

## Reflection Theme

# Looking Back on the First Year

As a first-year teacher, I must have heard a thousand times, “Wait until winter break . . .,” “If you can just make it until spring break . . .,” and “You’ll be amazed at what an expert teacher you’ll feel like when you return from summer break.” And so finally I’ve reached summer break, and I have a chance to not do anything even remotely related to school; yet, I’m finding this desire to reflect on my first real year of teaching and where I am now in my career. I ask my students to do this all the time; shouldn’t I do the same?

Well, it’s safe to say that I’ve got the basic patterns and habits down that work for me. Put desks in rows for attendance and daily activities. Move to groups or circles when necessary. Don’t check my voicemail messages until the end of the day; a disgruntled parent will only vampirize all my energy first thing in the morning. Dress like a professional so that I feel like a professional. Laugh a lot—I mean a lot—because on a daily basis none of my peers get to hear a thirteen-year-old’s amazing views on flag football statistics and what the latest nail polish trend is like I do. Take time for myself every single day—school will absolutely engulf me if I don’t. Seek out a mentor, and use her, test her, question her, hug her. Be nice to the copy ladies. Always remember that, first and foremost, these are twelve- and thirteen-year-old kids, and yes, they honestly do believe that their Friday night plans are much, much more important than proper nouns and Tom Sawyer. And I also need to remember that I am still just a twenty-four-year-old person trying to balance my checkbook and send my rent check on time.

So, I’ve finally gotten that stuff figured out (maybe). I also don’t turn down the wrong hallways anymore looking for my classroom, I know where the teachers’ restrooms are, I’ve learned to write down assignments in at least three different places in the classroom, I’ve learned that being cool with students doesn’t make one a good teacher, and most important, I’ve learned that all 120 of my kids are as different as snowflakes—and that’s precisely why it’s not easy being a novice teacher (or an expert teacher, for that matter).

I also know what I should do. I know all about differentiation, tiered assignments, and learning stations. I’ve read a million books. I’ve looked at charts and plans and other teachers’ lessons. I’ve given up my own free time reading a cheesy mystery novel in order to review old college textbooks on educational psychology in order to be the best teacher I can possibly be.

But I also know about state standards and standardized test results and the fact that I have empty filing cabinets I can’t pull lessons from. I know what a failed lesson looks like. I know what it means to have seventh-grade gifted-and-talented students performing at a level beyond my own, and I know what it means to have eighth graders who don’t seem to know what a paragraph is—all in one day. And I know what I should have done—I should have had music playing, portfolios overflowing with beautiful student work, and a classroom library filled with young adult literature—but it just wasn’t going to happen in those first few months.

I know what it's like to have the desire to save the world and be the best teacher there ever was. And I know how crushing it is to realize that's not going to happen—at least not the first year. I know what it's like to cry at school because I'm too overwhelmed and exhausted to deal with grades and attendance slips. I know what it's like to cry before I go to bed because I can't figure out how to reach that one student.

And it was only my first year.

In other words, what I feel like I know is what it's truly like to be a teacher—not a good teacher, or a bad teacher, or a student teacher anymore, but a real teacher. I now know about the hoops we're required to jump through on a daily basis, and I now know more than ever that the salary truly, truly isn't enough (although it doesn't really matter somehow).

After my first year of teaching, I can say that I have a vision—certainly not an answer or a solution but a vision nonetheless. I can visualize myself with individualized learning plans, a class full of students all reading different novels, music playing, and kids laughing, and behind me will be filing cabinets full of lesson plans to refer to. I can really see that. But until that vision comes true, I will strive day to day to survive, to laugh, to love, to be patient—and to move up from there. I need to feel safe in the knowledge that that is enough for now.

*Source: Humphrey, T. (2003). In the first few years: Reflections of a beginning teacher. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Copyright © 2003 by the International Reading Association.*

## Reflection Prompts

# Looking Back on the First Year

**Mentors:** Reflect on your own first year of teaching.

1. What lessons did you learn?
2. What support did you receive?
3. What would have been helpful during your first year?
4. What advice can you pass along to beginning teachers?

**Beginning teachers:** Reflect on how you feel now.

1. What are you most looking forward to?
2. What are you most unsure of?
3. What does ideal support look like to you?
4. What legacy do you hope to leave?
5. How will you capture the events and feelings of your own first year in the classroom?