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## Wrong Place, Right Time

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## **WRONG PLACE, RIGHT TIME**

rachel mazor

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My first real job out of college lasted exactly six days. I was working in the development office of a New York City synagogue, and my boss took me to visit the congregation's Hebrew school. When I saw the teachers completely absorbed in their work with the students, I knew immediately that I, too, was meant to work with young people. I'd had glimmers of this understanding before—I remember feeling proud when my high school teacher praised the way I explained difficult concepts to my classmates, and I knew I enjoyed working at summer camps—but it was only when I stepped into the school building that I realized with certainty where I was meant to be. I gave notice and tried to find a job—any job—that involved teaching. In the next few years, I found many. While none of these jobs turned out to be exactly the right teaching placement for me, I now believe that having these diverse experiences was the best way to begin my career.

When I started, it didn't matter what age, setting, or subject I taught—I just knew I had to get involved in the educational process in a direct way. This was before I enrolled at Bank Street, when I was still testing the waters of teaching. My career goals weren't focused beyond that, and, as a result, I ended up working in three distinctly different environments over the course of two years: I taught sixth-grade math, pre-school social studies, and first-grade reading. Each of these experiences taught me specific skills that I later applied to assignments; additionally, each experience helped me develop my own style as a teacher.

My first job was as a part-time assistant in a sixth-grade class at a Jewish day school on New York City's Upper West Side. I was hired mid-way through the school year, after doing some substitute teaching in the school. I worked primarily with the math and history teacher, although I also got involved in composing and directing the class play. I had worked with eleven-year-olds before, at summer camp, but my own memories of being a sixth grader were hazy. I recalled it as being a “lost year” of bad fashion and awkward socializing. I had no idea how much sophisticated academic content was covered in the sixth grade.

The kids surprised me with their questions, their insights, their connections, and the things they noticed about the world. The social studies curriculum dealt with the Holocaust and the American slave trade. Seeing children grapple with and react to the complex ethical issues raised by these somber periods in history helped me to understand how even young people try to make meaning of the often-senseless realities of our world. What impressed me most was the way that the group teacher guided discussions and prepared the students for the troubling material to come. She knew what would upset the children, and how to help them channel their feelings into safe and productive learning experiences.

At the same time, I was also working for a Brooklyn-based environmental group, leading workshops in pre-kindergarten classes in places like Flatlands and Gerritsen Beach, areas I never knew existed. These students could not have been more different from the sixth graders whom I taught. Aside from the age difference, they were growing up in near-suburban communities by the ocean. Unlike the savvy Manhattanites at the Jewish day school, some of these kids had never seen a skyscraper. This made my job challenging, as I was ostensibly there to teach them about “the urban environment.” The program director had given me a set curriculum of four lessons aimed at teaching about such architectural phenomena such as brownstones, apartment buildings, and, yes, skyscrapers. Since most of these preschoolers lived in single- or dual-family houses, it was a stretch to ask them to build a high-rise out of blocks. After the first few stabs at forcing this curriculum on the bewildered four-year-olds, I asked one of the Pre-K teachers for advice. She encouraged me to begin taking liberties with the lesson plans, focusing instead on architectural elements with which they were familiar—roof shingles and porches, chain-link fences and driveways. I suppose this was my introduction to the idea of a child-centered curriculum, although I was not yet fluent in the language of Bank Street.

After a year of patching together two part-time jobs (and wearing out my Metrocard with all that commuting), I decided to get a “normal” teaching job—preferably one with health insurance. I took a position at a Manhattan independent school, where I assisted in two first-grade classrooms. This job bore some resemblance to my work at the Jewish day school, although the children were, of course, much younger; still, being a full-time assistant teacher was a new experience.

For the first time, I got to see a class (two classes, really) from the first day of school to the last. The year before, as a workshop instructor, I spent four days in each classroom before moving on to a new school and a new group of children. This year, I got to know the two group teachers and had a chance to see how much planning goes into designing even the simplest lesson. Like many people new to the field, I had

assumed that teachers gave children books to read and perhaps helped them pronounce the big words. Now I saw that teachers had to develop extension activities, make lists of sight-words, and pay close attention to the types of mistakes the children made in order to assess their growth. I had enough trouble getting the laminator to work, let alone planning a curriculum that was engaging, educational, and developmentally appropriate. I don't suppose I had ever thought teaching would be easy, but I never guessed just how much work it would be.

Many aspects of teaching took me a while to master, but one thing was clear from my first few minutes in a classroom. I knew that teaching was my calling. There was something about each of my classroom experiences that reinforced this belief, something that told me I was on the right track. No matter where I was, whenever I managed to explain a difficult concept, I felt that same sense of accomplishment I had first experienced in high school. Still, while I treasured each of my first three jobs, none felt quite "perfect." I liked working in middle school, but I didn't want to teach math. I liked being a specialist, but I wanted to work with the same class for an entire year. I liked being in an independent school, but I wanted to work with older students. By the end of my first two years in teaching, I had a much clearer idea of what I wanted to do: I wanted to work in an environment that combined the best of all of my jobs. Now, six years into my career, I am a high school English teacher at another Jewish day school. I work with older students, specializing in my favorite subject, and because I am in a very small school, I stay with many of the same students for several years.

In the intervening years, I had jobs working in public and independent schools, grades four through twelve, teaching math, drama, science, and humanities. When I tell my current colleagues how I got started, many of them shake their heads in amazement. They ask some version of the same question: "How could you go from middle school to preschool to first grade—and end up here?" When I first quit my office job, I knew I wanted to teach something to someone somewhere—it just took a while to figure what, to whom, and where. Many of the people with whom I now work started off teaching in independent high schools and have never considered teaching in other kinds of environments or with different grade levels. While I respect their ability to know early on what they wanted to do, I'm glad I had the chance to explore numerous paths. Having worked in several independent schools, I have seen different approaches to report writing, discipline, professional development, and curriculum design. I've been able to observe what works (and what doesn't), and to share the things I've picked up along the way with my colleagues.

Most importantly, however, I've seen how many traits good teachers have in common, no matter what they teach or where they teach it. Good teachers help their

students to think critically about the world, to ask questions, to look deeply, and, at times, to experience outrage. Good teachers tailor the curriculum to their students' needs instead of forcing them to engage in meaningless study. Good teachers plan carefully and work hard to make sure that every aspect of their students' experience is rich and productive. Good teachers know how to use the laminator.

I've also realized that my interests as a teacher have carried across my diverse experiences. I incorporate drama and art activities into my teaching, whether my students are turning their bodies into shapes or rewriting Shakespeare in contemporary dialogue. I look for ways to appeal to my students' senses of humor, whether I am telling first graders knock-knock jokes at lunch or using *The Simpsons* to teach tenth graders about satire. I have developed a reputation as a demanding, enthusiastic teacher, equally equipped with strict rules and silly games. I have found that a balanced diet makes for a safe and warm classroom for students of any age.

I still find myself reflecting on my first experiences as a teacher. Now, when my tenth graders read *Things Fall Apart*, a novel about British imperialism in Nigeria, I remember how my sixth graders struggled to understand human cruelty, and how their teacher acknowledged their anger without allowing them to feel hopeless. When my twelfth graders don't understand a story about Dominican girls who rebel by dating white boys, I think back to the advice of the pre-kindergarten teacher and relate the ideas to something more familiar to my students—the way their families feel about their dating non-Jews. When I devise a ninth-grade homework assignment, I remember how carefully the group teachers gave instructions to first graders, and check to make sure that my directions are clear.

Throughout my experiences, my desire to be a teacher has never wavered. I still love to explain things to people. I've been lucky to have worked with students of many ages and backgrounds, and to have taught many different subjects. All these experiences have helped me figure out what kind of teacher I want to be. I have learned a lot about being a good teacher no matter what the setting. Six years into my teaching career, I realize that spending a few years in the “wrong” schools can be invaluable preparation for the “right” one.