Getting Ready to Interview

Personal Reflection, Picking the Right Path, and Interview Readiness

In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honor and the highest responsibility anyone could have.

—Lee Iacocca

"I want my résumé to be the one you remember. It's also available as a music video, interpretive dance, and a haiku."
After much time, thought, and effort, you are ready to begin a new, exciting career. Perhaps you have longed for this type of position for years, or maybe the yearning to work with young people is relatively new. Wherever you are on this journey toward becoming a teacher, it is essential that you take some time to reflect upon what you’ve done to reach this place in life and how you’d like to see yourself develop as a professional in the days, weeks, and years ahead of you.

After finishing your education courses as well as the practicum and student teaching experiences, you may still feel unprepared to be in charge of your own classroom. You know that you’ve done a tremendous amount of work to get ready for this adventure, but you’re uncertain about how you’ll be as a leader. Don’t worry; you are not alone in these concerns. Most individuals who have entered the field of education have experienced similar apprehension. Remember, some anxiety can be a plus because it encourages all of us to grow and stretch in areas that we might normally tend to avoid.

Once you have been hired for a particular position, you will have much to accomplish before you embark upon the actual work of teaching young people. Although this process is seldom discussed in education courses due to time constraints, I believe the most essential “first step,” before you even interview for a teaching job, is to spend several hours reflecting upon who you are as an individual and professional. Without being fully aware of your own strengths and weaknesses, you will more than likely struggle in some significant ways during the early part of your new career.

Here’s an analogy that should help you understand this point. Before expert backpackers set out on a hike, they take an in-depth analysis of the trip that they are about to undertake. Based upon the path to be traveled, they assess their own abilities to reach the end successfully. If one of the hikers has a weak ankle, he or she will wear certain shoes and pack equipment accordingly. If another of the adventurers tends to get dehydrated, he’ll back extra water. If the sun will be out, those with sensitive skin will generously apply sunscreen.

No matter how many trips these backpackers have made in the past, they will spend time assessing their strengths and weaknesses for this particular journey. How about you? How prepared
are you for this new venture in life? Is your resume in good shape? Have you reviewed the types of questions that might be asked during an interview? Do you know what your abilities are? And what about the more personal aspects of who you are? Are you aware of how your upbringing, culture, and community play a role in how you interact with others? All of these essential aspects make up the real “you” and, most importantly, will impact how you relate to the students that will be part of your classroom.

TEACHER, KNOW THYSELF

An accurate assessment of who we are as individuals is rarely ever done in life, especially when we’re about to start a new career! One of the main reasons is time. Most of us are so busy living life that we don’t have any spare minutes left over for self-reflection and analysis. In addition, you have been focused on completing all of the requirements to attain your teaching credential as well as a position; it is a miracle that you still have energy left over to read this book! Don’t stress if you feel that this is one more thing to add to your “to do” list. The advice that I’m offering should be painless, and the effort that you invest in these endeavors now will benefit you greatly in the days ahead.

Reflection

Part of this self-assessment process will involve stretching and struggling in areas that you may not have experienced before, and the best of our seasoned educators will tell you that an important aspect of this involves interpersonal experiences and self-reflection. Spending time now understanding more about who you are as an individual will not only help you become a better person, but it will also aide in your development as a professional. And, as I can tell you from my own experiences, it will help you avoid mistakes as you relate to students, parents, and co-workers down the road.

As you begin to reflect, try to remember what it was like for you when you were growing up. Where did you live during your first ten years of life? What was the community and culture like? Who were your main caregivers? What type of values did your
parents, grandparents, teachers, and even community members try to instill in you?

**Learning Preferences**

I’d also like you to consider the style of learning that you experienced when you went to elementary school. Were there certain teachers who impacted you more than others? Which ones, and why? The reason that I ask this is that many educators enter this profession because of a particular teacher (or teachers) who greatly influenced their lives. Often, we will find that our own philosophy of education or style of instruction may reflect these influences in our development.

Spend some time thinking about the way that you tend to learn new information. For example, are you a visual learner? Do you prefer to see something written down or in picture form before someone tells you about it? If you are the type who likes to read the instruction manual before you program the VCR, you are probably a visual person. Or do you need new data explained to you? People who enjoy listening to the radio, cassettes, and CDs are often auditory learners. There are some individuals who are more “hands-on,” which educational experts would call kinesthetic learners. You would rather take something apart, then put it back together again by yourself. Reading a manual or having someone talk you through the job would be a waste of time, since you learn by doing.

Once you have identified which of the three types of learners you are—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—you will begin to understand why you typically develop your lesson plans the way you do. While it is beneficial for you to work within your area of expertise and comfort, you also need to be aware that this may be a mismatch for some of your students. If you are an auditory person, and you give most of your class directions orally, the visual learners can easily become lost in the process. If you always make presentations with overheads or use the lecture method, those students who learn better by doing will become bored and, possibly, unruly.

**Multiple Intelligences**

The style in which you or your students learn is only one of the educational considerations that must be understood when we
discuss how people acquire and process information. Another recent theory developed by a professor from Harvard University is that of multiple intelligences. Dr. Howard Gardner contends that there are many areas of intelligence and that learners can be “gifted” in one or more of these main categories: mathematical-logical, linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intra-personal intelligences. Recent investigations suggest that emotional, naturalistic, and existential intelligence could be added to this list (Gardner, 2000). A wonderful resource for teachers by Thomas Armstrong is *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Armstrong, 2000; see Appendix B, Recommended Reading). This book will not only allow you to analyze your own strengths and weaknesses, but it will also help you gather ideas on how to fully address the giftedness in all of your students.

**Cultural Heritage and Diversity**

Another personal assessment to undertake before you actually begin teaching involves reflecting on your own culture, ethnicity, and family heritage. I believe that this will be an unusual and perhaps daunting task for many of us. While some families may have lost part of their cultural identity because of the “melting pot” philosophy that has been prevalent in the United States for decades, many individuals and ethnic groups are now attempting to get in touch with their cultural roots. This may involve talking to grandparents or other members of the family, or you may have to investigate old family albums and genealogy records. Knowing our cultural heritage is essential to having a strong sense of who we are as individuals.

Realize that all cultural influences play a part in what makes you unique as well as how you approach others. The only reason that other people’s practices seem unusual to us is that we often compare them to our own! *When you accept the distinctive qualities of your background, ethnicity, language, and heritage, you will be much more open and accepting of the cultural differences of others.*

As most of us are aware, the demographics of our student populations have changed dramatically in the United States during the past several decades. This is also true in many other industrialized nations around the globe. In numerous cities across America, the “minority” groups have become the majority, so it is essential
that today’s teachers not only understand about culture but also create positive connections with students from diverse backgrounds (Darling-Hammond et al., 1999; Garcia, 1994). If you are interested in learning more about diversity as well as finding ways to educate children from a multicultural perspective, I suggest reading Dr. James Banks’ text *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice* (Banks, 1994; see Appendix B, Recommended Reading). As you delve deeper into these issues, you will be better prepared to work with the diverse students who will comprise your classroom. (We’ll look at this topic in more detail in Chapter 5.)

**PROFESSIONALISM**

In addition to reflecting upon your own background and culture, you should begin to visualize yourself as a professional in the field of education. Although you may be leaving the university, a business position, the military, or some other occupation to become a teacher, this new position will have its own particular demands. Indeed, the complex and multifaceted tasks that most educators balance on a daily basis are more than many doctors, lawyers, or engineers would be willing to handle!

**Beware of Cynicism!**

Even though teaching is highly valued by many in our society, unfortunately, there will be many negative forces that you will have to confront as you journey through your career. Plenty of people will cross your path who may try to devalue your new profession; you may have already met some of them during your college experience. They say things like, “You want to be a teacher? What for?” or, “Of all the jobs that you could have picked, you want to work with lots of kids for little money?” It’s hard to smile in the face of such cynicism, although you can let these doubters know that teacher salaries have been on a steady increase since the 1990s (*NCES Digest of Education Statistics, 1999*). Besides, no amount of money can compare to the benefit of helping young people succeed in life. Many people who are not part of this wonderful profession will never understand that fact!
Confidence

An enormous struggle for new teachers is cultivating the confidence needed in this challenging career. Every novice employee has these same feelings to some degree, but not everyone will have to face thirty or more inquisitive faces each morning that may also be wondering if you’re good enough for this position. If the kids aren’t thinking this, then their parents probably are! Self-confidence is essential from the very beginning. You have selected this career because you enjoy it, and obviously you have the skills and expertise in your subject area or you wouldn’t have received a credential. Recognize your assets and abilities, and regularly remind yourself of them when you start to feel a little shaky. (This is one good reason to hang your diplomas, credentials, and other documents in your classroom; sometimes you need a visible reminder of just how far you’ve come in life!)

I’ll be the first to admit to you that teaching isn’t easy. Today’s educators must be knowledgeable in numerous areas as well as be able to relate information at a moment’s notice. There is also an enormous amount of pressure placed upon teachers regarding pupil performance, test scores, and preparation as citizens of the future. You will have many more responsibilities than Plato ever dreamed of when he taught in the “outdoor school” centuries ago (Lee, 1987).

COMMITMENT

Another vital aspect of teaching is that you must truly love the job that you do. Sure, there will be days when you wish that you had chosen dentistry or interior design, but overall you should find pleasure in the mere fact that you get to work with kids. After all, they truly are our national treasures! Though young people can be trying at times (especially when they can’t seem to sit still), for the most part they are willing to adapt to anything you want them to do. Students almost innately want to please and perform for their teachers, so gain their respect early on and you’ll be able to accomplish great things!

You have probably known a teacher who didn’t like his or her job. This is tragic, because the students are usually well aware of these feelings. Some people entered this profession merely to have
a “secure” position that paid decently. Others may have been highly motivated when they started teaching, but somewhere along the road they “burned out” and couldn’t (or wouldn’t) leave. Don’t let this happen to you! If you are already wondering whether or not this is the right job for you, then spend more time pondering your career choice. If you are questioning your commitment to this profession now, you may grow to hate it down the road. Sadly, that’s when both you and the students will suffer.

You will never regret setting aside a weekend or several quiet afternoons in order to think about some of the questions and concepts in this chapter. After some self-analysis, you will not only be more aware of who you are as a person and professional, but you will also be more certain of how your life experiences will affect your relationship with your students. Resolve to spend quality time reflecting on these ideas so that you can take the next important steps toward becoming an exceptional teacher.

**PLANNING YOUR PATH**

Life usually leads us down a variety of paths. Sometimes the route we take is smooth and clearly marked, while at other times things get a bit bumpy—and we may even reach a fork in the road from time to time. You may have been on a different course in life before you decided to investigate a career in education, but now you know what direction you’re headed, and you can’t wait to get there!

**School Settings**

As you think about your potential teaching position, you may have some questions about your final destination. Often new educators don’t realize that there are different options available to them. Sometimes there is so much pressure to find a job—any job—that little forethought is given as to exactly where you’d like to spend the next decade, or two—or three—of your life! Statistics show that once a teacher commits to a particular district, he or she is less likely to move elsewhere (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Therefore, take some time before you sign that contract to figure out exactly where you’d like to invest your time, effort, and energy during the years ahead.
Although we could spend several chapters talking about the different types of schools across the United States, suffice it to say that you have three major options: public, private, and parochial school settings. Each of these will offer you many opportunities to fulfill your dreams of working with young people, but you will have to be the one to figure out which type of climate and culture is right for you.

**Public Schools**

Public schools have a rich history in the United States; their development has directly corresponded to the transition of the American people and their needs during the past four centuries (Johnson, Dupuis, Musial, Hall, & Gollnick, 2002; Shatzer, 1999). Public school environments are based on concepts like “education for all” and how to produce “philosopher kings” from ordinary citizens (Johnson et al., 2002; Lee, 1987; Spring, 1998). Although the burgeoning size of public schools can be overwhelming for some, the multitude of opportunities for up-to-date resources, access to technology, and professional growth are unparalleled.

**Private Schools**

Out of approximately 53 million school children in the United States, 5.9 million of these attend private schools (National Association of Independent Schools, October 2000). Private settings are typically smaller than most public institutions, and the student/teacher ratio tends to be low. Parent involvement is usually high, but salaries often cannot compete with the tax-dollar supported schools. Parochial schools are private schools that are run by a parish, church, or religious group. Like private schools, they operate from their own independent philosophies, but the First Amendment prevents federal money from going directly to teacher salaries (Johnson et al., 2002; Spring, 1998).

Due to societal changes, some students, parents, and educators feel safer and more able to express their personal and religious beliefs in private or parochial school settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Shatzer, 1999), but we have also seen tremendous reform efforts being made in all areas of public education (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 1993; Spring, 1998). The most important thing to remember is that all of these institutions
are in business for one reason: to benefit the lives of all students. Whether it is teaching the “3 R’s” or developing character in the lives of young people, these schools are striving to make society a better place for all of us (DeRoche & Williams, 2001). So, spend some time evaluating what type of educational setting would be best for your skills, philosophy, and style.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Now that you’ve done a thorough self-assessment, including asking yourself what type of school setting would suit you best, you’re ready to interview for your first teaching position—well, almost. There’s a little more prep work to do. But after all that soul searching, this should be a snap. The first task is to make sure your paperwork is in proper order. Most importantly, make certain that all of the requirements for the placement file kept at your university are met. Someone in the school of education can review the file (whether it is an open or closed one) and inform you of any other documents that you may need to include now or at some future date. Remember that you will want to include letters of reference to this file as you gain experience in the field of education (and be sure to keep copies of any letters that principals, fellow teachers, parents, and other professionals provide you for your personal records at home).

A second step toward preparing for your new position is to create a professional resume. This French term literally translates “to summarize.” Although synthesizing one’s life onto a single sheet may seem impossible, it is a key document to keep up-to-date throughout your career. Resume formats and styles do vary, but most should include these main ingredients:

Core Content of Your Resume

1. Vital statistics: Name, address, e-mail, phone and fax numbers

2. Job objective: List specifics according to the position
3. Education: List college(s) attended, degree(s) attained, years of attendance

4. Work experience: Include positions related to teaching, but any job that shows you were a responsible employee is important

5. Certification: List your state certification document(s) along with any other specific licenses or credentials that you may hold

6. Honors/Awards: Include a few achievements that will provide insight into your capabilities as well as extra-curricular activities

7. Professional Organizations/Community Involvement: Provide examples from both inside and outside the educational arena

8. References: Often “available upon request” is sufficient, but a brief list of people along with their addresses can be given as long as they have given you permission to do so

Remember, a resume is a brief snapshot of who you are. Make sure that it is clear, concise, and professional. This might be the document that encourages someone to call you in for an interview. If you are overwhelmed by the task of developing your own resume, there are individuals and businesses that specialize in these services. Also, many educators are choosing to post their resumes on-line for prospective employers. As time goes by, you will want to add updated information to your resume so that it will be a handy resource for future professional contacts.

Another tool that is highly recommended by experts in the field of education is the Professional Teaching Portfolio (Jensen & Kiley, 2000). This is a compilation of documents and materials that showcases your strengths, qualifications, and ongoing development in the field of education. This portfolio should be a “work in progress,” and it can actually be started during the student teaching experience. Sample lessons, work done by students,
photographs of activities, and even a video tape of your teaching can be included in this montage of your mounting educational experiences. You might put together a binder, flexible file folder, or

**Box 1.1**

**REHEARSING FOR A TEACHING INTERVIEW**

**Potential Interview Questions**

1. Tell us about yourself.
2. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
3. Describe your educational background for me.
4. What kind of experiences have you had in the field of education?
5. Can you define your philosophy of education?
6. Explain how you think you will fit into this position.
7. How do you best work with other people?
8. What will your classroom management be like? (They may give you an actual scenario and ask how you would solve it).
9. What professional organizations do you belong to? Do you read certain educational journals?
10. What books or people have most impacted your life?
11. In what ways would you be an asset to our school?
12. Where do you see yourself in five (ten) years?
13. What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
14. How do you plan to keep in touch with parents?
15. What will you do to keep current in the field of education? In your content area?
16. Are there any questions that you’d like to ask us?
some other compact, easily transportable form to organize the portfolio work.

Finally, as you reflect upon your preparation for teaching, how confident do you feel about what will be asked of you by potential employers? The interview process is a component of any job search, but the questions that future teachers are typically asked are often highly specific and unique to the field of education. When you are called to an interview, be sure that you have these details down on paper:

Core Questions for Your Teaching Interview

1. When is the interview?

2. Where will it be? (I recommend that you drive to this site a day in advance to become familiar with your surroundings as well as have the opportunity to study the culture and climate of the community before the interview.)

3. Who (and how many) will be involved in the interviewing process? (Find out specific names with correct spellings so that you can send thank-you notes later. Please be aware that there are often teams of people who assist with interviews for prospective teachers.)

4. What specific position will you be interviewing for? (This information will help you prepare for potential questions that you will be asked.)

5. What will the process involve? (Will you need to make time to fill out paperwork or write a short essay? Should you bring your career portfolio along?)

Of course you’ll want to put your best foot forward during the interviewing process. Prepare an appropriate outfit in advance, and make sure it is clean and pressed ahead of time. Although everyone’s idea of “appropriate” attire may vary, think about what you would wear to any professional engagement. If you aren’t certain, ask a friend or family member for help. This person
would also be a good resource to assist you in preparing for the actual interview. Some sample questions are provided in Box 1.1. Practice them until you feel comfortable with your answers. As you do so, you will gain more confidence in your ever-expanding role as an educator.

Tips to Remember

1. Mark a day in your calendar that will be spent thinking about the contents of this chapter. Call it your “Who Am I?” day.
2. Make sure your placement file, resume, and career portfolio are in good shape. Photocopy letters of reference and other important documents (like applications sent to school districts) for your own records at home.
3. Spend time rehearsing potential interview questions with a friend so that you feel confident about your ideas on educating young people.
4. Write down what countries your ancestors came from. How do you think these cultures impact the things that you do today?
5. Order a book on learning styles or multicultural education so that you can study these educational issues before the first day of school.