

NEW-TEACHER SUPPORT

Progress, Not Perfection: Three Tips for Your Journey

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"A goal is a dream with a deadline." - Napoleon Hill

I'm a goal setter (and a teeny bit of a perfectionist). Although I don't always reach my goals, I know it's important to set them.

Visions of Perfection

When I was a new teacher, the goal to have the "perfect" classroom was top of my list. It started with making sure that my room was painstakingly organized, down to the last color-coded crayon holder. What is that, you ask? Well, it was a system I developed to house my students' crayons by placing them in milk cartons, which were cut, taped together, covered with construction paper to match the color of each crayon, and then covered once more with clear contact paper! Each little eight-box set was covered with the color of the crayon, so that students could place them back in the right little color-coded box after using. (*What?*)

And that's not all. This carried over to the ritual of covering all my white cardboard box storage containers (no plastic for me) with decorative contact paper. And to top it all off, designing perfectly coordinated bulletin boards with perfect themed borders, selected by season or lesson focus.

How in the world did I ever manage that? I'm shaking my head as I remember how. I spent way too much time in that room, long past the school day and into the night, seeking the goal of the perfect classroom long after others had already gone home. The custodians on my campus frequently had to usher me out the door at 10 PM!

With all that time spent on perfect classroom decor, the perfect lesson plans followed close behind, starting with the planning system. As a new teacher, I took great pains to find just the right lesson planner, markers to color-code my lessons, and stickers to give their appearance some pizzazz. The planning process took me days, and I'd spend most weekends on the living room floor of my apartment with curriculum tools spread all around me. I'd forget to eat at times, turning down social invites, until the perfect lessons were

developed, all written out by hand. No fun, no life!

So there I am: new teacher in the perfect classroom with the perfect lesson plan, hoping to be that perfect teacher. Meanwhile, the demands on my time start to pour in, my school starts a new initiative, and my adorable, not-so-perfect kids are in my classroom, crying, acting out, running around, and needing me to be anything but perfect.

So when did I finally stop and take a breath? Thankfully, through difficult discovery in my second year teaching, I soon learned that seeking "perfection" from myself as teacher was **not** what it was about. (*What was I thinking?*) Rather, it was about the journey or progress that I made in my work as a new teacher, and about how I unpacked that learning, set goals for myself when I failed, and laughed out loud with my kids (sometimes till I cried) that made a difference!

Savoring and Learning from the Experience

It's important for me to share this background, because I want you to know that I made it harder on myself than it needed to be. Teaching is far from perfect; rather it's "messy," and in that "mess" is where you will craft your teaching life and truly enjoy the journey.

Take a look at three tips with me today on how to chart -- and enjoy -- your early teaching progress:

1. Get Out and Have Fun

The process is simple. Take time for yourself, make play dates with friends, kick up your heels and have fun! This simple strategy shouldn't take much thought, but many new teachers neglect to do this in those early months or even years of teaching. If you take my advice and make time for fun, in the end you'll be glad that you did. You'll be a happier person and a happier teacher, not to mention a more inspired one. I make this important point because I think that when we forget to have fun, as I did in my early career, we lose a bit of ourselves, and then have to work hard to recapture it. I want you to learn from the beginning to have **balance**. It will truly enhance your level of satisfaction with your teaching career.

2. Capture It With a Camera

Get out your cell phone or digital camera and photographically chart the progress of your career. Snap pics of your room, colleagues, lessons, kids and events. I'm sorry I didn't take the time to do this. Early on, I was so busy seeking perfection that I forgot to capture it. Imagine that -- all those memories, lost! In my mind's eye, I can still see the crayon holders, contact paper boxes, bulletin boards and adorable kids in my classroom like it was yesterday, but I don't have any visuals to share. Don't let this happen to you. Slow down, snap a pic of the less-than-perfect (fill in the blank), sit back, enjoy it, and then share it. You will treasure these images for years to come.

3. Journal About the Journey

I know you think that you don't have time to do this, but believe me, you do. Once a day or week, 15 minutes is all it takes. And you don't have to put your thoughts in the form of a "traditional" journal. You can do it at the end of the day, in your lesson plan, on your cell phone or -- better yet -- in a blog. Charting and

writing about the progress in your practice, whether you choose to do it publicly in a blog or privately to reflect on later, will be priceless. It's what will give you that lens into the who, what and when of your career, that story you'll never want to forget.

I wish that I had taken the time to capture my early career with photos or a scrapbook, or journaled my dreams and goals. There were many roller coaster rides over the years, and it would have been great to have details that I could share. It stings a bit not to have those, but for now, I'll have to be content with sharing written tidbits of my early teaching journey on my blog, in hopes of offering encouragement to those who are just beginning their journey.

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/progress-not-perfection-your-journey-lisa-dabbs

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