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# NEW TEACHERS SEEK SUPPORT

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IN THE EYES OF NEW TEACHERS,  
SOME PEOPLE ARE SUPPORTIVE AND  
OTHERS AREN'T.

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**O**ne day while I was waiting for a parent to arrive for a conference—it was going to be rough because the boy was going to be suspended—Mr. Brodbeck, my principal, came to my room. He told me that a very similar circumstance occurred to him when he was a first-year teacher. He had to face a parent and tell why his son was being suspended. He made me feel like I was not to blame for what had happened and that things were going to be OK. I guess this is just one more thing I will have to understand about being a teacher.



JANE H. APPLGATE,  
V. RANDALL FLORA,  
AND THOMAS J. LASLEY

**T**he first year of teaching has been likened to an expedition—a mission requiring courage, stamina, and a will to survive (Eddy, 1969; Fuller and Bown, 1975; Jersild, 1966). New teachers are challenged daily; they encounter people and situations they have not previously experienced. They discover the reality of school life and feel a sense of responsibility for all that occurs. The type of support and encouragement new teachers receive from the people around them is influential in shaping their attitudes about themselves as teachers. One way beginning teachers gauge such support (or lack thereof) is through interactions with others. What new teachers come to believe about themselves appears to be influenced by what they read into the contacts they make with other people. First-year teachers in particular appear highly self-conscious and sensitive to what others might think and feel about them.

Ryan and others (1977) conducted a large scale investigation of the development of 18 new teachers;

*Jane H. Applegate is Director of the Franklin County Teacher Center; V. Randall Flora is Staff Consultant, Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, Ohio Department of Education; and Thomas J. Lasley is Staff Consultant, Division of Teacher Education and Certification, Ohio Department of Education; all in Columbus, Ohio.*

six in the elementary grades, six in the middle grades, and six at the senior high level. The 18 teachers taught in 16 schools from six different school systems with diverse student populations. Each teacher was assigned to one of seven researchers who formally interviewed him or her several times during the school year. The teachers were observed for one hour twice a week during the first four weeks of school and two to four times per month thereafter. Contacts were also made by phone.

Noting that the teachers frequently distinguished between people who were supportive and those who were nonsupportive, the researchers constructed a framework of categories which appear to be descriptions of individuals but are actually composites. The categories are not mutually exclusive; that is, no single person could fit into one category nor could his/her relationship with the new teacher be considered static. The different types are presented here as descriptions of individuals to enhance clarity.

### Supportive Contacts

Six different types of supportive contacts were identified: Cooperators, Problem-solvers, Reinforcers, Advice-seekers, Socializer-Sunshiners, and Empathizer-Confidants. The supportive individuals, whether students or adults, are those who appear to make the life of the new teacher less stressful; they help rather than impede events in the new teachers' lives.

*Cooperators* respond to the needs, wishes, interests, or feelings of new teachers. They assist and encourage. Always willing to reciprocate, Cooperators ask frequently if there is anything they can do to make classroom life easier. Unobtrusively they recognize and respect the limits set by the first-year teachers.

Mr. DeSantis is really nice. He's the vice-principal in charge of discipline.

Whenever I have a discipline problem, I can send a note to the office and he'll come down to talk with the student. Like the other day, I'd tried everything I knew with Lisa and she was still off-the-wall. Well, Mr. DeSantis took her out of class and down to the office. He talked with her, and later on I did too. But getting her out of class just then was really helpful.

*Problem-solvers* are the persons, often supervisors or master teachers, who provide the informal knowledge necessary to teach effectively. Informal knowledge involves matters not

covered by administrators during orientation sessions at the beginning of the school year. Problem-solvers are always on hand to help, whether the new teacher is learning where the extra ditto paper is located, when to leave school for home, or how to schedule conferences with parents to ensure maximum attendance.

Miss Francis, the curriculum coordinator is very helpful. She knows the curriculum materials real well and can suggest many activities which might work in my classroom. I just feel comfortable going to her with problems.

*Reinforcers* acknowledge the beginning teacher's efforts and support them both emotionally and intellectually. Their presence, statements, or actions sustain the new teacher's personal and professional worth and accomplishments; they nourish a sense of well-being and satisfaction.

Yesterday I was eating lunch in the lounge with a group of the teachers. I'm usually quiet in there. One of the teachers said to me, "You must be feeling pretty good today." When I asked her why she said that, she said, "Didn't you hear what Mr. Wilson (the principal) said about you in the staff meeting? He said that Miss Knox is really doing a fine job for a first-year teacher." That really made me feel good.

*Advice-seekers* trust, respect, and value the new teacher's competence, and openly and honestly request assistance from the new teacher. Advice-seekers are not condescending or interested in being on top. They do not ask for advice in order to give it.

I'm back in study hall again. Barbara and I handle it together. Really, I handle it because Barbara doesn't do a very good job of it.

In September she and I were given the sixth period study hall. But the most students we ever had was 27. After a few months the numbers I had dwindled to less than 20, so the principal transferred me to lunchroom duty. I liked lunchroom duty; you don't have to insist on quiet and there are three other teachers there.

Well, Barbara was not able to handle study hall by herself, it seems, and she asked the principal to move me back to study hall: I was able to get order. Barbara cried. She said she felt really incompetent, not even able to get the control a first-year teacher could get.

*Socializer-Sunshiners* acknowledge the presence of the new teacher and attempt to engage him/her in conversation, school activities, and social activities. Socializers-Sunshiners foster camaraderie. They are optimistic about life and teaching, prompting the first-year teachers to feel energized and worthwhile.

Last week was really a hard week for me. I'd been having trouble with the students, and my husband was upset because I always came home tired and had papers to grade. Bill Sampson stopped by my room on Friday afternoon to give me a special invitation to TGIF with the faculty. He bolstered my spirits when he said, "As social committee chairman I beg you to come tip a few with us after school." He was so nice that I went and had a great time with everyone.

*Empathizer-Confidants* are trusted persons a first-year teacher can talk to about school and the feelings, beliefs, and aspirations associated with becoming a teacher. They provide an ear to the new teacher and create a nonjudgmental, open atmosphere so that the new teacher feels free to honestly speak feelings about his/her teaching experience. Empathizers-Confidants identify with and understand the beginner's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about the first year of teaching.

I'm pretty honest with the observer in my classroom. I've told him things that I wouldn't tell anyone else in the school. Because he knows what my class is like, he can understand what I'm talking about.

I've found him very helpful. When I need help with grades, he's able to make some good suggestions. He's always encouraging me. If I feel down, I can call him and talk it out. I talk and he talks. We spend a lot of time. I don't know who I'd go to without him.

### Nonsupportive Contacts

First-year teachers also interacted with many nonsupportive people during the year. It is not the role that makes an individual nonsupportive; it is whether he/she helps or hinders the professional growth of others. Six types of nonsupportive contacts are: Troublemakers, Double-Binders, Doubter-Embarrassers, Advice-Givers, Coldshoulder-Deflators, and Judge-Silencers.

*Troublemakers* react to the first-year teacher without considering his/her wishes, interests, or feelings. Typically, Troublemakers are students. They explore, test, and exploit limits set by the new teacher.

There is sometimes a sense of tension in Ann's (a student's) group. We all wait to see if she will behave badly or be rude. She has two people (Sally and Jill) who hate the way she picks on them and throws fits. The other day Ann accidentally hit Sally in the eye with an eraser. Sally went into a hysterical fit. I made Ann apologize and we went on with the class but the girls were visibly upset by the incident. During recess Ann kicked Sally on the playground and called her names. When she came back

to class, Ann, I think, pulled a chair out from under Jill and made her cry. I'm at my wit's end with that child.

**Double-Binders** promote confusion by communicating conflicting messages that create anxiety and doubt. The new teacher asks for assistance but ends up more confused: "The principal told me that my teaching was satisfactory. What does that mean? Does it mean my job is in jeopardy?" When conflicting signals are sent, the new teacher tends to fear the worst rather than anticipate the best. The Double-Binder creates self-doubt and blame rather than success and stability.

French III is making crepes, and one kid picked out Brandied Apple Crepes. The home economics teacher said I should ask the principal about it, so yesterday after school I went to him and explained the situation. I asked him what he thought about using brandy in school. He said he'd leave it up to me, but since I'm a first-year teacher he'd advise against it—some parents are just looking for an excuse to cause trouble.

**Doubter-Embarrassers** specialize in "put-downs." They question the new teacher's methods and promote anxiety with statements like, "You mean you are teaching those kids **FRAC-TIONS**?" or "Don't tell me you are going on a field trip with **THAT** class?" Doubter-Embarrassers question the new teacher's motives and worth. They demoralize and denigrate the novice by using subtle sarcasm and cynicism.

As Mr. Sharp walked past me he looked at the spelling papers and said, "Boy! They're not doing very well, are they?" I said, "No," but I thought, "What business is it of yours?" Then he commented on my using X's to mark the wrong ones. I hadn't thought of it, but I don't believe it makes very much difference what mark you use. Well, my kids were really doing poorly on the test, and I was upset enough as it was. Then when Mr. Sharp spied Jodi's paper marked with 14/20, he said, "Geez, Jodi was my best student last year. She always did better than this." Well, I had had enough. I collected my papers and went back to my room.

**Advice-Givers**, usually colleagues, provide unsolicited suggestions on how to teach, how to control students, and how to deal with parents. They make statements like, "We walk them in **STRAIGHT** lines here at Rosehill School," or instruct the new teacher about various techniques which could be (and should be) used to control unruly students.

On days like today when it seems like every minute with eighth period class is a



trial by fire. I can't even face Mrs. Bronowski (team teacher). I know how easily she handles students, and it is like being slapped in the face to try to explain to her my problems. She says to me, "Don't let the girls get away with rude behavior." So what do I do about it? There's the problem—if the children don't cooperate because they want to, there is really no "or else." And don't think they don't know it. When they start working me over, talking loudly, and on purpose, I get angry inside but also embarrassed and upset at their ability to behave so poorly in my classroom. I see it as a reflection of me, and Mrs. Bronowski seems so smug as she watches me struggle.

**Coldshoulder-Deflators** intentionally ignore the new teacher. Aloof, condescending, and often nonaffiliative, they plan afterschool parties to which only "in" teachers are invited, or they exclude the new teacher from special school events and social activities. Many are pessimists who approach life as a difficult, displeasing struggle, and deflate the hopes and aspirations of others. Sometimes through inaction (making no special efforts to reach out to the new teacher and make him/her feel welcome), a whole faculty can appear as Coldshoulder-Deflators.

I like to enjoy the people that I have to come face-to-face with every day, but here unless I go to the library for lunch, I can go through days and never see any of my fellow teachers. A lot of times when I go to the lunchroom, I don't put anything into the conversation just because I have nothing to say, and I'm a talker! I haven't really

felt a part of the faculty at all. Sometimes things will come up, and I don't even know they are supposed to be happening, or that we are going to do this or that, but it seems like everyone else is informed.

**Judge-Silencers** create discomfort and distrust. They discourage expressions of feeling and thought by verbal or nonverbal rejection of the new teacher. Often openly critical of a new teacher's behavior, they make the new teacher uncomfortable, engendering feelings of self-doubt.

Today I thought I had planned a really exciting lesson for the students. They worked in groups making up skits that they were going to put on in front of the class. The kids were a little noisy, I suppose but not out of hand. The last class was the worst of all. They were loud. After school as I was coming back upstairs from bus duty, Mrs. Walters, the group's homeroom teacher, stopped me in the hall and said she had something she thought I might be interested in. She took me to her room and gave me a set of papers she'd had the students write during study period about why they were so noisy in my class. That really hurt my feelings. I'll never be able to understand why she did that. I just took the papers and went back to my room and cried.

Sometimes people fail to recognize how their actions are interpreted by others. The contacts and categories we have described may serve to make administrators, teacher educators, and fellow teachers more attuned to the effects of their behavior on new teachers. If they become more supportive, they will be contributing to a healthier school environment.

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