

The Stages of a Teacher's First Year

— ELLEN MOIR —

To support new teachers effectively, other educators must understand the phases that novices often experience during their pivotal first year.

First-year teaching is a difficult challenge. Equally challenging is determining how to assist beginning teachers as they enter the profession. Since 1988, the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project, a 16-district consortium led by the University of California, Santa Cruz, has been supporting the efforts of new teachers. After working with nearly 1,500 new teachers, my colleagues and I have noted a number of developmental phases. Although not every new teacher goes through this exact sequence, understanding these phases is useful to educators who support new teachers, including administrators, teacher education faculty, and other support personnel.

New teachers move through several phases: from anticipation, to survival, to disillusionment, to rejuvenation, to reflection, then back to anticipation. Here's a look at the stages, exemplified by excerpts from new teachers' journal entries and end-of-the-year program evaluations.

Anticipation Phase

The anticipation phase begins during the student teaching portion of preservice preparation. The closer that student teachers get to completing their assignment, the more excited and anxious they become about their first teaching position. They tend to romanticize the role of the teacher. New teachers enter classrooms with a tremendous commitment to making a difference and a somewhat idealistic view of how to accomplish their goals. *"I was elated to get the job but terrified about going from the simulated experience of student teaching to being the person completely in charge."* This feeling of excitement carries new teachers through the first few weeks of school.

Survival Phase

The first month of school is overwhelming for new teachers. They are learning a lot at a rapid pace. Beginning teachers are bombarded with a variety of problems and situations they had not anticipated. Despite teacher education courses and student teaching experience, the realities of teaching on their own catch new teachers off guard. There is so little time and so much to learn. *"I thought I'd be busy—something like student teaching—but this is crazy. I'm constantly running. It's hard to focus on other aspects of my life."*

During the survival phase, most new teachers struggle to keep their heads above water. They become consumed with the day-to-day routine of teaching. It is not uncommon for new teachers to spend up to 70 hours a week on school work. They have little time to stop and reflect on their experiences.

Particularly overwhelming is the constant need to develop curriculum. Veteran teachers routinely reuse excellent lessons and units from past years. New teachers, still uncertain of what will really work, must develop their lessons for the first time. Even when they depend on textbooks and prepared curriculum, teaching unfamiliar content is enormously time-consuming.

"I thought there would be more time to get everything done. It's like working three jobs: 7:30–2:30, 2:30–6:00, with more time spent in the evening and on weekends." Although tired and surprised by the amount of work, first-year teachers usually maintain a tremendous amount of energy and commitment during the survival phase, and they harbor hope that soon the turmoil will subside.

Disillusionment Phase

After six to eight weeks of nonstop work and stress, new teachers enter the disillusionment phase. The intensity and the length of the phase vary among new teachers. The extensive time commitment, the realization that things are probably not going as smoothly as they would like, and low morale contribute to this period of disenchantment. New teachers begin questioning their commitment and their competence. Many new teachers fall ill during this phase.

Compounding an already difficult situation is the fact that new teachers confront several new events during this time frame: back-to-school night, parent conferences, and their first formal evaluation by the site administrator. Each milestone places an already vulnerable individual in a very stressful situation.

Back-to-school night means giving a speech to parents about plans for the year that are most likely still unclear in the new teacher's mind. Some parents are uneasy when they realize that the teacher is a beginner, and they may pose questions or make demands that intimidate a new teacher.

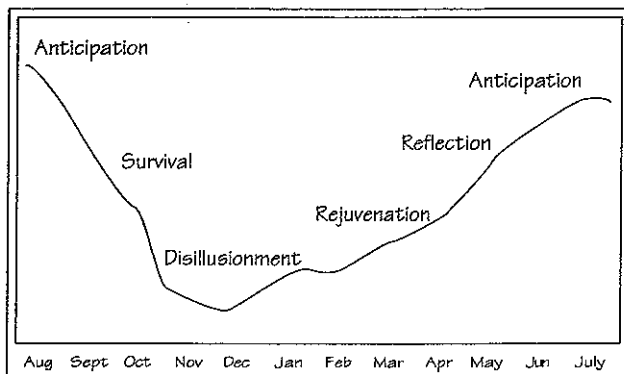


Figure 1: The Phases of a First-Year Teacher's Attitude Toward Teaching

Parent conferences require new teachers to be highly organized, articulate, tactful, and prepared to confer with parents about each student's progress. This type of communication with parents can be awkward and difficult for beginning teachers. New teachers generally begin with the idea that parents are partners in the learning process, and they are not prepared for parents' concerns or criticisms. These criticisms hit new teachers at a time of waning self-esteem.

This first formal evaluation by the principal also arrives during the disillusionment phase. Developing and presenting a "showpiece" lesson are time-consuming and stressful. New teachers, uncertain about the evaluation process and anxious about their own competence, question their ability to perform.

During the disillusionment phase, classroom management often becomes a major source of stress. *"I thought I'd be focusing more on curriculum and less on classroom management and discipline. I'm stressed because I have some very problematic students who are low academically, and I think about them every second my eyes are open."*

At this point, the accumulated stress on new teachers, coupled with months of overwork, provokes complaints from family members and friends. In the disillusionment phase, new teachers express self-doubt, have lower self-esteem, and question their professional commitment. Getting through this phase may be the toughest challenge they face as new teachers.

Rejuvenation Phase

The rejuvenation phase, which generally begins in January, is characterized by a slow improvement in the new teacher's attitude toward teaching. Having a winter break makes a tremendous difference for new teachers. The free time allows them to

resume a more normal lifestyle, with plenty of rest, food, exercise, and time for family and friends. The break also offers an opportunity to organize materials and plan curriculum. This breathing space gives new teachers time for reflection and a chance to gain perspective. Most of all, it provides hope.

Putting past problems behind them, new teachers return to school rested and reinvigorated. They now have a better understanding of the system, more acceptance of the realities of teaching, and a sense of accomplishment at having made it through the first, and hardest, part of the school year. Although still months away, the end of school becomes a beacon of hope. By now, new teachers have also gained confidence and better coping skills to prevent or manage problems that they will encounter. During this phase, new teachers focus on curriculum development, long-term planning, and teaching strategies.

"I'm really excited about my story-writing center, although the organization of it has at times been haphazard. Story-writing has definitely revived my journals." The rejuvenation phase tends to last into spring, with many ups and downs along the way. Toward the end of this phase, new teachers begin to voice concerns about whether they can accomplish everything by the end of the school year. They also wonder how their students will perform on tests, once again questioning their own effectiveness as teachers. *"I'm fearful of these big tests. Can you be fired if your kids do poorly? I don't know enough about them to know what I haven't taught, and I'm sure it's a lot."*

Reflection Phase

The reflection phase begins during the last six weeks of school. These final weeks are a particularly invigorating time for first-year teachers. Reflecting back over the year, new teachers highlight events that were successful and those that were not. They think about the various changes that they plan to make the following year in management, curriculum, and teaching strategies. The end is in sight, and they have almost made it; but more important, a vision emerges about what their second year will look like, which brings them to a new phase of anticipation. *"I think that next year I'd like to start the letter puppets earlier to introduce the kids to more letters."*

It is essential that we assist new teachers and ease the transition from student teacher to full-time professional. Recognizing the phases that new teachers go through gives us a framework within which we can begin to design support programs to make the first year of teaching a more positive experience for our new colleagues.

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