

Outside the Box: A New Teacher's Guide to a Balanced Life

As a child, chance encounters with my teachers outside school were weird. I guess that I assumed my teachers lived at school with no lives of their own. That's a silly idea. Or is it?

When I changed careers three years ago, I "lived at school" mentally, socially, and emotionally. Though my alternative teaching program seemed ideal at the time, I lost my identity in the shuffle between my day job and my night job. During the day, I taught 100 middle school students. At night, I was the student, taking classes toward certification. As preservice educators, my classmates and I expected the hard work to pay off. However, many of us did not anticipate the price we might pay for "overworking" (working too hard).

One friend, already into her first year of teaching described my new career choice this way: "If you want to be an extraordinary teacher, you basically have no life." Every teacher I knew seemed to consider stress as part of the territory. Yet, the effects of stress can be devastating to teachers—to anyone! Stress corrodes our personal and professional lives. It's an occupational hazard that new teachers often do not recognize, understand, or address until too late. Too late is when burned-out teachers leave the profession; the largest percentage within the first five years. Yet, burnout need not occur. By being aware of the ill-effects of stress, teacher candidates and new teachers can arm themselves with stress protection. The first step to long-term success in the classroom is developing a plan for managing stress.

My Plan

When my stressful experiences began affecting my outlook on teaching, I realized that I had to learn to live "outside the box" to stay in the profession I love. Setting realistic boundaries between my personal and teaching lives established my route to personal and professional satisfaction. The following practices have helped me set boundaries and regain balance.

1. "Me First"

And I don't mean selfish or self-centered! Commonly, teachers don't hesitate to prioritize the needs of others—particularly students—above their own. Though this other-oriented practice seems caring and noble, if it involves overlooking personal needs, then teachers' own resources eventually become depleted. When teachers' resources are exhausted, they are less willing and able to respond to the needs of others. Their wells have run dry. Yes, self-sacrifice is sometimes necessary, but when

educators attend to their own needs, their students ultimately are rewarded with a happy and refreshed teacher who is less likely to burn out.

2. Passion Outside the Classroom

I lived lesson plans! Whatever I was doing became a potential lesson: Museum visits morphed to art lessons, grocery shopping inspired math lessons. Though at first the possibilities were exciting, it wasn't long before I was "teaching" 24-7. My personal interests withered. Thankfully, I revived myself with pursuits that belonged only to me. For me, movement is an essential passion. I like martial arts, dance, and yoga. I also sustain balance by paying attention to other parts of my identity: writer, good friend, great cook, music lover. Whatever your passions, make sure they belong only to you.

3. Mentors Who Tell It Like It Is

When veteran teachers talked about their careers, I found myself dogged by the discrepancies between their experiences and my own. There seems to be an unwritten code among educators to speak positively about the profession! Yet, this code stifles honest conversations between beginners and veterans. Sure, experienced educators want to encourage—not discourage—beginners about the profession, but reality checks from the experienced can help new teachers adjust. I know that I needed to hear the truth about snarky parents, difficult children, and administrative apathy. Supportive, candid mentors are priceless!

4. Prepackaged Curricula!

To endeavor to be the most inventive, creative teacher the world had ever known, I disdained prepackaged lessons. However, I discovered eventually that many prepackaged curriculum programs actually are quite good. Though differentiating curriculum to meet particular student needs is necessary, starting from scratch for each lesson isn't. Embrace the work of others. Then, when you develop your own unique lessons, remember to share them with colleagues.

5. Breathing

Breathe—in and out, all the time, all day. Just breathe.

6. Accepting Mistakes

Lessons that bomb not only happen, but are essential in a teacher's growth. I could have completed Steps 1-5 with more ease had I recognized perfection to be a misguided enterprise usually leading to tears.

I hope what I learned helps others starting their educational careers. I'm sure that my stress management plan will become refined as I gain more experience and take on other responsibilities. No one plan lasts forever and flexibility is important. After all, maintaining a healthy, balanced life is a lifelong pursuit. I want to be the teacher who—when students greet me outside the box—is happy, healthy, and whole.

Resources

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