

ONE TEACHER'S JOURNEY THROUGH YEAR ONE

During the 2006-07 school year, her first as a teacher, Fairfax Education Association member Laura Mathurin, a middle school English teacher, blogged about her experiences on the VEA website. Here are some of her thoughts on year one:

8 SEPTEMBER

I arrived at school at 7:20 to make sure everything was in order, and to prepare myself for the 130 students that I would call my own. Fifteen minutes later, seasoned teachers entered the building and walked the halls with a confidence that I envied. The principal stopped by my room to wish me good luck. “If the kids can tell that you like them, and that you like teaching, you’ll do fine,” he reminded me, reading the helplessness in my face. At 7:50, I took a deep breath, and greeted my first students with a big smile.

Throughout the whirlwind of the day, I became more comfortable. I welcomed each of my five classes, and instructed the students to find their seats (according to a pre-arranged seating chart that I posted on the overhead projector), and to begin working quietly on their warm-up assignment. This structured start made the rest of the class time flow very smoothly. I then spent the rest of class time discussing classroom procedures, and having student volunteers act out the procedures.

The novelty of the role-play was an immediate hit with the class, especially because they were receiving “classroom procedures lectures” from most of their teachers that day. The students enjoyed making lots of noise, and then quickly becoming silent when I rang the little bell on my desk. They also enjoyed my lesson on “don’t touch anything on Ms. Mathurin’s desk.” I tossed a bag of candy on my desk and had a student with a self-proclaimed “strong will” stare at it, without touching it, as the rest of the class egged him on.

By the end of the day, I was happy but extremely exhausted. My feet, shins and lower back all ached from all the laps I had (compulsively) walked around student desks. Emotionally, I felt especially drained.

I had been anxiously awaiting this day for months. Now that it was over, I felt as though all that nervous energy had been suddenly expelled like air from a balloon, leaving me weak and flimsy.



^ Laura Mathurin

After three weeks of teaching, I can finally say that I've memorized the names and faces of all my students. It's amazing how much more comfortable I feel in front of my classes now that the 131 names on my roster have evolved into unique kids who wave to me in the hallways.

Although each class has a unique atmosphere, there are a few commonalities. Classroom leaders have emerged in each class. Class clowns have also been auditioning. My most ambitious clown is Joseph. His goal is to make his peers laugh each day, whether it's by mispronouncing words when reading aloud or tripping as he walks to the pencil sharpener. Unfortunately, Joseph's goal sometimes collides with my goal of teaching an effective lesson. When this happens, I shoot Joseph one of my "teacher glares," and the ball is back in my court (at least until the next day).

A substitute teacher asked me, "Do you like teaching?" A lot of things came to my mind; unfortunately the negative thoughts tend to float to the surface first.

I thought about my first parent conference, which occurred just a few weeks ago. A parent sent me an angry e-mail, scolding me for not contacting her about the C that her son received in my class on his interim report. She referred to my lack of communication as being "unacceptable," and demanded that I meet with her within three days. Our school counselor, Maria, called the angry parent and set up the conference. During the conference, Maria worked her magic, somehow calming the parent down enough to tell her that C's are not poor enough grades to warrant a phone call home, considering that each teacher has 130 students to monitor. By the end of the conference, the parent was thanking us for our time (and I was thanking Maria for her time!).

That's when the positive thoughts surfaced. I thought about the time I spent after school consoling a sobbing student whose PowerPoint presentation had partially deleted when she tried to send it to me. I remembered how she hiccupped tearfully while we worked together on my classroom computer to redo the missing parts, and the e-mail that she sent me that evening.

I thought about parents and students who have donated new books to my ever-growing classroom library. I thought about a phone conversation I had with one parent who applauded me for helping her son "fall back in love with learning" after a difficult sixth grade year. I thought about how the kids moan when I tell them that I'll be absent for another in-service.

I'm tired, but it's completely worth it. How many other jobs give you the opportunity to be a part of so many lives, and have an impact?

12 JANUARY

I have my principal to thank for today's opportunity to sit down and reflect. About a month ago, he invited all the new teachers to join him for coffee and a chat. My colleague Maggie and I used this time to tell him everything we love about our first year of teaching, and the one thing we have the most trouble with: time. We want to use the many resources that our school and our county have to offer to create phenomenal lesson plans, but a lack of time keeps us digging through the same book or online database in order to be prepared for the next day. Mr. Parris responded by giving us each two days of administrative leave to familiarize ourselves with the available resources and plan ahead. Today I am poring over my resources and coming up with lessons to start the next quarter off strong. Maggie and I have decided to take the other day off together to create some cross-content lessons that we can implement this spring. Not only is the time beneficial, but knowing we have the support from our principal encourages us to do our best.

6 MARCH

At the beginning of the school year, if I had a "bad day" I could just blame it on my lack of experience. Now, a bad day has the potential of turning me into one of those poisonous, "bitter teachers" for an entire week if I allow it to go unchecked. I had my first really "bad day" about two weeks ago. The students had become a little wild and unruly (due to the chaos caused by multiple snow days), and the workload was intense. The last straw was a parent who e-mailed my counselor, accusing me of not replying promptly to e-mails. I felt tired and angry. I was mad at my students for treating me with disrespect after all the time I'd put into their lessons. I was mad at the parent for not understanding how committed I was to each and every one of my 130 students. I was even mad at myself for not using the snow days more constructively. I didn't feel like a new teacher, but like a haggard, overworked babysitter.

It's funny how things work out. This was the day that my principal decided to make an impromptu visit to my classroom. I was in the middle of a lesson when he quietly entered my room and sat down at a desk in the back. I became immediately aware of and ashamed of my negative attitude. Yet, I realized that I had still remained professional, and my students had no clue that I had been feeling poorly all day. In fact, the kids were completely engaged in my lesson. I had neglected to notice how alert and involved they were because I was too focused on my own bad mood.



My mentor, Anna, came to me at the end of that day and told me that the principal had stopped by her room after visiting mine, and had praised me, calling me a “dynamic teacher.” The “new teacher” part of me blushed at this. The other part of me, that part that is just emerging, and was noticed even by my principal, took pride in the knowledge that I’ve come a long way since September, and comfort in the realization that I’m still a work in progress.

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MAY

Today was one of those really good days: The kind of day where you leave work singing, the kind of day that only comes after you’ve had a lot of really not good days. I have now learned that singing-days are scarce for teachers during the month of May. May is SOL season.

Even if I had been unaware of the looming state test, I would have felt the change in my school’s atmosphere as May approached. The tension was palpable, noticeable in the tired faces and curt voices of my coworkers, whom I only seemed to meet in the copy room while running-off hundreds of copies of released-SOL packets. Even the students seemed more sour than usual. Two weeks ago, one of my top students came in, her eyes brimming with tears. When I asked her what was wrong, she whimpered about the amount of SOL prep homework she had received in her classes and suddenly cried out, “All you teachers care about are the SOLs!” I couldn’t help but feel guilty that the day’s lesson involved working in our SOL packets.

That night I went home and watched my favorite movie from my ever-growing “motivational teacher movie” collection. I began the collection over a year ago during my tough student-teaching semester and have been adding movies to it ever since. “Motivational teacher movie” therapy comes in handy on days when you start to wonder whether working as a teacher is really more fulfilling than asking for your old college job back as a grocery store cashier.

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JUNE

The empty classroom surrounding me serves as inspiration today. It hasn’t been this quiet in here since that very first day when I, bewildered and wide-eyed, opened the door to room 118. After spending all of yesterday cleaning and packing, my room looks remarkably like it did on that first day. The floors are not as pristine, and the chalkboards are covered in farewell wishes from the students, but otherwise this classroom is just as I found it.

I, on the other hand, am much changed. Just as my once-bare file cabinets are now brimming with materials, I can now say that I am brimming with teaching experience. I know so much more than when I started:

- > I know what it's like to teach a lesson which really excites the students, and also what to do when a lesson takes a nosedive and an impromptu back-up plan becomes necessary.
- > I know now how to communicate with upset parents, and also how uplifting it feels to receive a parent's compliment.
- > I know now that you should keep half of your art supplies (markers, glue and colored pencils) hidden for the first part of the school year, so you can pull it out for the second half when the children have somehow lost/destroyed the first batch of supplies.
- > I know that asking for help is not admitting defeat, but honoring the experience of your co-workers.
- > I know that e-mails should always be responded to promptly.
- > I know that games are the best way to review content with students, and that every teacher should keep a ball, a bag of candy, a pack of flashcards, a timer or stop watch, and a set of white boards with markers in their classroom.
- > I know that all students enjoy being read to aloud.
- > I know that students are more likely to follow your rules when they see you following your rules.
- > I now know that you should always keep band-aids, tissues and hand-sanitizer close by.
- > I know that when a student comes to your class, he or she is not always searching for education, but is always seeking respect and acceptance, and will eventually gain the former so long as you ensure the latter.



I thought I'd feel sad in those last few days of school, but instead I just felt proud and extremely satisfied. I'm lucky in that I will be able to see my kids again next year when they rule the school as eighth graders. Many of them wrote in my school yearbook that they would be back to visit me. Many said I was one of their favorite teachers this year. These messages all helped to confirm my confidence, but none did so as much as the message written by Joseph.

As I sit here in my empty classroom, I reflect on how teaching is all about having chances. This year was my first chance to teach a group of kids. This was my first chance to touch their young lives in a positive way. It was my first chance, and I believe I did fairly well.■