

CHAPTER ONE

Surviving in School

YOUR OWN CLASSROOM

Every teacher remembers the first day of “real” school, the day when you walk into your very own classroom—no university supervisor, no mentor teacher—just you and your students. It is a moment filled with both anticipation and apprehension. You have years of preparation for this time. You have spent hours reading, observing, writing lesson plans, and practicing your role and skills. And yet as you wait for your students, you are just a little nervous. What will you do when you are left alone with these people? How will you negotiate this first year? How will you implement the things you’ve studied and learned? Will you be able to manage students? Will you know what to do in dealing with students and parents? Will you find a friend and mentor on the faculty? What happens if you make mistakes? Although your experience is unique, it is also similar to the experience of every new teacher. No one has faced that first year absolutely certain of what to expect or of how to handle the challenges inherent in teaching.

There are so many aspects to “learning the ropes” that it is really an ongoing process. This is critical to remember. Teaching is a dynamic rather than static process, and even career teachers have to change procedures or approaches periodically. As you work through your first year of teaching, realize that this initial time is really on-the-job training. Even after all the methods classes and pedagogical training, there is no way to be 100% prepared for teaching. All of your college preparation has helped you get ready

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to teach your subject, but you won't actually learn all that's involved in the profession until you are in a room, all alone, with no one to call on for help. The first year will be focused not so much on what you teach as on your learning about how to teach and about how school really works. And even though you may wonder if you aren't more of a learner than a teacher at times during this first year, remember that you are involved in the process of learning to teach—a process that should last through your entire career.

One of the most important things to do during your first year of teaching is to be kind to yourself. Realize that it will take about 3 years for you to feel like you really know what you are doing. A former student called this week, excited about beginning her third year of teaching. "You were right!" she exclaimed. "This is my third year, and I really think I know what I'm doing. That first year was rough, but I didn't damage anyone," she chuckled. "Last year was better, but I still felt a little unsure. This year, however, I am ready to start. I think I have it figured out, but even better than that, I know I can do this."

LOOKING AT AND SETTING UP YOUR NEW ENVIRONMENT

Many schools provide campus tours for new teachers. However, if your school doesn't, you need to ask a colleague to do this for you. You could probably do it on your own, but a colleague can help you navigate the buildings smoothly. Some of the obvious places you need to locate are the principal's office, faculty restroom, student restrooms, teachers' lounge or workroom/copyroom, telephone for faculty use, cafeteria, counselor's office, library/media center, and the school nurse's office. You might also want to find the place where faculty members can make private telephone calls and the facilities that are away from the main building (e.g., music annex, agriculture complex, or technology lab).

Not only do you need a sense of where things are, but you also need to know the route your students will travel to come to your room. If a student tells you that she left homework in the music annex and that area is a great distance from your room, you may need to give the student a hall pass to use after the tardy bell has rung, or, depending on the circumstances, you may need to refuse the student's request.

LEARNING SCHOOL POLICY AND PROCEDURES

Before you begin to create lesson plans or prepare your room, you need to become familiar with school policy and procedures. Most schools have student handbooks that they make available to students, teachers, and parents. Most also have faculty handbooks for teachers and staff members. If possible, you should ask for copies of these two handbooks as soon as you know you have been hired. These documents form the structure on which you will build your career in that district. Although neither document is entertaining reading (that's why many students ignore the student handbook), you need to learn the contents of both to ensure that you know and follow the rules established by the district and to give yourself confidence in dealing with discipline. Knowing the rules and regulations before you even begin to think about classroom management and lesson plans will keep you from embarrassing situations. You don't want to require something that goes against school policy.

CREATING AN INVITING ENVIRONMENT BY ATTITUDE AND DEMEANOR

The most important aspects of creating an inviting atmosphere are your attitude and demeanor. If you are glad to be teaching, your students will know. They can tell by the look in your eyes, the tone of your voice, and the way you move about the room. They will be interested because you are interested and excited because you are excited.

Although teaching is one of the most gratifying professions in our society, not every day will be a thrilling experience. There will be days when you come to school after a sleepless night. There will be days when you are not feeling well. There will be days when problems in your personal life will weigh heavily on your shoulders. Your students will know when you are not having a good day. However, "bad" days should be greatly outnumbered by excellent days. Teachers who love what they do and truly enjoy working with students have an opportunity to make a positive difference in their students' lives and educations. Keeping that thought in mind is a basic element in creating an inviting environment.

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WELCOMING STUDENTS

Your classroom should be an emotionally inviting place. If at all possible, you should be standing at the classroom door when students begin entering your room at the beginning of a period. Look each student in the eye and call him or her by name. It is possible for some students to spend the entire day without making any personal or positive contact with anyone. For example, a shy student whose parents do night-shift work may get up in the morning, have breakfast, get ready for school, and leave home without speaking one word to parents or siblings. When she gets to school, it is easy for her to avoid speaking to anyone. In your mind's eye, can you see this person? She is so shy that it is an effort for anyone to get her to speak, so it's easier for people just to ignore her. She moves from class to class all day, locked in her isolation. When the school day is over, she goes home to sleeping parents who get up in the evening and go back to work. Your greeting at the classroom door may be the only personal contact she has all day.

ANOTHER SCENARIO

Another scenario involves the belligerent student who seems to thrive on conflict. She is hateful and caustic to anyone who talks to her, and no one even wants to be around her. If you have developed the habit of greeting each student, even those who aren't lovable, you may be the only positive contact she has during the day. It can be amazing to watch both shy and belligerent students change their behavior because they know you are going to greet them and welcome them to class. Shy students begin to lift their heads and look you in the eye as they walk in the door. Before long, they will initiate the greeting if you don't. Belligerent students stop trying to instigate negative responses. They, too, begin to exchange greetings. For both types of students, that small, seemingly insignificant act of saying hello and calling their names helps them know that you are interested in them and that they are valuable to you.

Another reason it is important to greet your students is that the greeting sends a signal to troublesome students that you are giving them a second chance. There are going to be times when

you will have serious problems with a student. Although you may handle the situation quickly and the issue gets resolved, quite often there will still be a feeling of resentment on either your part or the student's. It would be easy just to look away and ignore that student the next day. However, if you force yourself to look the student in the eye and give your usual greeting, the tension from the previous encounter is defused. By greeting the student, regardless of the way you may feel about the student at the moment, you have done two important things—you have acted professionally, and you have shown the student that you are an adult and are not going to hold a grudge. Greeting the student also frees you emotionally to treat him as you should. Once that greeting breaks the ice, you will feel more comfortable working with the student and giving him the help he needs.

MAKING SPACE INVITING

Your room needs to be physically inviting. Even secondary students enjoy classrooms that are decorated. As a new teacher, you will not have as much material to use as more established teachers have. However, with a little creativity, you can make your room special. Create a bulletin board that introduces you to your students. Use pictures of you with your family, friends, and pets. Cut out or print words that describe you or things you like to do. Put up a copy of your college diploma or any awards you have received. Make sure you don't use original pictures or documents. Students have an annoying habit of drawing horns and mustaches on pictures, and you don't want your originals ruined. Your students will enjoy your unusual way of introducing yourself and will get a sense of who you are. Use discretion in the things you choose to share with your students; remember that although you want to show things about yourself that make you "real" to your students, you don't want to compromise yourself professionally. Also consider the attitudes of community members where you teach. In one community it might be fine for you to display a picture of you and your friend at a casino. In another community, the same picture could generate calls from parents.

Another way to make your room physically inviting is to use things about and by students. Students like to see their names in

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print. Laminate a piece of colored poster board and title it "In the News." As the year progresses, cut out newspaper articles (not court reports) about your students and tape them to the poster board. As one board fills up, start another. At the end of the school year, you will have an interesting collection of information about your students, a collection they will enjoy as much as you do. You could use this information to build a scrapbook about your students. Leora, a secondary social studies teacher, selected student work, newspaper articles, and mementos (a football tossed out at the homecoming parade, a program from the band concert) each year and glued her selections to a poster board that she displayed in her room. Each year she added another poster to her room. Students enjoyed looking at the posters and recalling the events she had commemorated. They also enjoyed seeing pictures of students who had graduated in past years.

SHOW STUDENTS' WORK

It is gratifying for students to see their work displayed. Displaying student work can be rewarding and encouraging for them, but you need to keep the issue of confidentiality in mind as you choose work to use. If you are going to display graded work, cover the grade and ask the student's permission to use his work. Even if you've covered the grade, students will still be able to see your comments and identify the good things the anonymous student has done making the piece worthy of display. Again, use discretion as you choose pieces to share. You should never publicly display work that is inappropriate for school children or work that contains material that could be considered inflammatory to other groups of students. If your students know ahead of time that you are planning to display some of their papers, they are more likely to use appropriate topics and language. If they continue to write material that is inappropriate, then obviously you need to have a discussion with them outside of class to explain why the text they have written could be harmful to other students.

DISPLAY LEARNING MATERIALS

Another idea is to use learning exercises as part of a student display. At the beginning of class, give each student a 4" × 6" index

card and a marker. Depending on your subject area, ask students to do the following:

- Write down one thing they enjoy as a result of the First Amendment.
- Create a mathematics problem in which the answer equals their age.
- Write a metaphor or simile for a holiday (or other special event).
- Draw a picture of their favorite crustacean.

You may ask students to sign their work or to leave their identity a mystery. You can also use the work to check students' understanding of a concept you are teaching. Discussing each piece before displaying it gives class members instant feedback on their work. For example, Mary's students enjoyed creating metaphors and similes to use on seasonal bulletin boards. Mary would cut rectangles of red, green, orange, and yellow paper and distribute them to students as they entered class. Before the tardy bell rang, she would point to a blank bulletin board that had a heading "Autumn is like. . . ." Students would write similes on their papers. After Mary finished checking role and submitting the absence report, she had students move into groups to examine their similes. If they needed to make corrections, they did so on the backs of their colored papers. Mary would collect the students' similes, check to make sure they were corrected, and staple the corrected entries on the bulletin board before the next day's class. Students enjoyed seeing what their classmates had created, and it gave Mary an opportunity to reinforce a literary device students would see in literature they would read later.

SHARED ROOMS AND SHARED DISPLAY AREAS

Sometimes teachers have to share rooms with each other. That makes decorating a room more of a challenge. Instead of decorating the entire room, you might ask for the use of one wall or a part of a wall. If you travel from room to room, you might ask for a portion of a wall just for your class that meets in that room. Although it might involve a little more effort to create displays for more than

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one room, investing the time will let your students know that they are important to you and that you value their work and ideas enough to share them with others. They must always know that each one of them is special.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR COLLEAGUES

You will find that you are an automatic member in some groups. For example, if your district is large enough to have several teachers in your subject area, you will be part of that subject-area group. If you are assigned to help sponsor organizations or activities, you will find yourself part of another group. Sometimes becoming part of a faculty is a little intimidating. Teachers who have taught and worked together for a few years may be so comfortable and secure that they have forgotten what it's like to be a new teacher. Don't sit back and wait to be included. In group sessions, try to sit with people you think you would like to get to know. Ask questions and accept advice. You don't need to be intrusive or thrust your opinion on the group, but if you indicate an interest in what your colleagues are doing and saying, they will be apt to include you in their conversations. Sometimes it is lonely as you wait to be accepted, but try to remember that forming relationships takes time and effort.

Many jokes are told about teachers who "hang out" in the teachers' lounge. It seems to be a common perception that these people are only interested in gossiping rather than working. That is not always the case. Many times the informal atmosphere in the teachers' lounge makes it possible to socialize and get to know your colleagues. As with everything else, balance is the key to success. If you find yourself engaging in gossip or using your planning period exclusively for socializing, evaluate why you are spending so much time there and make whatever adjustments you need to make to behave as a professional.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR MENTOR

Many states and school districts assign new teachers to a mentor teacher. The mentor is responsible for disseminating information

and guiding the new teacher through the first year in that district. When this policy works well, the new teacher feels less isolated and less unsure of what to do. The mentor can help with everything from how to handle classroom management issues and what to do with difficult students to what to expect for a special emphasis week. He can help the new teacher to negotiate curriculum and state mandates while also observing in the classroom and providing encouragement and advice. Many times the mentor becomes a lifelong friend and confidant.

Sometimes the mentor and mentee do not hold similar views and philosophies on teaching and learning. That can be a potential problem, depending on the amount of input the mentor has in questions of certification. In some states, the mentor is on the certification committee responsible for helping the new teacher meet the state's certification requirements. In states where the mentor is required to spend a specified number of hours observing the first-year teacher and to be closely involved in evaluating teaching methods, this mentor may be the pivotal member of the committee on certification issues. You might be able to request that another mentor be assigned to you if your views and philosophies are in conflict, but if the district is small, there may not be other teachers who are qualified. If it is impossible for you to be assigned to another mentor, you will need to make the best of the situation for the ensuing year. Remember, however, that even though you may not agree with your mentor, he may have good reasons for his beliefs and practices. Maybe he has tried some things the way you would like to try them and has found from experience that they will not work in that district or with those students. Maybe he insists on doing things a certain way because they have worked well for him and he thinks you should try them as well. Regardless of why you don't agree with him, try to turn a potentially negative experience into a positive one. Even though you may disagree, you can still learn from your mentor, and you must respect his experience and views.

If the state or school where you teach does not provide mentoring, it would be well worth your time to find someone who would agree to be your unofficial mentor. For example, many professional organizations such as the National Writing Project offer mentoring as part of their work with teachers. In the event that you cannot find a professional organization, forming a group with former classmates via e-mail might be a viable alternative. If your university supervisor is not overwhelmed, she might agree to keep

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in touch with you during the first year. The point is this: The first year is full of challenges. Having someone to share these challenges with will give you more self-assurance as you navigate your first year in the classroom. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Asking for help is not an admission of incompetence; it is an indication that you want to do a good job.

GETTING TO KNOW OTHER STAFF MEMBERS

Another important step is to meet staff members. Sometimes they are not available to attend the faculty meetings at the beginning of the year. However, they are an important part of the total system. For example, the secretaries are valuable sources of information. They can help you with many of the details that are part of teaching—when grade reports are due, where to find textbooks, how to request supplies, what procedures to use in contacting parents, and so forth. Some of the most frustrating moments for a new teacher are when faculty members have failed to explain something simply because they are all so familiar with the routine that they have forgotten that the new faculty members need help. Jennifer found herself in an awkward position the first semester of her new job. Instead of building a relationship with a slightly intimidating school secretary, Jennifer avoided Ms. Smith. She didn't realize that her actions were interpreted as snobbery. The school did not assign mentor teachers to new personnel, and because she was shy, Jennifer decided to keep to herself. The sixth week of school was Homecoming Week. Jennifer read the announcement that listed a special emphasis for each day of the week—hat day, school spirit day, cowboy day, fifties day, wear your colors day, and crazy day. That's all the information that the office had given. Because nothing was said about special activities during those days, Jennifer planned an instructional video one day, group project work the next day, and then ended the week with an essay test. No one told her that classes would be cut short on Wednesday so that students could participate in a schoolwide picnic. Nor did anyone tell her that although classes were scheduled all day on Friday, the cheerleaders, band members, pep club, and all float entry participants would be dismissed at noon to prepare for the

parade. When Jennifer realized that one of the other new teachers knew all about the chaos of Homecoming Week, she asked why she hadn't been informed. Her colleague shrugged his shoulders. The following week, he stopped Jennifer in the hallway. "What have you done to make Ms. Smith mad?" he asked. "I overheard her tell someone that if you hadn't been so rude to her, she would have made sure you knew all about Homecoming?" It wasn't until that moment that Jennifer understood that her shyness had been misinterpreted.

Custodians are another excellent source of help. They know where you can find ladders, chalkboard cleaner, mops, and paper towels. They can find extra desks and repair those that are broken. They can also tell you where to find dollies and carts for moving books and equipment. A politely worded request may result in their helping you with anything from moving desks to cleaning up after a sick student.

It is so important for a first year teacher to understand that often support staff feel intimidated by their college-educated colleagues. Small acts of kindness and a heartfelt "thank you" go a long way in bridging that gap and creating a partnership that benefits students.

DISCOVERING THE "THOU SHALT/THOU SHALT NOTS"

One of the most difficult things for a new teacher is discovering all of the unspoken rules that exist in the school. This can be especially difficult if experienced teachers don't follow policy and procedure, giving the impression that rules don't matter. For the new faculty members, it is imperative to follow carefully the procedures that are identified in the student handbook and the faculty handbook. Even if you feel that you are the only one going by the book, it is better for you to err on the side of doing what is required than to be reprimanded for being out of line. Realize that reprimands are documented and become a part of your professional file.

Faculties seem to be divided into three general groups—those who never follow the rules, those who bend the rules occasionally, and those who never bend or break the rules. Quite often, you may feel a real temptation to bend or break the rules. Students can be

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so persistent in their requests and make you think they would really like you so much better if you would just break a rule or two. The truth is that if you insist on following the rules and do so with a good attitude, the students will respect you much more than they do the teachers who try to act as their buddies and ignore the rules. Even more important, perhaps, the teacher who is known for following the rules is less likely to be involved in a situation that results in a lawsuit or termination.

LISTENING CAREFULLY AND OBSERVING CLOSELY

During your first year in a new school, it is imperative that you learn to listen carefully and observe closely. In a few weeks you will know who the master teachers are in your building. Watch what they do, and listen to what they say. If you have not been assigned a mentor teacher to guide you through the first year, choose one of the master teachers whose personality seems compatible with yours. Ask him if you may come to him with questions about what you should and should not do. Usually a teacher is flattered when a new teacher makes such a request. It is possible that the master teacher will take the responsibility of seeing that the new faculty member is informed not only about day-to-day activities but also about what the administration expects from faculty members in every kind of situation.

FINDING YOUR NICHE

The first year in a school can be a lonely time for a new teacher. If you are in your 20s and have just completed college, you will probably feel more comfortable socializing with students than with faculty members. You might prefer to sit at a table in the cafeteria with your students rather than sit with the faculty. However uncomfortable you feel in your new role as a faculty member, you must make the transition from student to teacher immediately. Developing friendships with students must be avoided—*with no exceptions*. Once you cross the line from teacher to friend, you have compromised your authority and possibly your integrity. Students are flattered by attention from young teachers. Many times what seems like an

innocent friendship to the teacher is a completely different relationship in the eyes of a student. This is especially true with students of the opposite sex. Any action of a teacher that could be construed as flirting is inappropriate. As a member of a faculty, a new teacher must realize that she has stepped into an adult world. Things that she considered acceptable only a few months or weeks ago are now professionally off limits. A young teacher must keep in mind the fragility of teenage egos and the danger inherent in encouraging students to become friends. Friendships between faculty and students can only lead to problems, and often those problems can lead to the teacher's termination. Always keep in mind that once you have signed a contract with a district, you have accepted the responsibilities of a teacher. You must behave as a professional and insist that students accept you as a professional. Before long you will find yourself more comfortable with your status as classroom teacher and will find your niche in the new environment.

REMAINING FLEXIBLE

You may be surprised at what you do *not* find in your first teaching experience. Some of the resources you had at your disposal in student teaching may not exist. The importance of students' social life may surprise you. The myriad interruptions to your classes may distress you. Learn to take a deep breath and do the best you can do in the situation. The longer you teach, the more easily you will be able to handle the milieu of teaching in the secondary setting. Remember that part of your responsibility is to prepare these young people to be successful in the world outside your classroom. That will make it a little easier to tolerate all of the interruptions that creep into your instruction—at least some of the time.

JOURNAL TOPICS

- What are some questions you would like to have answered before you meet with your first class?
- Brainstorm some ideas for using student work in your subject area to enhance your room.
- List some behaviors that could compromise your being considered a “teacher” rather than a student.

