

How Mentoring a Student-Teacher Got Me Through the Five-Year Itch

By Sydney Chaffee

One January afternoon, I sat at the back of my own classroom trying to be invisible while my student-teacher, Mollie, led a vocabulary lesson. "Sydney," a student whispered. "Can I go to the bathroom?" (Students call teachers by their first names at our school; it's a way we try to build a culture of shared power and respect.)

"Ask Mollie," I replied quietly. "She's in charge."

"But I don't want to interrupt," she said. I smiled. My student-teacher had, despite quite a bit of boundary-testing from students, nurtured and maintained an orderly classroom where students came to learn.

Six weeks earlier, when Mollie took over my 9th grade humanities class, she'd stood shakily at the front of the classroom, apologetic about asking students to learn. She fretted over discipline and forgot to take attendance. She reminded me of me when I first started out.

The previous August, facing the looming specter of my fifth year as a full-time teacher, I'd been worried. A lot of teachers fall victim to burnout at the five-year mark, shuffling around spouting cynical adages at idealistic first-year teachers before abandoning the field. Four years at my school had convinced me that I wanted to keep teaching, but I felt burnout creeping in. I worked every weekend and felt tired all the time. I cried during meetings with my principal. I convinced myself I was the worst teacher alive, doing irreparable damage to young brains. I needed a break before teaching broke me.

I decided that mentoring a student-teacher was a great plan for taking the pressure off. "I'm going to be able to relax!" I explained to my mom. "And I'll have another set of hands in the classroom."

"It's a lot of work," she said. "It'll make you busier."

I shrugged off her warning, imagining myself calm, happy, and wise.

Needless to say, I've realized that having a student-teacher is a lot of work, but it's a refreshing and different kind of work. Working with Mollie helped me hold a mirror up to my own growth and gave me energy to keep getting better at my job.

Reflective Practice

At the beginning of the year, Mollie and I set up a weekly schedule: one meeting where I set the agenda and one where she did. Mollie's meeting agendas were fraught with panic: piles of grading, kids' confusion, her own fatigue.

I didn't want my meetings to focus on what was going wrong, so instead I used them to ask Mollie to reflect more broadly on her practice. "Whose teaching style do you admire?" I asked. "What are

your goals as an educator?" I pushed her to acknowledge small successes and analyze how other teachers tackled the issues she faced. These conversations told me how Mollie saw herself when she wasn't mid-crisis. They helped her acknowledge what she was learning, how she was growing, and where she'd like to go.

Hearing Mollie's reflections made me reflect on my own growth. Five years before Mollie walked into my classroom, I'd struggled with behavior management, too. Student actions sent me into emotional tailspins. At the time, my own mentor had showed me that their choices were usually not about me at all. "What's really going on with that kid?" she'd ask. "What is he trying to get from you, and why does he need that?" These conversations were revolutionary for me. I worked to remain emotionally detached from behavioral problems. *This is not about me* became my mantra. Now, Mollie struggled to maintain control of an unruly classroom and asked me, "Why are they doing this? I just want to teach them!"

"Remember," I said, "this is not about you." We had a long talk about students' motives and techniques for addressing their behavior. It was as if I were sitting across from my younger self, reassuring her: *You can do this*. Reflection time is hard to carve out of a full teaching schedule. It's also an invaluable tool for gaining perspective. Our talks forced Mollie to think about more than her failures and to see teaching as an ongoing learning process, and they showed me how far I'd come.

Learning by Mentoring

But that year wasn't all about congratulating myself on how much I'd learned. While Mollie battled through her first year, I, too, had to learn new skills. As student-teacher, Mollie was also my special education inclusion associate, charged with ensuring that we met the needs of students with individualized education plans. She pulled students out for one-on-one reviews, helped me think through differentiated lessons, and reported students' progress on IEP goals back to parents each trimester. When Mollie took charge of the class, we switched jobs. Now, as the inclusion associate, I saw what creating an inclusive classroom entailed. I recorded audiobooks, modified assignments, and untangled misconceptions. I had more time to work closely with individual students, and was then able to design more effective interventions. Not being the primary disciplinarian helped me see that certain disruptive students were just overwhelmed by the material.

As the inclusion associate, I also spent a lot of time unsure of Mollie's expectations for me. Having not thought about what role she wanted me to play, she often told me to "just jump in whenever kids need help." I stood in the back of the room feeling useless and frustrated. But then it clicked: Mollie had learned this from me. I'd taken my inclusion associates for granted, letting them languish in the back of the classroom, devaluing their particular expertise. I'd failed to thoughtfully write them into my plans. In the process, I had denied myself a valuable co-teacher.

Ultimately, that is the greatest lesson I learned during my year with Mollie: Mentor teacher and student-teacher should learn and teach together. Yes, the official paperwork said that I was to guide her through the perilous world of teaching: I would "teach her how to teach." Aside from that being a ridiculously tall order for one person (and one year), it's one-sided. Mollie taught me so much. She is now an accomplished teacher in her own classroom, and I am working with my third student-teacher in as many years.

The lessons I learned working with Mollie have made me a more effective mentor teacher. I now begin each year by working through a sample lesson plan with my student-teacher, discussing our respective roles at each point in the lesson. For the first few weeks, I ask my student-teacher to annotate a copy of the lesson plan with reminders about what he or she should do during each activity. We think through different accommodations that will help students access the material, modify reading assignments together to make our thought processes explicit to one another, observe each other teach, and debrief on what we see.

Having had time to evaluate my *own* practice, I now strive to make my classroom a site of learning, growth, and reflection—not just for my students, and not just for my student-teacher, but for myself as well. My mom was right. Having a student-teacher is a lot of work. But it is good work, and it energizes me. It reminds me of the excitement and optimism that led me into teaching, and, now that I've passed that five-year mark, it keeps pushing me toward new milestones.