

## Why We Accept the Challenge

I've been involved with science teacher preparation most of my career, first as a cooperating teacher and now as a science teacher educator. The opportunity for a preservice science teacher to learn teaching strategies under the guidance and supervision of an experienced veteran is clearly an important aspect of training. However, in order to provide helpful guidance for our teacher education students, it is imperative that an adequate pool of qualified teachers serves as mentors. These ranks are the hardworking, caring, committed teachers who volunteer their valuable time and energy training the science educators of tomorrow. Because veteran teachers make such valuable contributions to the professional development of preservice teachers, perhaps we should examine the mentor role through the eyes of a cooperating teacher.

The responsibility of a cooperating teacher is demanding and time consuming. A good cooperating teacher must assume many roles: mentor, teacher, model, evaluator, colleague, supporter, friend, and parent. So if the job is so challenging, why do we do it? Most cooperating teachers recognize the value of the student teaching experience in the professional development of the new teacher. I chose to serve as a cooperating teacher because of my desire to share my classroom, students, and passion for teaching with those just entering the profession.

What can we—students, student teachers, and teachers—learn from each other in the process? How can all of us work together to create a learning and growing environment? What are our individual roles in this transformation process?

The uncertainty and fluidity between cooperating teachers, student teachers, and students in the classroom relationship can be disconcerting. For the teachers and students used to a particular rhythm and flow in the classroom, the introduction of another adult seems disruptive. Previously established interaction patterns are broken, and all parties struggle to define new ones. Experienced cooperating teachers are aware of this and can help smooth the student teacher's transition from observer to practitioner.

Just as classroom teachers must quickly get to know their students, they must likewise get to know their student teachers. This is critical to a successful working relationship. Cooperating teachers are ulti-

mately responsible for what their students learn. In this age of standardized testing and other accountability measures, experienced teachers are justified being nervous about turning over the classrooms to novices. How does one go about determining the amount and type of support the student teacher needs? This process constantly must be negotiated as the student teacher gains confidence. If this is not done, a mismatch can occur between the expectations of the cooperating teacher and student teacher.

If the job of being a cooperating teacher is so difficult, why do veteran teachers continue to open their classrooms to preservice teachers year after year? In most schools, scheduling often prohibits the opportunity to work closely with colleagues. We generally spend our planning time correcting papers, prepping labs, and getting ready to teach. Welcoming a student teacher into the classroom provides opportunities to share and develop ideas that an overworked teacher most likely does not have the time or energy to contemplate alone.

Another benefit of working with preservice teachers is the opportunity to unpack the job of teaching. Getting back to the basics forces us to critically evaluate the decisions we make regarding our strategies. Are the choices we make out of habit and experience still appropriate? What new knowledge is out there that may cause us to change what we do for our students? Preservice teachers bring with them information on current research in both content and pedagogy. Cooperating teachers can seize the opportunity to incorporate this into their teaching, thereby assuming the role of learner.

I want to thank all of the student teachers over the years who spent some time in my classroom. I have learned so much from them about what it means to be a good teacher. In the long run, it is the students who benefit. Maybe this is the genuine reason we embrace preservice teachers.

*Michele Cheyne  
Instructor and Doctoral Student  
University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*