Preparing student teachers for the classroom should include practice with support and guidance from a skilled mentor teacher. Although hard data are difficult to come by, it seems student teachers are most often assigned mentors more or less at random. The university where I earned my teacher certification in secondary social studies takes a different approach, known as mutual selection: interns begin the school year observing and assisting in different classes.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, interns ask one or two teachers to be their mentor(s). Those teachers can accept or decline the placement. During my first month, I spent a lot of time in the classrooms of two high school social studies teachers. Mr. Hayes taught American History. He took a businesslike approach to teaching, and he taught me how to grade student work efficiently. When students misbehaved, he brought them into the hallway where he would discuss the problem, instruct the students to change their behavior, and shake their hands before they returned to the classroom together. Mr. Raymond’s World History classroom looked traditional, but his teaching style got everyone up and out of their seats to work together on projects. He was widely adored. On the first day of school, he was two minutes late entering the classroom because so many of his former students had stopped to give him hugs and say hello. I was certain I would ask Mr. Raymond and Mr. Hayes to be my mentors.

In late September, my internship supervisor shared devastating news: I had to observe in the middle school. In my experience, middle schools were horrible places filled with unhappy students. To my surprise, it was wonderful! The kids were happy and enthusiastic. The social studies content was engaging—ancient world cultures and geography. And I discovered Ms. Brook, who used humor in her teaching, storytelling as an alternative to lecture, and project-based learning; she managed her classroom with a firm yet caring approach. I quickly decided that I would like to student teach with Mary Brook.

From January to May, Mary and I taught three classes of 8th-grade world cultures and two classes of 7th-grade geography. She proved to be a true mentor, even after I left her classroom. During my difficult first year teaching in a tough inner-city school, I was overwhelmed by the discipline issues I faced. Mary spent more than two hours with me on the phone after my first day in my own classroom.

In a traditional teacher-training program, I would have been asked before beginning my internship only to indicate a preference for a middle- or high-school placement. My request would unequivocally have been for a high-school assignment, and I would not have been assigned to Mary. With traditional student teaching assignments, university administrators or school districts assign pre-service teachers to in-service teachers with little or no knowledge of either person’s personality or teaching style. Not surprisingly, many mentoring relationships are strained and troubled. Today, as a student teacher supervisor, I see few genuine mentoring relationships develop between student teachers and randomly assigned mentors.

Ideally, a mentor offers support while communicating clear, meaningful feedback specifically designed to help the student teacher improve her practice. Such a “critical friendship” develops most easily when the mentor and student teacher have compatible teaching styles and personalities. Mutual selection allows student and mentor teachers who are already acquainted, and know they are compatible, to agree to work together, making a successful partnership far more likely.

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