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THRIVING IN THIS PROFESSION

CHAPTER 10

As we gear up for the beginning of each school year, the whirlwind of excitement and activity in our schools is palpable. The sounds of teachers and staff preparing for their new classes are full of promise for a successful school year. In the flurry of designing bulletin boards, unpacking supplies, and ringing telephones are the first-time teachers, both smiling and a bit sick to their stomachs at the same time. You see, for them it's more than a new school year; it's a new chapter in their lives. It's time to prove that they can do it! They *can* be caring, knowledgeable, and effective teachers. They *can* make a difference in the lives of their learners. They *can* make it through the first week (and the next and the next!).

Over my career, we have worked with many novice teachers, and I have learned so much from them. Their enthusiasm for learning is infectious, and they are certainly up on the latest research and techniques. But there are a few things that I wish I knew when I first became a teacher (other than to run in the opposite direction!). Trust me, you will find your rhythm and your unique style, and this will serve you and your learners well.

Find Your Village

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As the saying goes, “It takes a village to support a new teacher . . .” (or something like that!). Your village as a new teacher can provide you with the necessary support to feel successful and supported. This village may shift or change but will continue to be valuable to you throughout your career. This support may come to you from a variety of directions, or you may have to seek it out. Either way, these connections can help bolster you when you need a helping hand.

You may be starting your teaching career with many other new teachers alongside you, or you may be the lone newbie in your school. Either way, connecting with other educators who can share experiences with you is crucial. While you may be nervous to reach out for assistance or establish new professional relationships, you will find that many colleagues are happy to collaborate with new teachers. Connections through new teacher orientation, grade-level meetings, run-ins in the hallway or faculty room, and even carrying with you those friends from your teacher education programs are great places to start building your networks. These teachers may support you in person, on social media, via texts, smoke signals, however you foster those connections. Hopefully, these relationships are reciprocal in terms of sharing experiences and learning from one another.

Please know that you may still have a lot to learn but you also have much to share as well. The most effective educator support systems are those where everyone can learn from others. Seeking out people who are sincere as lifelong learners and who are willing to accept help may be the key to your successful partnerships.

With this being said, it's important to understand that having a "teacher bestie" does not make or break your year. I have had times in which I had great friendships with my colleagues, and we would spend time together with our families outside of work. There were other years where I was friendly and professional with my colleagues, but I left it in the school building. In other words, don't put a lot of pressure on yourself to create these relationships within your building or district. Some of my closest teacher friends live in other states or countries—and I laugh and learn with them as well!

"Never be afraid to lean on others for advice. Chances are if you are struggling with something, that the teacher down the hall has experienced the same thing. I'm in my third year of teaching now and I find that there are things that my grade-level team all try to improve together as a team."

—Matt, educator and coach, New Jersey

Other members of your village include your mentor, grade-level, or content-area colleagues, paraprofessionals, administrators, coaches, custodians, secretaries, food services workers, and crossing guards (you get the idea). *There is no one from whom you cannot learn, no matter their role in your district or community.*

Reflect, Reflect, Reflect

As you begin in this amazing profession, record those memories and experiences in whatever way works for you. These personal reflections about teaching, learning, connecting, and growing will help you see how far you've come—and where you want to go. You may keep a journal of lessons learned and be disciplined about writing in it every day. Or maybe you will write a positive memory from each day and put it in a jar to read at the end of the school year. You will surely find those reflections to be a treasured artifact of this “moment in time.” You are surely at a pivotal time in your life!

Less personal reflections, such as notes embedded in your lesson plans, are also very useful. What worked in this lesson? What would I do differently next time? You may even return to these notes much later if you find additional materials that may work in this unit. All of this is useful because you may be doing a similar lesson at a later time, or this may shape other lessons in the future.

“One of my assignments during student teaching was to write a reflection for my lessons, and my professor encouraged me to sit and write something at the end of each day that had nothing to do with academics. I didn’t look at that notebook until after my first year of teaching had ended, and I teared up at all of the incredible things I learned about being a teacher. And, to be honest, some of the most challenging days were the times that I grew the most.”

—Susanna

Reflecting with others in your village is incredibly important as well. Different ways to set up a classroom community, techniques for guided reading, and engaging labs in science class all may be born out of conversations with your village. And let’s be clear: Not every suggestion or recommendation will suit your style. But keep them in your pocket in case you ever rethink your preference at another time or if you teach a different level. Sometimes even the discourse that you have will help clear things up in your mind.

Having someone outside your school to whom you can vent or share successes is helpful as well. Sometimes someone who has a different perspective can help you through rocky times or just lend a sympathetic ear. My sister (not an educator) gives me great advice and celebrates my successes as someone who has rooted

for my success my entire life. My husband and kids support my *teacher time* without question, and they are proud of the differences I make in kids' lives. These reflections with my family both recharge me and help me work through things I couldn't quite figure out on my own. Trust me, the money you will spend on coffee, tea, or other beverages will be well worth the support you receive.

Perhaps the most crucial reflections may be those that question our own interactions, perspectives, and biases. Are we truly meeting each of our learners where they are, and do we honestly believe in their potential? Are we sincere in our interactions with our learners' families and the ways that we support them? Do we advocate for all learners? Do we have a deep understanding of the cultures of our school community and how our learners carry those cultures with them in everything they do? As we journal about our experiences, these are things that can guide us as we seek to improve ourselves as educators. We—educators who reflect in these ways—are all a work in progress.

Connections Before Curricula

Let's face it: Not every learner will enter your class just bursting with intrinsic motivation to learn every lesson you plan, as beautiful as your lessons are. Most learners may not fully comprehend the importance of what they will learn with you and the positive effect of it on the rest of their lives. Learners are not sponges, just waiting to soak up all academic things. It is through connections and relationships that learners find the motivation to put in the effort needed to progress and learn.

If it weren't for the need for connections, children could learn from robots (or artificial intelligence!). Teachers learn about the interests, strengths, challenges, and uniqueness of their learners and use those to engage them in reaching their potential. Those connections are essential to creating the classroom climate in which learners strive for success—and truly feel that they can achieve it.

Learners who feel you care about them will want to please you and believe you have their best interests at heart. They will trust that what you teach them is worthwhile and will be motivated to learn. I'm not trying to say that every learner every day will earn top grades or complete every assignment, but these connections are part of the recipe for engagement. If a learner does not engage one day, you will certainly try to connect him with his potential the following day.

Genuinely representing and celebrating diverse backgrounds (languages, families, abilities, identities) is a culturally responsive way