

Practical Theory

A View From the Schoolhouse

Letter To A Young Teacher

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I don't remember where I read it, but I was reading another article that mentioned the oft-quoted stat about how many teachers leave the profession within the first five years, and I was thinking about how many really amazing young men and women I've known in my career who fell into that category, and I was thinking about a conversation I had with an old colleague at Beacon and how she said, "Yeah... that year three or four mark, that's a dangerous time, because that's when you think you know so much more than you actually do." And I was thinking about my own progression as a teacher and how true that was... And I was thinking about some of the things people who stayed with the profession seemed to embody that the ones who left didn't. I was thinking about what I want to say to all those teachers who, right around year three or four, start to leave the profession...

Dear Young Teacher Thinking of Leaving,

You've stuck with this job for a few years now. You have made it past the hardest few years, but it's still a really hard job. And you're at a point where you know a lot about the job, but there's still a lot to learn. And the things you haven't learned yet are the some of the things you need to stay with this job. I don't know for sure that you should stay; after all, people switch professions these days. But here are some of the things it takes longer than three or four years to really, really learn. Some of these are things I've had to learn the hard way, some of these are things I've seen others learn the hard way, and a lot of these ideas are things that I keep having to relearn all the time.

This job is a marathon, not a sprint. As much as we don't like to admit it, we have to acknowledge our need to pace ourselves.

However, you learn something in time that makes that easier. You aren't their only teacher. You aren't the only adult in their life. And even if you were, you can't be everything to every kid.

You learn that perfection is a lousy goal because it is unattainable.

You learn that excellence is a better goal, but even that is a moving target.

In other words, you learn that the perfect really is the enemy of the good.

You learn that it's just not about you. And it's just not about the kids either. It's about the space between where the meaning happens.

You learn that you can't reach every kid. And you never really learn to be o.k. with that.

You learn that you know a lot less than you think you do.

You learn that your colleagues know a lot more than you think they do.

You learn to find the teachers who can prove to you that you can do this job for thirty years, and you learn to go sit in their classroom when you need to.

You learn that you don't have to be young to relate to the kids.

You learn that teaching is both an art and craft, and that it is something you get better at.

You learn that the more you document what you do, the happier you are the next year.

You learn that retooling a unit takes less time than creating one....

You learn that the more you get good at the basics, the more you can experiment with new ideas.

You learn that you can't grade everything.

You learn where you can compromise and where you can't.

You learn that not every kid is going to major in your subject and you accept that that's o.k.

You learn that you aren't perfect... and neither are the kids, and sometimes the best thing you can do is forgive... yourself and the kids.

You learn that taking care of yourself is important... and that the kids know when you do... and want you to.

You learn that you shouldn't idealize other jobs.

You learn that the worst thing you can do is think of yourself as "just a teacher."

You learn that the second worst thing you can do is think that being a teacher is the hardest job in the world.

You learn that the best things that happen in your class weren't wholly because of you.

But you learn that the worst thing things weren't wholly because of you either.

And you learn that, in both cases, your presence did matter.

You learn that every time you are feeling like really know what you are doing, it's important to find the thing about the job that humbles you.

You learn that every time you feel like you have no idea what you are doing, it's important to find the thing that reminds you how much you have learned.

You learn how to ask yourself, "Did I give what I had to give today?"

You learn how to look at that question over time.

You learn that life is hard... that the teaching life is hard... that the movies rarely get it right... and that being a young teacher means being the adult in the room, and that's o.k.

You learn to find that teacher's voice inside you that is real, authentic and effective.

You learn how much good you can do... and how important it is to find ways to do that much good over a whole career, not as a martyr to the job, but as a healthy, clear-eyed teacher.

You learn patience.

You learn how much you have to keep learning.

Most of all, you learn that once you stop trying so hard, you can listen better, and then you can hear what the kids are saying back to you. And then you can learn that they change you as much as you change them.

It's a hard job, it's a frustrating job, and the vast majority of our schools are underfunded, understaffed and swimming upstream to teach the adult values of hard work, sustained effort and sustained focus when there is very little else in teenage life that reinforces those values. And you realize that the kids are hearing your message, even when you think they aren't.

Our schools need so many more of those early-career teachers to stay in the profession so that they can become the master teachers of the next generation. We need you to stay and figure it out. It's never easy, but it does keep getting better as long as you are willing to continue to learn.

And you do learn that, in the end, so many of us love our jobs more than the rest of the world does.

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