Starting Over Again: Comparing the First and Second Years of Teaching

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SCOTT MORAN, a native of the New York City/New Jersey area, spent his school age years in the Montclair Public School system. Later he attended the University of Rochester, where he earned a B.A. in psychology. Before enrolling at Bank Street College, Scott worked as a human resources professional. He began his first teaching job in the fall of 2001, and graduated from Bank Street in the fall of 2002. Scott currently lives in Ithaca, NY, with his wife.

After finishing the coursework for my M.S.Ed. in December 2001, I had a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. I had a similar feeling as I concluded my first year of teaching. I saw these two events as great milestones. I had the impression that together they represented a conclusion, and that I was finished with the bulk of learning to be a teacher. It was in my second year as a classroom teacher that I came to understand these milestones as the complete opposite.

In my first two years as a head teacher, I taught at a small independent school in downtown Manhattan, the Marck* School. I began my first year while still finishing my Bank Street degree. I chose to work at this particular school because the school’s philosophy was well aligned to Bank Street’s. Additionally, there was a great level of freedom afforded to a teacher in the Marck School, yet there was also a support system for new teachers. I considered this school a logical next step, as it would allow me to continue learning how to be a progressive educator through interaction with interesting and experienced colleagues, while also letting me experiment on my own.

I found that the Marck School was a great match for me as I made the transition from student teacher to classroom teacher. The most valuable asset I had received from my education at Bank Street was an ethic of critical reflection, honed principally through the advisement group process and supported by thoughtful coursework that examined the play between theory and practice. It was this tenet that pushed me never to be satisfied with accepting the status quo in my classroom. I developed a necessary uneasiness about coasting through the curriculum. It was not enough to reach a point where the classroom functioned smoothly. I always looked for ways it might function better. Out of this fundamental characteristic of Bank Street College came a focus on what works for students, rather than what works only for teachers and schools.

[*Note: The name of the school and all the children’s names are fictional.]
After finishing my first year of teaching, I felt extremely confident in my skills as a teacher. I had had a successful year, and had received praise from my supervisors. I had learned a lot in my first year, and I believed that subsequent years could only be better and easier. This assumption proved to be more than a little naïve.

In my first year of teaching, I learned or solidified a number of skills that were essential for being a teacher. I had found my “teacher voice,” the voice that communicates clearly to students that you mean business and are taking control. My ability to time lessons and activities correctly had grown tremendously. After several homework assignments on which my students worked earnestly for four or five times the amount of time I expected, I also learned that there is a distinct difference between eighth graders, with whom I had had previous experience, and the eight-year-olds I was teaching. As I grew to know this group of students over the first five or six weeks of school, I was able to determine which activities would be better done individually, in partnerships, or in groups. I also found a comfortable balance of power as I attempted to maintain a democratic classroom. The children had what seemed like an instinctive drive to come together as a group around an activity. I was able to rely on this characteristic to offer them more choices and more control over the direction of the curriculum, as I could count on them to rally around a task and focus on getting it done together. If a group of students were working on a project and Jake was distracting the group, I could depend on Sophie, or any number of other children, to ask Jake to stop. Sophie’s comments would usually be received with respect and recognition from the rest of the group. They knew that Sophie should be listened to, and that Jake should get back to work. Additionally, this group was skilled at helping students like Jake, even if he were prone to losing focus.

I was calm as I returned to school after summer vacation to begin setting up my classroom for my second year. Though I had been warned that my upcoming students would prove more difficult to manage than my former group, I worried little about it. I knew the curriculum and I had been successful in managing my classroom the previous year. This knowledge represented such a difference from the beginning of my first year that I figured I had little to worry about.

By the second week of my second year, my confidence had been justly shaken. It wasn’t so much that my students were more difficult, it was that they were very different from my first class, both individually and in how they functioned as a group. While the strength of my first class, from the beginning of the year, was to rally around a common purpose, this group did not easily come to that point. As my belief that this group would start acting like my last group of students evaporated, it became clear that I was not prepared for what seems obvious now—every student and every group of students is
different. For instance, although I had established in my first year that certain lessons or activities were good for individual or group work, those same choices often were not the right ones for my second group of students.

The essential difference between my first and second classes was that the former came to me as a functioning group, and the latter didn’t. I could always count on the pull to be part of the classroom community as a way to focus and drive the first group of students. My second group of students, however, turned out to be exactly the opposite. What drove this group was principally the work that I gave them. They did not function well as a group, and were often divisive in their interactions. It was tempting to work directly on their group interaction skills, and this was my first response. I commonly stopped what we were doing and tried to discuss social problems as they came up. This was how I had dealt with social issues in my first year, and it had worked well. For example, as four small groups in my first-year class were planning a mural of the natural environment of Manhattan for social studies, Jesse and Duane, who were working on trees, got into an argument about who in the group would get to do which tree. The other three members of the group got involved in the disagreement, and the group disintegrated into shouting and grabbing the materials from each other. I intervened and calmed the group down enough so they could talk peacefully. However, after several minutes, they were still at an impasse. I stopped the entire class, explained the problem in Jesse and Duane’s group, and led a discussion of what might be done. Not only did these conversations resolve the particular situation being addressed, they also gave other students insight into similar problems they would likely run into later in the year.

However, I soon discovered that because the instances of social difficulties were so frequent with the second year’s students, we often lost sight of our academic work. While my first group of students had faced difficulties once or twice a week, my second group often faced them several times a day. This class quickly lost any interest in working on group interactions, and it often seemed, even to me, that we spent more time talking about behavioral and social issues than we did on our more academic work. The conversations would ultimately spiral into circular arguments about whose fault a particular problem was, and not on a solution to the situation. It was at this point that I began to remember my training at Bank Street—to take a leap of faith when it came to experiential education. I discovered that our attempts to work on social interaction in the group were much more effective when the context was clear. With my second class, it was imperative that the reason for getting along (the need to come together for some sort of common purpose) had to be immediately apparent, not obscured by time or excessive frequency. In short, I had to pick my battles. Instead of stopping the group every time problems arose, I drew the class’s attention to only the most palpable situations.
In this way, my fundamental interaction with my students was markedly different between my first two groups. In my first year, I could always count on their recognizing and being interested in a common purpose to their work. In my second year, I could not. While a desire for a sense of community drove my first group, academic work drove my second group. As a result, in my first year I could use community to produce work, while in my second year I needed to use work to produce community. For instance, when working on a mural of the natural environment of the New York City of long ago, the two groups came at the task from very different angles. My first group was primarily concerned with who wanted to work together to paint trees, rivers, etc., whereas my second group was concerned primarily with what needed to get done and how to organize to get it done. The first group relied on their affinity for group action, and the task was secondary. Their questions were first, “Who’s interested in working together on this?” and second, “How are we going to get this done?” The second group asked these questions in the reverse order.

Nearly all of what I thought I had mastered in my first year needed to be called into question in my second year. It was no longer enough merely to use my “teacher voice.” I now needed to pay special attention to how, why, and how often I used that voice. As I came to terms with the group dynamics of this class and let go of my ideas about what they should be, I also had to examine the power dynamic between these students and myself, part of which meant looking at the use of my “teacher voice.” If I used my “teacher voice” too often, it would become ineffectual and I would clearly be exerting a level of control in the classroom that disempowered my students. If I used it inconsistently, then the students would have difficulty recognizing my reasons for using the voice.

It was uncomfortable for me to give power to this second group in the beginning of the year, as I did not know exactly what they might do with that authority. However, they needed the control I was reluctant to give in order to take ownership of their learning and to begin to see purpose in the act of coming together as a group behind a shared goal. While in the first year, I would have provided choices and flexibility in the beginning of an activity or unit, if I did this with my second group the freedom would be overwhelming to them. However, I feared that they would not learn to take responsibility for themselves if I limited their control altogether. Instead, I began to limit their control and choices at the beginning of tasks, until the framework was clear. When studying the Lenape Indians, I started out with a few categories for study from which students could choose, all having to do with basic survival needs: food, shelter, and clothes. Once they had had experience researching these topics, and (inevitably) had run across other interesting information in the process, I was able to expand the topics of study. At this
point, the students made suggestions about which topics they wanted to study. Some of them chose to delve deeper into the topics they were already studying, while others chose completely new categories. Now that the structure and task were clear, the students were able to take more control. This was the only way it seemed they would have a chance to experiment with an essential element of democracy, the dilemma of self versus group, and to find value in working together.

Indeed, I did not only have to call into question my classroom management style, but the entire execution of my curriculum. I had counted on my first year’s work to relieve me of much of the curriculum planning in my second year. While I certainly had less work to do on my curriculum and I had a much clearer picture of what I wanted to accomplish, I still needed to do some serious work to adjust my plans to best fit this particular group of students. I made my directions more specific, shortened full-group lessons, and added more structure to small-group work, including a list of rules and a selection of which children would work together. Overall, I used less group work and more individual work in my second year, with more direction from me in the beginning of activities.

In the midst of my realization that my second year might not be any easier than my first year, I remembered one of the meetings I had had with my advisor and my cooperating teacher when I was a student teacher. In that meeting, my advisor asked my cooperating teacher if his job had gotten easier in the course of the five years he’d been teaching the same age level. He replied, “Well, in some ways yes, but then again, I still work every Sunday.” At the time I hadn’t thought much about this comment. In my second year of teaching, I realized just how important it was. My second year allowed me to understand what seems now to be a fact of teaching: while teachers usually get better at their jobs from year to year, the job may never get much easier. It was just as valuable a lesson to learn how much I didn’t know in my second year as it had been to learn what I did know in my first.

As I discovered, groups of children will always be different from year to year, either subtly or, in my case, greatly. With time, I traded a focus on the skills that had become second nature, such as my “teacher voice,” for more in-depth questions, like how to use that voice. This act of delving more deeply into teaching skills happens on many fronts. While a first- or second-year teacher may be concentrating on doing only what needs to be done in the curriculum, a more experienced teacher, having mastered that part of the curriculum, will turn to the subtleties of how to make the program work best for the greatest number of students. They may provide more individual attention and often devote more time to thinking about each individual student. In fact, in the Marck School, the people who work late and on the weekends are more often the more experi-
enced teachers. Thankfully, even though I did not have an easier time with my second year, I was able to give my students more individual attention. I worked hard to keep all the students intellectually engaged, even when our work as a group was suffering. I also got to know each child more deeply and was better able to understand his/her needs and personality. For a few students who found it frightening when I raised my voice, I worked out a signal that let them prepare for those times. Not only did this alleviate their stress, but it also brought us closer on a more personal level.

It may be that when teaching feels noticeably easier, it will be a sign that I have stopped trying to delve deeper and stopped paying attention to the differences in each child and group of children. While I know that I have grown as a teacher, I am glad that my job doesn’t feel much easier. It’s clear to me now that teaching is always a work in progress. Even as I am acquiring more and more skills, activities, and strategies for teaching children, I have also come to realize that each year represents a certain kind of starting over.