

Reflections of a First Year Teacher

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Teaching is the one thing I have always wanted to do. Even when I was a young girl playing school, I can remember wanting to be the one called teacher. I enjoyed making the tests, giving the assignments, and grading the papers. I liked being the disciplinarian and the person in charge. From the age of nine, every time someone asked me what I was going to be when I grew up, my response was always that I would be a teacher. As I sit here almost 30 years later, I am now “the teacher.” I am currently about four months from finishing my first year of teaching, and I am ready to look back on my experience.

Despite hearing for the past year or so how there is a huge shortage of teachers, when I was job hunting at the end of last summer there was not a teaching job to be found in my parish. However, after getting a tip from a friend, I drove about 40 miles north from my house and went to visit the principal of the elementary school at which I am currently employed. The principal had only one position left and after an extremely short interview, I was offered a position teaching the third grade. Upon agreeing to take the position, I was shown my classroom. It was the worst thing I have ever seen. The room was covered in dirt and dust, and there was trash everywhere. It was only one week until the start of school and I had to have everything clean and organized before it started. I left the school that day feeling both overjoyed and overwhelmed. Overjoyed because I could finally call myself a teacher and overwhelmed because I had no idea

how I was going to be able to get the classroom clean and organized in less than one week. As I drove away from the school, I began planning what I would do.

The next morning, I awoke early so I could get started. I had so many ideas floating around in my head I could not wait to get going. There were also so many unanswered questions: Did I want a theme for my classroom? Did I want to paint my classroom? What kinds of bulletin boards did I want to begin the year with? The questions and thoughts were endless. Regardless of what was going on in my mind, I knew the first thing I had to do was to clean. To accomplish this, I enrolled the help of my husband and my step-daughters. After we gathered cleaning supplies, we drove to the school and began our journey.

When we arrived at the school, we entered the classroom. I turned on the light and wanted to cry. There were books and desks everywhere, there were piles of trash all over the floor, and there was about twenty inches of dust on top of everything. It was unbelievable. We began our day picking up trash and cleaning out desks and then went on to unpack books and sort through other miscellaneous items. When we were all exhausted, we left for home knowing that we had left unfinished work. Once again, I left the school wondering how I would ever be ready for the start of the school year.

The next morning, I returned to the school alone and got to work. I wandered around the school searching for tables, bookshelves and chairs. They were scarce, but I finally managed to locate everything that I needed for my classroom. After killing my back moving furniture, I arranged the classroom and finished unpacking books. After two additional days of cleaning, I finally got my classroom to the point of being presentable and I decided that I had better get busy planning out my rules, procedures and management plan.

Being a first year teacher, I had never experienced the first day of school, so I was unsure of what to do. Yes, I had read books and had heard stories, but I had no idea what I was supposed to do or how to handle it. I sat down in front of my computer to begin, but it seemed as if everything I had learned in all of my education classes had abandoned me. As I sat there, I was the teacher, but I knew absolutely nothing about teaching. Questions kept popping into my mind: What did I need for the first day of school? What was I supposed to teach? What was I supposed to say? Was I supposed to have notes to send home? They were endless. Finally, I decided the most important things were the rules and procedures, and I figured the rest would just fall into place.

On August 8, 2008, my big day was here -- my first day of teaching had finally arrived. I woke up early, got dressed, and drove to school. Upon arrival, I signed in at the office, walked to my classroom to make some last minute adjustments and waited for parents and students. The minutes passed, and much to my surprise, there were no parents, just the students. Being a parent myself, I always assumed that parents drove their children to school on the first day, but being a teacher, I learned that this is not necessarily the case. I only had the opportunity to meet three parents. I was dumbfounded. I had eighteen students on my roll and had only met three parents. I did not realize it at this point, but I would soon learn that this lack of interest would guide the rest of my year.

If I were to sum up my first day of school, I would have to say that it went well. My students and I took some time to get to know each other, we played a few name games, and we talked about the classroom rules and the daily procedures. While discussing the procedures, I modeled each one and then let the students practice. I went home knowing that everything was going to be fine. I thought I was going to be the perfect teacher and that I was going to have the

perfect classroom. I wish I could have seen into the future to know that my students would soon transform into the loudest, most disrespectful group of children that I had ever met.

The first week or two went smoothly. There was some loud talking in the morning, but nothing that I could not deal with. On occasion, I had to repeat myself a couple of times, but again, it was nothing that I could not handle. I was wrong in not seeking help. I quickly learned that these problems were something that I could not deal with on my own. The problems continued to escalate to the point that my classroom was out of control. Nothing I did or said mattered and no matter what I tried, my students did not listen. My dream of teaching had quickly become a nightmare that I wanted to wake up from. When I could no longer take the stress and felt like I was going to explode, I finally broke down and enrolled the help of the dean of students. Surely the children would listen to her. Wrong again! These children listen to no one.

As I sit here writing this, I still have four months left in my first year of teaching. My classroom is still out of control; my students still do not listen to me. They still do not respect me, and they do not seem to care about passing school, or about themselves or others. Every day, I go through the motions of being a teacher, and every day I am ignored by my students. I ask them to stop talking and they ignore me; I ask them to take a seat, and they ignore me; I ask them to go to their learning centers, and they think it is play time. I feel as if I am in a battle that I cannot win. I feel like I am failing my students and that there is nothing I can do about it. The situation is breaking my heart. Academically, the children have grown—their test scores prove it, but I still feel like I have failed them. I wish I knew how to get these children to understand that I am not at school to be ignored: to understand that I am there to help them. Other teachers make the job look so easy, but teaching is hard work.

I feel that my educational experiences have not fully prepared me for all of the frustrations to be had in a person's first year of teaching. When education majors do their practice teaching, it is under ideal situations. A teacher's first year is seldom this way. Even though my first year has been less than desirable, I still want to be a teacher. I do not believe that all children are like the ones who are in my class. I know deep down in my heart that things can only get better from here. I will not give up—I will teach!