guide or coach. Rebecca's comfortableness with the nuances of performing seems to go hand in hand with her comfortableness with renegotiating her authoritative role in her classroom as the climate dictates.

It becomes clear, through these teachers' stories, that assuming authority as a teacher is not as simple as merely standing in front of a class of students and delivering a lesson. It is a complex negotiation between students and teacher and between teacher and self. Not only are the performative aspects of a teacher's self under scrutiny in this negotiation (voice, presence, leadership, control) but also core elements of their identities (gender, sexual orientation, size, ethnicity, accent).

"A Line in the Sand": Creating Boundaries and Not Walls

Eight of the ten teachers in this study spoke of having to carefully balance their relationships with students by creating boundaries that are flexible, sustainable, and reasonable. Here, Andrew explains his view of setting boundaries.

> I have gotten pretty close to kids…and it's a line in the sand…you have to be a role model too…there's always that line there, and it's very difficult to see sometimes, especially up close.

Barbara, an English teacher in a suburban high school in Western Massachusetts, voices similar concerns below. She, too, is conscious of the line in the sand.

> … I had to remember to be the adult and keep a boundary. You really have to be careful not to be their friend…if you act too casual with them they don't get the right message. And, they can do things that are probably not appropriate…You have to keep that really tough border and that boundary to keep yourself safe too, because if you really let your guard down, they can suck you in.

As a 45-year-old first-year teacher, Barbara has concerns about getting too close to kids and sending the wrong message. Additionally, she notes that students "can suck you in," a concern that Andrew also raised when he stated, "You can't let them invade your personal life."

But, Barbara also points out that, as a first-year teacher, she came into her new position wanting to be liked by her students. The need or desire to be liked by one's students is often a pitfall for first-year teachers. As Barbara states below, she quickly

realized that her need for professional boundaries had to supercede her need to be liked.

> … At first I wanted to be liked…because if you are liked, you feel better about yourself…But I realized that if I suffered because I had a student who didn't get along with me or didn't like me for whatever reason, I would not be doing a service to myself or the other students…

Like Barbara, Cathy, an urban middle school teacher in Central New York, talked about the complexity of ignoring the need "to be liked" for the sake of her professional relationship with her students.

> …This was a really hard year for me because I wanted to be liked…
> In my student teaching placement…I was younger [than the teacher] so the kids liked me and it was cool. But, now here I am as the teacher and I'm saying, "We're going to keep this very professional" And that was hard…[But] you're walking this tightrope of friend, teacher, friend. So, you set some clear boundaries.

The issue of negotiating boundaries with students is more than a professional concern. As Tori points out below, it is also a personal concern. Although Tori spoke openly about setting clear boundaries in the classroom, here she almost laments the fact that once her students leave her classroom, the social boundaries between them become barriers that separate them in powerful ways.

> …You know them in the context of your class, and you see them out in the hall and they recognize you…But the truth of the matter is, I don't live [downtown], and I did not grow up they way they grew up, so I think in that aspect I don't know them…And I don't think I'll ever really know them in that aspect of their lives…To be really honest with you, that's where the relationship becomes very, very fuzzy…

This excerpt highlights boundary setting as a double-edged sword for beginning teachers: on the one hand, a teacher needs to maintain a professional distance and, on the other hand, Tori seems to wish that she had a greater understanding of and connection to students' lives outside of class.

Setting boundaries is central to teachers' negotiations of their relationships with students. And as the literature reflects, the negotiation of teacher-student boundaries is vital to beginning teachers' developing identities. Zembylas (2005) points out that "the need to find personal and professional boundaries emerged as a central part of teacher identity" (p. 9). Additionally, Lasky (2005) finds that "the willingness to blur the boundaries between the personal and professional with their students was a core component of [beginning teachers'] teacher identity." (p. 908)

Resilience & Resolve: Exhibiting the "long haul" attitude

> "I can see myself in it for the long haul" (Valerie).

Six of the ten participants described their resolve to keep moving forward in their development as teachers, despite the challenges of the first year. In the following excerpt, Ian, a 50-year-old first-year teacher in the New York Metro area, compares his resilience as a beginning teacher to his daughter's resilience in learning to walk. In this passage, it is clear that Ian, as with many first-year teachers, expected to encounter difficulty in his transition from student to teacher. What is also clear here is his understanding that "falling down" in the classroom is part of the process of becoming a teacher.

> …Our second child is just learning how to walk. It's amazing…She would take these steps. She would fall down. She'd pick herself back up and walk another six steps…She did this countless times…It takes a long time to learn to be a good teacher…It will be five years before I'm anywhere near where I want to be as a teacher…[My daughter is] so excited to be able to stand on her feet and walk. I get excited when I actually think I'm communicating to some of my students, so it's the same idea. One step at a time and bob along forward, muddle through. That's what I've been doing so far. I've been falling down and picking myself up…

Though the idea of falling down in the classroom and muddling through may not constitute what a beginning teacher imagines his life in the classroom will be like, Ian well understands that falling down and getting back up is the nature of learning to teach. He has come to expect it, and he has learned to weather it. There is hope in his analogy and in it we can see his desire someday to be the teacher he wants to be. Considering that about one third of all new teachers leave teaching in the first three years (Darling-Hammond, 2000), the hopefulness that Ian portrays above is reassuring.

Similarly, Maria, who is 22 and has wanted to be a teacher all her life, acknowledges that she is still a student of teaching. Like Ian, she understands that her first year of teaching was "the first step" in getting to be the teacher she wants to be. And, she is able to see room for improvement and change in the future without diminishing the meaning or accomplishments of her first year.

> …I think that this year is the first step in aspiring to what I want to be in five years, ten years, how good I want to be. I still feel like this is the year that either makes me or breaks me…And I want to come back next year, so that's a good thing…But I feel like it's the first step on the ladder. I have so much that I want to do and so much that I want to change… I can see what I need to do now to be there and so

> the first step is, "This is where I am, this is where I want to be and this
> is what I have to change along the way to get there"

Likewise, Cathy compares her first year to a first draft of a piece of writing and to laying the foundation for a structure. Similar to Ian's analogy, in Cathy's analogies I find hope for improvement, hope for next year, and ultimately hope for the students she's committed to working with.

> …My first year of teaching was like writing a first draft. I really
> believe that because…I just want to get to the point where I have
> a base or something to work off of. Now I can start revising…I feel
> that I have so much more to learn. I think if anything that's what this
> year has really shown me, how much I do have to learn. But…I have
> laid the foundation for next year and the years after that.

Tori also demonstrated hopefulness that the first year of teaching has provided her with some perspective on her vision of teaching. Here, she discusses how she is able to frame her idealistic notion of changing students' lives in the very real context of her locus of control in her classroom. She acknowledges that she cannot control what happens to students when they leave her classroom. And yet, she intends to persist.

> Ideally, a teacher can create enough energy that it will trickle out
> [from the classroom]. But, you can't control what's going on in
> [students'] lives…I feel if you're going to be a teacher, you have to
> work under that [gambling] mentality. You have to have an obsessive,
> compulsive urge to keep putting money into something and maybe
> you're losing in the end, but if you hit the jackpot a couple of times,
> you keep playing. And I feel like I encountered many teachers who
> are like that. And, those are the ones that have the positive outlook.
> Like, "I can hit the jackpot again and again…

The "gambling mentality" that Tori cites is her analogy for the tenacious resolve of successful teachers. To feel defeated everyday as a teacher, one needs only to consider the inequities that challenge, and sometimes counter, the work we do in schools. But, as Tori points out, good teachers resist throwing up their hands in the face of systemic problems. Instead, as Tori realizes, teachers who last take personal responsibility for what they can do, in small or large ways, to better the lives of their students.

As much as she is attuned to reality, the faith and hope of a teacher (or the "obsessive, compulsive urge" as Tori describes it) has to fuel the fire every day. She seems to understand, by good examples that have been set for her in school, that she has to walk into school each day thinking she'll "hit the jackpot."

Nieto (2003), in her work with a teacher study group, found that one of the dominant themes in the stories and words of her teacher participants was "teaching as hope and possibility" (p. 53). Nieto (2003) writes:

> Hope is at the very essence of teaching. In all my years of working with teachers, I have found that hope is perhaps the one quality that all good teachers share…In spite of anger and impatience or the level of frustration and exhaustion that they experienced, most remained in teaching…because of hope. (p. 52)

The members of Nieto's study group were predominantly veteran teachers, teachers who had stayed in the classroom in spite of everything and who had remained vibrant and energized by the work of teaching and learning. It is equally as significant for our newest teachers to demonstrate a similar sense of hope and resilience. So much of the literature on the beginning years of teaching is fraught with stories of disillusioned novices, unsupportive colleagues, and the symptoms of "failing" schools, that the notion of hopefulness in beginning teachers goes unrecognized. Too often, I think, we imagine hope as a potential fortunate byproduct of a good year of teaching.

It is interesting to note here that Barbara and Meredith, the two participants with no formal teacher preparation, did not discuss their long-term vision of themselves as teachers. Though I hesitate to devise a correlation between their lack of formal preparation and their failure to demonstrate a "long haul attitude" in these interviews, I do believe that the benefit of a teacher preparation program provided some of the participants here with ways (language, solutions, scenarios, cohort support) to better articulate and understand their challenges as new teachers. By immersing them in school and teacher culture as apprentices before they were required to enter as professionals, teacher preparation seems to have afforded many of the participants with more patience for the complexities they faced as beginning teachers. Is it possible to teach hope and resilience in a teacher education program? Are hopeful, resilient people more likely to be drawn to classroom teaching?

DISCUSSION

Managing the Disequilibrium of the Self During the First Year of Teaching

> …I have come to feel that self-knowledge is a major fruit—perhaps the major fruit—of early teaching experience…intimately bound up with the struggle to understand and change the self. (Featherstone, 1993, p. 94)

As Featherstone (1993) indicates, the primary site of struggle for beginning teachers is the self. Each of the participants in this study, in fact, discussed their experiences

as teachers in terms of having to alter what they had previously believed or experienced in order to have success with their students. As Joyce (1984) points out below, our productive use of disequilibrium can lead us to integrate change into our lives:

> Important growth requires change. We have to give up our comfortable ways of thinking and survive the buffets of taking on unfamiliar ideas, skills, and values. The need to grow is built into the fiber of our being. We are impelled upward in a developmental sense. Paradoxically, however, we have an ingrained tendency to conserve our beings as they are or were…the answer is to produce disequilibrium—to create environments that impel us to change, not discarding what we were at any given stage, but learning to build on it productively. (p. 33)

By reflecting on their experience, the teachers in this study were able to recognize sites of dissonance and how they made meaning of that dissonance. The ability to develop new schema in response to disequilibrium is an invisible process for most beginning teachers. Through interviewing these ten beginning teachers, I have attempted to make these invisible processes visible. Tori, for example, continued to struggle, even at the end of her first year of teaching, with the notion of herself—a young, Asian woman—as an authority figure in a public institution. Tori's ability to reflect on and to continue to grapple with these competing parts of her identity illustrate how a novice teacher can *productively* use her state of disequilibrium as a site of struggle, growth, and new understanding.

The notion of productive disequilibrium as a theoretical framework for teacher development gets tricky for, in order to subscribe to it, we must necessarily learn to embrace, not to *fear*, change and discomfort in our lives. This is difficult for most of us to do. We tend to like to stay within our comfort zones and to be creatures of habit. Additionally, it is often hard for most of us to appreciate the process of struggle while we are immersed in it, to learn lessons from our mistakes while we are drowning in consequences.

For most beginning teachers, it is difficult to embrace a state of disequilibrium during the first year of teaching. Time and space and resources do not typically allow for it. And, beginning teachers are not naturally or necessarily equipped with the strategies or motivation to do so. Only after they had been granted a captive audience to reflect on that experience were these ten beginning teachers able to make sense of how they had managed the disequilibrium of their first year of teaching.

Teacher preparation programs and comprehensive mentoring programs are some of the critical venues where we can facilitate reflective practice for beginning teachers, encouraging and practicing this important habit of mind. Two of the ten participants in this study had no formal teacher preparation, nor did they participate

in comprehensive mentoring at their schools. I did not pursue how this lack of preparation affected their experiences directly, as my hope here was to show some commonalities in beginning teachers' lived experiences and not to compare groups. However, exploring the role teacher education programs play in developing beginning teachers' habits of mind and reflective practice is an important direction for subsequent research in this area.

CONCLUSION

> "…teacher education must address the difficulties of the embodiment
> of a teacher identity." (Alsup, 2006, p. 92)

When our novice teachers, upon experiencing their first few weeks in the classroom, say to us, "It's not what I thought it would be like," we need to push them to examine their sense of uncertainty and instability. "What is being called into question? How are your notions of teaching being challenged by what you are experiencing in your classroom? How are your ways of seeing yourself changing, as a teacher and as a learner?"

Historically, this type of "nudging" has not represented a way in to teacher education and teacher development. After all, we in Schools of Education are constantly outrunning the persistent notions that we are too "touchy feely" for the Academy or too "Mickey Mouse" to be considered rigorous or scholarly. This may be why, as Alsup (2006) observes, "in general, teacher educators are not comfortable discussing the emotional lives of students" (p. 92).

The message for teachers and teacher educators here is imperative: the psychological and social-emotional complexities of becoming a teacher are integral to a teacher's sense of herself and, it would follow, her effectiveness in the classroom. It is critical in teacher education that we intellectualize the complexities, the impending disequilibrium, of becoming a teacher (*How do you feel when someone challenges your authority?*) in the same ways we intellectualize the professional complexities of teaching English (*How do you engage students in reading Shakespeare?*).

In the increasingly complex world of schooling in the U.S, teachers need to be taught not only the methods to teach English to a diverse audience, but also methods and tools that can help them to better understand how and why their teacher selves come to be what they are. Life history, school context, worldview, and personality all play a part, as do mentorship, teacher education, and reflective practice.

Current trends in teacher preparation and development, namely increasing the significance of quantitative measures for teachers in this data driven era, would seem to run counter to the implications of this study, which show how crucial it is to the success of beginning teachers that we provide them with ways to make sense of their developing selves. In our haste to prioritize accreditation of our programs over

the psychic readiness of our newest teachers, have we left teaching as a way of being, as a way of thinking, off of our syllabi?

As part of the charge for colleges and universities to take more responsibility for the beginning years of teaching, we need to embrace and practice comprehensive pedagogies in teacher education that address the whole teacher—the emotional, intellectual, and developmental processes of becoming. We can acknowledge out loud the "dirty little secret" that teaching is a wholly human drama, played out on a public stage in the midst of the whirlwind of daily social interaction as well as systemic and social complexity. In doing so, we contextualize the need for our teachers to be reflective, intuitive, empathetic, sensitive, adaptive, and resilient, dispositions we should be cultivating and nurturing in our newest teachers.

REFERENCES

Alsup, J. (2006). *Teacher identity discourses: Negotiating personal and professional spaces*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Britzman, D. (1991). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Bullough, R. V., Jr., (1989). *First-year teacher: A case study*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Featherstone, H. (1993). Learning from the first years of classroom teaching: The journey in, the journey out. *Teachers College Record*, *95*(1), 93–112.

Feiman-Nemser, S. (2003, February). *The multiple meanings of teacher induction: Implications for policy and practice*. Address given at the Fifth Annual New Teacher Symposium, San Jose, CA.

Gallagher, C., & Stahlnecker, K. (2002, April). *Recreating teacher development through productive disequilibrium*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Gless, J., & Moir, E. (n.d.). *Supporting beginning teachers with heart and mind: A decade of lessons learned from the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project*. Retrieved November 24, 2002 from http://www.newteachercenter.org/articles.php?p=7

Intrator, S. (2006). Beginning teachers and the emotional drama of the classroom. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *57*(3), 232–239.

Jersild, A. (1955). *When teachers face themselves*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Joyce, B. (1984). Dynamic disequilibrium: The intelligence of growth. *Theory Into Practice*, *23*(1), 26–34.

Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency, and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *21*(8), 899–916.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.

Lortie, D. (1966). Teacher socialization: The Robinson Crusoe model. In H. Hermanowitz (Ed.), *The Real World of the Beginning Teacher*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards.

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Mitchell, C., & Weber, S. (1995). *That's funny! You don't look like a teacher. Interrogating images and identity in popular culture*. London: Falmer.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.

Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.

Ryan, K., Newman, K., Mager, G., Applegate, J., Lasley, T., Flora, R., & Johnston, J. (1980). *Biting the apple: Accounts of first-year teachers*. New York: Longman.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Smagorinsky, P., Cook, L.S., Moore, C., Jackson, A., & Fry, P. (2004). Tensions in learning to teach: Accommodation and the development of a teaching identity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *55*(1), 8–24.

Smagorinsky, P., Lakly, A., & Johnson, T. S. (2002). Acquiescence, accommodation, and resistance in learning to teach within a prescribed curriculum. *English Education*, *34*(3), 187–213.

Stark, S. (1989). *A phenomenological journey towards understanding the lifeworlds of two beginning teachers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland.

Stark, S. (1991). Toward an understanding of the beginning teacher experience: Curricular insights for teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, *6*(4), 294–311.

van Manen, M. (1984). Practicing phenomenological writing. *Phenomenology and Pedagogy*, *2*(1), 36–69.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Vinz, R. (1995). Opening moves: Reflections on the first year of teaching. *English Education*, *27*(3), 158–207.

Webb, M. (2005). Becoming a secondary-school teacher: The challenges of making teacher identity formation a conscious, informed process. *Issues in Educational Research*, *15*(2), 206–224, http://education.curtin.edu.au/iier/iier15/webb.html

Zeichner, K., & Tabachnick, R. (1985). The development of teacher perspectives: Social strategies and institutional controls in the socialization of beginning teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *11*(1), 1–25.

Zembylas, M. (2005). Discursive practices, genealogies, and emotional rules: A poststructuralist view on emotion and identity in teaching. *Teaching and teacher education*, *21*(2005), 935–948.