

A New Teacher's Perceptions of the First Month of Teaching

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On the Friday of my third week of teaching, I found myself standing in front of thirty-four 4th graders who had just taken part in a food fight. This wasn't a little food fight, mind you; this was the stuff of childhood legend -- the sort of thing you fantasized about doing as a child but would actually never have the guts to do. But there I was, fresh in my first-year and at a complete loss for how to deal with the reality at hand.

Again and again in this first month of teaching, I've been struck by the reality of how education and school cultures exist separately. Each school I've ever stepped into has a distinct feel of its own, and this makes sense to me only now.

It's the sort of thing they don't teach you in grad school. I feel a continual pressure to conform to the norms of the school, whether that be in pedagogy, classroom management, or attitudes toward students. Maintaining and applying what I have learned in a teacher preparation program and utilizing this knowledge of theoretical best practice as I have been taught it requires an incredible amount of stick-to-itiveness. The structures, ideas, and knowledge that new educators bring to the table are important, but every day we, as new teachers, are confronted directly and indirectly with the ways in which our practice should adjust to the norms of the current system. Learning from our veteran colleagues is, of course, an essential part of the educative process, and they have much to teach us, but holding on to the theoretical underpinnings that have driven our schematic constructs to this point is also a necessary piece of the puzzle.

Until I was truly entrenched in the day-in and day-out of the school system, it was difficult to understand the sort of constructs that would exist as a teacher and the pressure that would exist to be a part of the predominant atmosphere of that school. For me as an educator, it is important to maintain a classroom that is inquiry-driven and student-centered. Maintaining this habit takes an exceptional amount of intention and drive, when more teacher-centered models of instruction predominate and the pressure to implement this practice is continual and persistent. This pressure is sometimes explicit from the administration in the required daily classroom instruction. Sometimes, it is simply a result of my desire to collaboratively plan with peer teachers, who have been teaching direct instruction models for years. Sticking to what I believe of student learning theories is a difficult balancing act, and being the brand-new teacher doing something completely different from other teachers is frightening -- particularly when I know that I, like other first year teachers, am on a temporary contract waiting rehire for next year.

Increasingly, I have come to understand that the path best for kids will often not be the path easiest for me. This may seem obvious, but I didn't really understand it until I lived it. A mentor of mine once said that people who are authoritarian toward children only treat them that way that way because they don't fully see them as people, and that has always stuck with me. Some moments it is so much easier to dictate to kids than to really work with them. When students are learning how to work in a classroom that is representative of a larger democratic society, it is hard. It takes balance and work and patience on the part of the educator, and in no situation do these communities flourish in a day or even a week. They take time and a concerted amount of energy, and it's definitely something our class is still working on. Throughout my studies, when I envisioned the kind of teacher I wanted to be, it was always in a classroom where student voices dominated and their ideas drove the classroom. I know already that this isn't always the classroom I have created each day. Not defaulting to the easy route has to be a continual, intentional, and conscious choice that we make as new teachers in order to maintain our identities.

What I am coming to understand is that our veteran teacher colleagues have an immense amount to teach us, and I have learned so much already from some great educators; it is just as true, however, that we must weigh this information against our recently learned knowledge of new best practices. New teachers are in the odd position where we must be tentative about sharing our knowledge with the community around us, since we are novices in practice. In the same breath, we have the most up-to-date theoretical information at the forefront of our minds. We hear colleagues say that old phrase again and again that practice and theory do not align, and in our moments of self-doubt (which come frequently early in teaching) it feels true. It is so easy to lose your voice and your identity as an educator in the beginning. It's essential for us to remember that what we've learned is critical and important, and that we do have something to contribute as new educators.

My teacher preparation program in particular was focused on the necessity of being self-reflective. It fixated on the need to reflect on ourselves in the classroom as we were teaching, but I think it's just as important to look at our interactions outside of the classroom. In what ways are we reflecting on our interactions with colleagues? How are we being purposeful about establishing best practice in our classrooms? How are we incorporating colleagues' ideas into our classrooms in a way that complements, rather than overshadows, our own practice?

Standing in front of that group of thirty-four nine-year-olds after their food fight encompassed pure, raw, new teacher fear, and it truly was my first fork in the road moment. I knew I could stand there and yell at them for this completely ridiculous choice they had made. I would make my point, they'd understand that I was mad, and that they did something wrong. That certainly felt like the easier thing to do. Instead, I just waited, with my usually giggly students completely

silent, wide-eyed, and waiting. I thought for probably a full minute about everything I had really learned and about the teacher I wanted to be, of all the little things people I respect have said to me about moments like this. So, we talked. We talked about safety, respect, responsibility, and empathy. We talked about being ambassadors for the 4th grade, and how a choice by the few makes the whole 4th grade look bad. We talked about what an apology really means – not just the words that parents and teachers make kids say all of the time, but the concept of remorse behind the words. My group of normally rambunctious little 4th graders was totally serious as they decided they wanted to write a letter of apology. So that's what we did together, as a community. We walked down and faced the people they'd wronged and handed them that letter signed by every solemn nine-year-old.

At the end of the day, our classrooms are our own, and we're responsible for our students' development. With all of the pressure and all of the concern, we have to continually keep the most essential end goal in mind. We can take what we learn, the new and the old, and combine it when we decide what's best. In the end, we have to withstand the pressure, because we're the ones who have to believe we're doing everything we can to give our students the tools to become happy, successful adults.