

From the Pen of a Teacher: Memories of Moving On

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There have been some important people in my life who inspired me with their unflinching dedication to teaching. Some of my teachers in elementary and high school made learning interesting, challenging, and rewarding. One of my college instructors really inspired me. I wanted to be like them. My mother was also a teacher and always set high standards and expectations. I wanted to emulate her. After I graduated from college, I realized that a very significant phase of life was starting. My dream was now reality. I was ready to teach. I took as inspiration the words of Dr. Reick, one of my college instructors: "Hearts and minds of boys and girls are the same all over the world."

My teaching career began with excitement and enthusiasm. On the first day, I was not as nervous as one might think (just a little bit though) because prior to the opening of school, I had attended a three-week orientation workshop for new teachers, which had prepared me. At the opening session, I met the principal, department head, and other teachers from my school. The English supervisory staff provided extensive training in lesson planning and classroom management. I even had a fellow teacher, a buddy teacher, help set up my room. She worked very closely with me for my first two years of teaching. I don't know what I would have done without her. From her I learned not only how to teach, but I learned how to be a good teacher. I often think of Mrs. Harris with fondness and gratitude. "This is a community school, and we work as a team—just like members in a community," she would frequently impart. This was the place to be.

The first two years of my teaching was a trial period. All newly hired teachers in the system had to fulfill this probationary requirement. I will never forget Monday morning meetings with the Department Head to review my lesson plans and the many announced and unannounced observations. I began to wonder if I had made the right decision to become a teacher. There were so many responsibilities to fulfill: plan lessons, grade papers, attend faculty, departmental, and PTA meetings, perform hall, bathroom, and cafeteria duties, serve on various committees, hold student conferences, volunteer to supervise after school detention—the list always got longer, never shorter. I was being pulled in many directions and felt overwhelmed. As if all of this was not enough, I had to attend a new teachers' meeting. "All I want to do is to teach the students. I don't have time to do all of this other stuff," I lamented.

Those monthly meetings were a highlight of my teaching career. I met with other new teachers who were experiencing some of what I was experiencing: good students, parents, days, and lessons and not-so-good students, parents, days, and lessons. We talked about our successes and challenges. We learned new teaching strategies and became familiar with the curriculum. We worked together, just like members of a community. We produced and exchanged lesson plans. Yes, I survived probation and was elated to finally be a real teacher.

For the next several years, I honed my teaching abilities to enhance student achievement. The community school concept expanded to include character development, civic responsibility, and artistic growth. I taught in a good school with average and

above average students and loved every minute of it. Things were not perfect but were "moving in the right direction."

As the years swiftly moved on, I began to think about leaving the comforts of this nest, a very popular and prestigious school, for something else. My decision to move to another educational setting was not easy. Colleagues doubted my wisdom. "You've been working too hard. Take some time off; perhaps you need a rest," they repeated. Still I transferred to an alternative school for at-risk students.

The number of at-risk students increased. Their characteristics included academic underachievement, poor attendance, a history of school suspension, teen parents, economically disadvantaged, overage for grade, and in need of employment skills. I believed that I would be successful. "They want to receive an education; that's why they're here. Similarities are present," I concluded.

The alternative school concept for at-risk students was a relatively new one; consequently, what to do with these students and how to do it became a real issue. I felt that these young people were still students. Maybe their reality could be transformed, and changed feelings about themselves and the world would motivate them to want to succeed against the odds. I was hooked.

All of my educational experiences as a student and as a teacher, like precious keepsakes that have been securely packed away, were immediately unpacked. My past became my present. I recalled former teachers and their motivating lessons, my mother and her insistence on maintaining high standards and expectations and, of course, the words of my college instructor. I built student rapport by building positive student-teacher relationships to generate and sustain the feeling of community within the classroom. For learning to occur, the curriculum had to be individualized, meaningful, active, and engaging. The students must be treated with respect, emphasizing cooperation, rather than competition. Students were expected to maintain high standards.

As time passed, I saw that most of these at-risk students learned better in a variety of learning situations—working alone, with other students, with other adults, and with multimedia and technology. Like so many learners, these students responded to frequent praise, preferred informal classroom settings, and assignments that require movement to different locations. Small classes really worked in my favor. I got to know each student individually. When success is not dependent on the failure of others, an individual and personal approach will develop improved social and academic skills, self-esteem, self-discovery, and self-awareness in students. Teaching is basically all the same.

This life phase has been quite interesting. There have been many pleasures, and there have been some regrets. Through them all, I have survived, and I feel proud. My life continues to evolve and, as I move into another phase, I take with me all of the knowledge, wisdom, and memories. What a joy!



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