

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCES OF A FIRST YEAR TEACHER.

BALANCE

I remember receiving a card from my mother while I was away at university, furiously slaving away on my degree and working four – count them, four – separate jobs. I can't recall what else was written on that note, save for that one word: balance.

One of the most difficult parts of a teacher's job is finding balance. Whether balancing the needs of the students, balancing the school goals with classroom goals or just balancing life, ours is a life of continually seeking to achieve a balance between what we can do and what we must do.

My image of teachers as a young student was not very positive. As a kid, I said, "I'll never be a teacher because that means that I will have no life!" You see, like many students, I pictured my teachers at home, red pen in hand, gleefully plastering checkmarks and x's all over the page, until the very last light of day!

In my first year of teaching, I came close to fulfilling that prophecy! I quickly got bogged down and began to walk among the lifeless.

Teaching consumed me. And so did many opportunities to get involved in school activities. I kept saying yes, until I felt like I was drowning in a sea of yeses, wondering why on earth I never learned to say no. Balance was elusive! I have always been a people pleaser, and as a first-year teacher, I found it very difficult to say no.

A typical day for me, from September to November of my first year of teaching, went like this: I got up at 7 a.m. to start making my mental to-do list. By the time I arrived at school, at 8 a.m., the list was too long to remember! After preparing and teaching the entire day, including during lunch, I rushed home with a huge satchel of things to be marked or planned. From 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. I set up a work station on the couch, with no more than the occasional nod or grunt to anyone foolish enough to speak to me. Then, I ate dinner and went to bed, worrying about how to get it all done the next day.

I did this every day and weekend until friends stopped calling me, and the only companion who could still stand me was my dog – and even she looked bored! My hobbies were filed away and I gave up almost every leisure minute to focus on my teaching. All in all, in my quest to get everything done, I'd become a hermit, at once engrossed in and tired of teaching after only two months on the job.

Clearly, I needed an intervention, and the only person who could intervene was me. No one in the teaching profession really tells you that you should work less, even when the growing bags under your eyes clearly say you should!

After the first set of report cards, I made myself a solemn promise – and it was a big one! I decided not to bring home my work from school. What didn't get done there could get done the next day, and with the exception of report cards and special projects, my home would be red pen and sticker-free!

Since making that decision, I've realized that it's made me a better teacher. The less I bring home to work on in the evening, the more of myself I have left to share the next day. Not everything needs to be evaluated, and not every piece of work requires a comment! When a colleague remarked to me that I always seemed to be able to leave before 4 o'clock, I couldn't tell if it was a judgment or a wistful compliment.

If I could send a message to other first-year teachers, it would be this: Drop the red pen! First-year teachers need to be told explicitly that, despite their best efforts, they cannot do everything. The pen is, for many teachers a talisman, a fixation we mistakenly wield as proof that we are working our very hardest. But the proof is not in the pen! For me, I've found that the proof is in the relationship I've cultivated with my students and in all of the learning I know is happening in my room – because I learned early in the year to put the pen down!

I once heard a saying that balance is all about finding equilibrium between what people want from you and what you need. Forget the three-ring circus; teaching can quickly become a four, five or six ring circus, if you let it.

I will continue with hobbies, with fun, with life! And, at least for now, my circus will remain three rings or less!

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