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As Apprentices in Classroom, Teachers Learn What Works

By MOTOKO RICH OCT. 10, 2014

OAKLAND, Calif. — Monica DeSantiago wondered how in the world she would get the students to respect her.

It was the beginning of her yearlong apprenticeship as a math teacher at Berkley Maynard Academy, a charter school in this diverse city east of San Francisco. The petite, soft-spoken Ms. DeSantiago, 23, had heard the incoming sixth graders were a rowdy bunch.

She watched closely as Pamela Saberton, a teacher with seven years' experience in city public schools and Ms. DeSantiago's mentor for the year, strolled the room. Ms. Saberton rarely raised her voice, but kept up a constant patter as she recited what the students were doing, as in, "Keion is sitting quietly," or "Reevan is working on her math problems."

To Ms. DeSantiago, the practice seemed unnatural, if not bizarre. But the students quieted and focused on a getting-to-know-you activity, writing down their hobbies and favorite foods.

Over the coming year, Ms. Saberton would share dozens of such strategies with Ms. DeSantiago, one of 29 prospective teachers earning a small stipend while participating in a residency program run by Aspire Public Schools, a charter system with schools in California and Memphis.

The idea is that teachers, like doctors in medical residencies, need to practice repeatedly with experienced supervisors before they can be responsible for classes on their own. At Aspire, mentors believe that the most important thing that novice teachers need to master is the seemingly unexciting — but actually quite complex — task of managing a classroom full of children. Once internalized, the thinking goes, such skills make all the difference between calm

and bedlam, and can free teachers to focus on student learning.

With its lengthy and intense mentorship, the Aspire model, one of a number of such programs emerging across the country, is a radical departure from traditional teacher training, which tends to favor theory over practice.

Over the last school year, The New York Times dipped into the classrooms where three residents trained, witnessing their choppy road through setbacks and successes.

Tackling Assignments

A month before school was to start, Ms. DeSantiago, a Fort Worth native and Brown University graduate, sat in a conference room with the nine other Aspire residents who were assigned to Bay Area schools.

Kristin Gallagher, the director of the residency program, stepped forward.

“There are going to be days when you’re wondering, ‘Why am I doing this?’ ” she said. “But getting back up and getting back in that classroom — that grit is what will make you successful.”

Among the fresh-faced residents was Bianka Mariscal, 22, the first college graduate in her family and an alumna of the Aspire elementary school in East Palo Alto where she was assigned to teach. As a sixth grader, she had helped classmates who were learning English.

David Nutt, 26, a Dartmouth graduate who had been home-schooled with his three younger siblings while the family sailed around the world, came to the residency after a year teaching Palestinian fourth graders in the West Bank.

He was assigned to teach 10th graders biology as well as 12th-grade anatomy and physiology, a subject he had never personally studied but figured he could master. After all, he had learned Arabic in college and gone on to use it in his teaching.

His first challenge, though, was to develop a rapport with students.

On the third day of school at Aspire California College Preparatory Academy in Berkeley, he followed the lead of his mentor, Jai David, a fourth-year teacher, and stood at the door of the classroom after lunch.

He held up a fist to bump as each student filed in. Several teenagers avoided eye contact, skulking past.

Ms. David, a popular teacher whose filing cabinet was papered with notes

from former students, ceded the class to Mr. Nutt. Originally, he had planned a 25-minute lesson about different styles of learning. Ms. David, now in her second year as a mentor, had advised him to trim the lesson to 10 minutes.

After showing YouTube clips from “Rain Man” (an example of someone who learns visually), “Kung Fu Panda” (learning by doing), and “My Fair Lady” (learning through listening), he opened the discussion to students.

Many slouched silently. Ms. David whispered to Mr. Nutt that he should draw from a can of Popsicle sticks, each with a name on it, and call on random students. That revved up the conversation a little.

About 200,000 new teachers enter classrooms every year, many not prepared for the jobs that await them.

In traditional teacher training programs on college campuses, candidates pay tuition and spend most of their time in courses studying educational theory. And in short, mostly unpaid, student teaching assignments, candidates are teamed haphazardly with mentors of varying experience.

More young college graduates and career switchers are entering the profession through alternative programs such as Teach for America or the Teaching Fellows, and receive even less practical teacher training than students in standard programs.

According to a 2014 review of teacher preparation programs by the National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit group, just more than a third gave them feedback on techniques for managing classrooms.

The most polarized debates about education have centered on higher academic standards and laws mandating that teacher evaluations incorporate student test scores. But the United States Department of Education is also focusing on the quality of teacher preparation programs.

It has designated $35 million in grants this year to help colleges and school districts develop new teacher training, prioritizing residencies like Aspire’s.

At Aspire, where most students come from low-income families, residents spend four days a week in a single classroom working with a mentor from late summer through the end of the school year. On the fifth day, they take seminars, role-playing typical situations and deconstructing videos while practicing almost scripted approaches to teaching. If they complete the program, they each earn a

master's degree and a teaching credential through a partnership with a local university.

Critics say mentors in charter networks have not taught long enough to gain the true wisdom of experience. They also argue that the training approach disregards the intuition that undergirds classroom culture, flattening teaching to its most mechanical.

Aspire leaders say they do not coerce trainees into a narrow model but give them tools, much as a surgeon shows a resident the best ways to conduct an appendectomy or a coronary bypass.

Battling Self-Doubt

At Berkley Maynard Academy, where eight out of 10 students receive free or reduced-price lunches and a quarter are learning English as a second language, Ms. DeSantiago felt her confidence growing.

Ms. Saberton would give her a simple objective, like "teach the students how to find the area of a circle," and Ms. DeSantiago would create a lesson in which students wrote geometric equations of shapes on a map of the Oakland Zoo. As she narrated the students' behavior, they responded with respect.

But on the first day Ms. DeSantiago stepped into the class alone, she felt like a substitute thrust into a hostile room. Many students disregarded her efforts to quiet them and stood up to grab a tissue or asked to go to the bathroom.

Even more painful, she felt she was letting down the cooperative students. "I felt like they were looking at me and thinking, 'Why can't you control the classroom?' " she said.

That night, when her boyfriend, Ben Leib, a software engineer at Twitter, arrived home to their apartment in Oakland, Ms. DeSantiago's face was blotchy from crying. All she wanted was to be a teacher. Now she worried that she was not any good at it.

Ms. Saberton swooped in with some practical tips. One afternoon, she cued up music by the Jackson 5 on her laptop, handed Ms. DeSantiago a textbook and told her to read loudly enough to be heard over the song "ABC" as it blasted from the back of the room. During class, she reminded Ms. DeSantiago to speak firmly by holding up a whiteboard with the word "voice" written on it.

At East Palo Alto Charter School, Ms. Mariscal fumbled to explain academic

content when her mentor, Sarah Steinke Portnov, was out of the room.

One morning after recess, she began a subtraction lesson. Wearing a sparkly silver top hat, she drew a number line on the whiteboard. But as she scrawled semicircles on top of the line, her pen repeatedly landed on the wrong numbers. Flustered, Ms. Mariscal erased her muddled work.

Hearing of the episode, Ms. Portnov urged Ms. Mariscal to let students see that mistakes are an integral part of learning. And during once-a-week debriefing sessions, Ms. Portnov acted the role of a student while Ms. Mariscal explained pictures and graphs.

At schools with a high concentration of poor students, many of the children are at risk for various academic and social problems that rookie teachers are ill-prepared to handle. Yet according to an analysis by the Education Trust, a nonprofit group that works to close achievement gaps, first-year teachers are assigned almost twice as frequently to schools with high rates of poverty as to schools in affluent neighborhoods.

Unseasoned teachers tend to leave quickly, leading to a damaging cycle of turnover in high-poverty schools. Part of the goal of the residency is to give neophyte teachers baseline competence. “Better preparing them meets a lot of the challenges that burn people out,” said James Willcox, the chief executive of Aspire.

Aspire — which as a charter network can raise private dollars on top of public money — pays its residents $13,500 a year and spends an additional $15,000 per resident to cover other costs, including health insurance and stipends to mentors. In the Bay Area, the residents pay $10,000 tuition for courses through a partnership with the University of the Pacific in Stockton. (Residents who continue teaching for at least three years are partly reimbursed.)

According to Urban Teacher Residency United, which tracked 2,700 graduates from 17 residency programs around the country, 82 percent were still teaching after five years. Since Aspire started its residency program four years ago, it has hired 82 residents, 73 of whom are still teaching within the charter network.

Mr. Willcox, a former Army helicopter pilot, wants to build a long-lasting teaching corps. But he acknowledged that many of the people attracted to the

schools are ambitious to take on leadership positions, while others are worn down by classroom teaching. Five of the 10 Bay Area mentors at Aspire, all in their early 30s, accepted new jobs as administrators for this school year.

Mr. Nutt was often up by 4:30 in the morning and working until 10 at night. Still, Ms. David was frustrated that his lesson plans for anatomy class did not always meet her standards.

The students, too, could detect Mr. Nutt's shaky knowledge. When they raised their hands and Mr. Nutt started to respond to questions, some students demurred, saying: "Actually, I have a question for Ms. David."

All year, the mentors toggled between the desire to give the residents practice while making sure their missteps did not hurt students.

"This is these kids' future, and it's really hard to see a lesson fail," said Ms. Portnov.

Many of the residents had been high achievers most of their lives. Teaching represented one of the first times that they could not simply follow the recipe and end up with a delicious cake.

"They are working all weekend long and late nights and putting in the time," said Ms. Gallagher, the residency director. "They're not always being successful. That's been a really hard thing to grapple with."

In late January, the residents in the Bay Area were dealt a blow when one of them abruptly left the program. Unbeknown to the others, Ms. Gallagher had put her on probation because the resident could not control her class.

Finally, Ms. Gallagher decided the resident simply would not be able to fly solo by the fall.

Ms. DeSantiago, who had an inkling of the difficulties, took the news hard. "Most of us have been struggling and relying on sheer devotion and passion for helping students learn," she said. It was frightening to contemplate that that might not be enough.

Finding the Right Fit

Mr. Nutt was beginning to miss working with younger children, recalling his days in the West Bank. Ms. Gallagher also decided it was too challenging for an inexperienced teacher to master a new subject while also learning the basic ropes of classroom management.

In January, she transferred Mr. Nutt to an elementary classroom at Monarch Academy in northeast Oakland. The move was a bit of a risk, because his new mentor, Rebecca Lee, had just two years of teaching experience.

But right away elementary school was a more natural fit. The students quickly bonded with him. In the mornings, when Mr. Nutt arrived on the playground to greet students, every single one of them responded to his upraised palm with a high five and a smile.

One March morning, Mr. Nutt jotted division equations on a white board and the students eagerly volunteered to check the work using multiplication. Ms. Lee, who had gone through a residency herself, filmed him on a Flip video camera and an iPad Mini.

After school, Ms. Lee showed Mr. Nutt the videos. He realized he had dominated the lesson and needed to give the students more time to grapple with math concepts on their own. The pair worked on a plan to double the student talk time.

While such coaching could border on micromanagement, Mr. Nutt appreciated the pragmatic approach.

“I didn’t want to be making and continually struggling to find the best practices through trial and error,” he said.

By spring, most of the residents seemed more assured. One March day, Ms. Mariscal wore a necktie, introducing herself as Roald Dahl, the English children’s author. When she asked a student to “let me have your eyes on me, sir,” the children erupted in giggles.

At night, Ms. Mariscal had been taking home the teacher’s guide to the third-grade math curriculum, searching online for child-friendly definitions of words like “product” and “multiple.”

At Berkley Maynard, the students credited Ms. DeSantiago with improvement.

“At the beginning, she seemed kind of shy,” said Jeremiah Lewis, 11, during a break between classes one spring morning. “But she learned how to become strict and how to get what she wants.”

Four years into the residency program, principals at Aspire had seen previous graduates flourishing and were eager to hire the new trainees.

Mr. Nutt secured a spot teaching third grade again at Monarch, while Ms. Mariscal accepted a job teaching first grade at East Palo Alto, her alma mater.

There were no openings at Berkley Maynard, so Ms. DeSantiago applied for jobs at other Aspire campuses, and was invited to give a sample lesson at Golden State College Preparatory Academy, a school for sixth through 12th graders in Oakland.

When she asked the class for names, one boy gave her an alias. Channeling all that Ms. Saberton had taught her, she looked him in the eye. “I’d really like you to give me your name,” she said firmly. This time, he complied.

The rest of the lesson went smoothly, as she explained the mathematical concept of scale factor using a childhood photograph of herself with her sister. The students were hooked by her mix of personal and practical. At the end of class, she handed out a short quiz, and 22 of the 24 students made the correct calculations.

A few days later, a job offer arrived.

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