

A First-Year Teacher Tells Her Story

Four months ago, something happened that changed my life. I am so honored to share my story with this audience. In my two days here, you have struck me as so invested in quality education. I am inspired by your passion and commitment.

I graduated from college in 2008, and my first job was at a museum. I did not major in education, but I knew all along that my life path would involve inspiring children to love learning.

A highlight of this job was working with students who came to the museum on field trips. Teaching these children for a few hours each day was exhilarating, and it became very clear that becoming a classroom teacher was exactly what I wanted to do.

I thrived in my graduate school program, through which I earned a master's and became a certified teacher. This program was all encompassing. It included 2 full years of field work, in both suburban and urban school settings. My classes in graduate school emphasized constructivist teaching and learning, responsive classroom practices, and teaching with passion and creativity.

Upon graduating, I felt thoroughly prepared and ecstatic to begin my first job as a third grade teacher.

Up to this point, my journey towards becoming a teacher was extremely positive. I spent my summer preparing for my students. I began sketching out my first few weeks of school. I asked my principal for information about the curriculum, and I studied the state standards.

Any apprehension was overshadowed by the knowledge that I was doing exactly what I felt I was supposed to be doing with my life.

When the school year started on August 25, I spent the first few weeks on autopilot. Meeting students, their parents, my colleagues, figuring out attendance, the photo copier, my way around the school, IEPs, and hundreds of other new things.... These details consumed me, but the thought that I was a teacher with my own classroom was still such a novel idea. I used that excitement to stay afloat.

It was in mid-September that this excitement started to be replaced by severe stress. I was arriving to school each day at 7:00 am, and leaving at 7:30 pm. I was planning each day the night before.

I felt like I had no idea how to do this, despite the ample amount of lessons and units I wrote in grad school and while I was a student teacher.



This was now real life. I did not anticipate the immense, diverse needs that my students would have, or the amount of extreme differentiation that they would need. I wasn't student teaching anymore. Now, I was the one responsible.

I was unfamiliar with the resources available to me and how to access them. The teacher who had my classroom before me left behind a wealth of books, guides, and programs, but the amount was overwhelming, and I had little direction. Instead, I planned everything from scratch. Everything I did was homemade, the night before.

There were very knowledgeable people at school providing me with support and help, but I needed more time than they could realistically give me.

I felt that my grasp on what to actually be teaching my students was flimsy. Am I teaching the right content? Am I teaching in the best possible way, so that all my students can be successful? How do I organize my literacy block? Am I supposed to be teaching vocabulary? When do we do writing? What is 3rd grade writing supposed to look like? I agonized over the students who were struggling and falling behind. I agonized over the students who seemed to understand everything and were not being challenged.

My mind would not stop: How can I do this better? What is wrong with me? I know what excellent teaching looks like, so why can't I do it? What if their parents find out that I have no idea what I'm doing? But most of all, guilt overwhelmed me: THESE CHILDREN DESERVE THE BEST EDUCATION POSSIBLE, AND I AM NOT GIVING IT TO THEM.

Meanwhile, as my lack of confidence deepened, I was supposed to eloquently discuss student progress at parent conferences, and to write informative report cards. I was expected to be an expert, a figure parents could rely on to do the best for their child. In my heart, I felt I was letting them down.

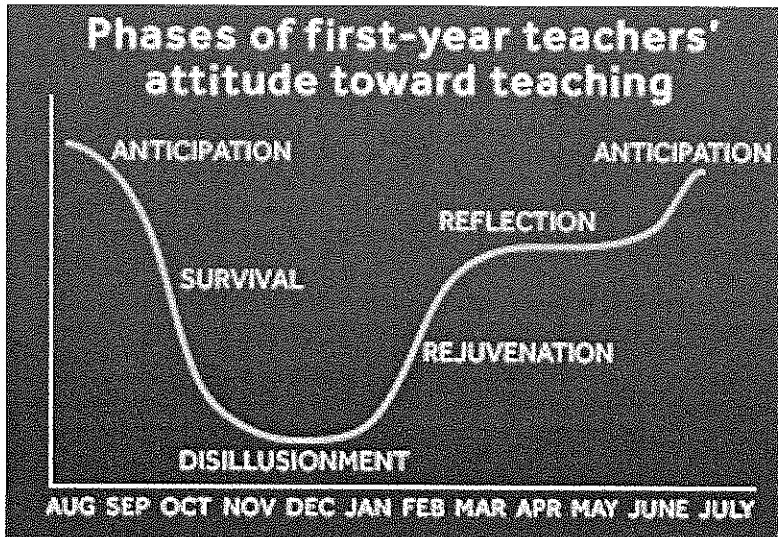
At this point, my personal life was suffering. ALL I did was work. 12 ½ hours each day, including weekends. I was not eating right or going outside. I stopped reading and listening to music, or doing anything to enhance my own life.

Some nights when I got home from school, I would work even a little longer – just to try to capture some sort of control. I felt that if I JUST KEPT WORKING, I could figure out how to do this. I knew that I COULD be a good teacher, but I was so enveloped in stress, confusion, and lack of direction that I did not know how to move forward.

My husband – we got married in July – gave me nightly pep talks about how things would get better. I wanted badly to believe him. At this point, I was feeling like there was no way I could do this again next year. In grad school, I learned statistics, like “Only 50% of new teachers remain in the field after 5 years.” When I heard this I thought, “I will be a teacher forever. Those people probably didn't really want to be teachers as much as I do.” Now this statistic made a lot of sense. I found myself Googling what else certified teachers could do.

One night I excitedly reported to my husband that children in the circus need tutors.

In late October, I came home from work feeling more dejected than usual. Through tears, I typed into Google, “HELP. FIRST YEAR TEACHER, NO IDEA WHAT TO DO.” I was searching for blogs, quotes, articles. I was trying to find out if my experience was common. Was there a teacher who struggled at first, but then figured things out? I never anticipated that this search would result in anything more than comfort. I was seeking a little bit of hope to help me face the next day at school.



When I came across Ellen's article, "*Phases of First-Year Teaching*," I felt like I was reading about myself. I showed my husband, and together we rejoiced that the next phase after disillusionment is rejuvenation.

That night, I emailed Ellen to say thank you for writing that article, and how much it resonated with me. I felt relieved. I might be able to do this. Things could get better. This was the first time I heard of New Teacher Center, and I fell asleep with some peace of mind that an organization like this existed.

I NEVER expected that this email could change my year, and my life. Through Ellen and New Teacher Center, I first met Fred Williams from New Teacher Center at a coffee shop. Amongst other great advice, he told me to STOP working through my whole weekend and to pick just one day. It seems obvious, but this was the best advice I could have been given at the time. That weekend, on Fred's suggestion, my husband and I went hiking.

When I visualize my year, up until this point, I imagine it in black, white, and grays. Starting with this meeting with Fred, it is like color starts to seep in. Soon, Ellen and Fred set me up with my mentor, who is a brilliant, knowledgeable, and compassionate person and teacher. I meet with her every week. We began with structuring my day, and navigating through resources available to me. Together we pore over student work. She guides me on how to use student work to guide my instruction. We work together on how to meet students' needs, assess their understanding, and help them reach their potential. She helps me with tough situations, like communicating to a parent that their child is struggling.

Because of my mentor, I have been able to feel a sense of control, which has allowed my creativity to flourish. I know where to plug in great ideas, and I can come up with engaging ways to teach, now that I have a better sense of what to be teaching! I have someone to go to for guidance. I don't feel alone anymore.

Most importantly, my students experience has improved. I have noticed tremendous changes in the quality of their work. I see growth, engagement, and

excitement for learning. I am able to communicate to my students what I expect from them, because I now have a sense of what those expectations are. I feel proud of them, and sometimes I feel proud of myself.

Since working with my mentor, I am now able to notice and appreciate the positive and happy moments that DO occur in my classroom. There is a girl in my class who has struggled with math this year, but she LOVES multiplication. She has a strong grasp on the concept, and she has told me many times how fun she thinks it is. She especially loves the twelves. Last week, she came into class and was beaming as she presented me with a well-worn piece of paper. On this paper, in tiny writing, she began with $12 \times 1 = 12$, and went all the way to 12×400 . I laminated this paper, and she keeps it on her desk proudly.

I have a looooooong way to go as an educator and so, so much to learn (when I tell that to my mentor, she says, "So do I!"). This is a very challenging and rigorous line of work, and I still have very hard days sometimes. But with her help, I have accepted these challenges, and I know that I can do this.

New Teacher Center gave me what I needed to keep going and to succeed. As a result, New Teacher Center has helped my students grow and learn.

You are an audience of incredible educators invested in quality education and the success of children, and I feel so honored to have been able to share my story with you. Please keep it in mind as you think about the new teachers in your lives.