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## The First Year: How to Thrive as a First-Year Teacher

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# THE FIRST YEAR

# How to Thrive as a First-Year Teacher

by John-Rine A. Zabanal, PhD

## Introduction

Congratulations! You finished your preparation as a music teacher! You most likely completed a degree in music, learned how to play several instruments, completed tests required for licensure, and now you have your first job. Now what?

It is time for you to teach students how to make music. You may have other teaching experiences, which may include summer music camps, band camps, or practicum experiences—all of which I hope you found to be valuable prior to your teaching internship (Hourigan & Scheib, 2009). It is not until your first year of teaching, however, that you have true control of your classroom and full responsibility of your students. As a young teacher, you have mostly been socialized as a student. You typically have 13 years in K-12 schooling as a student; then, you may have spent four or five years working on an undergraduate degree as a student. If you decide to attend graduate school, that is an additional year or two living as a student. That means you have spent 18 to 20 years of your life identifying as a student! Once you sign your first teaching contract, you are suddenly pushed to the other side of the proverbial and literal

podium. This transition from being a student to becoming a teacher can be a difficult adjustment for many new teachers.

There are times when you might feel as if you are alone and that you are the only one experiencing the challenges associated with your first year. I am here to tell you that you are not alone. The purpose of this article is to help you calm down and realize that everything will be O.K. I was a new teacher once; every teacher was a new teacher once. Using research and personal experience, I will address a few issues experienced by many new teachers and provide some guidelines that will help you thrive in your first year.

## Reaching Out to Colleagues

During my last year as a music education major at The Ohio State University, I completed a final recital, I interned at three different schools, and I frantically applied to string orchestra jobs across the nation. It was not until June of that year that I landed a job at a high school and middle school in Virginia, nearly eight hours away from my hometown in Ohio. I was ecstatic to have a job! With the help of my parents and my aunt, I moved to Virginia, got settled, changed my driver's license,

and waited for new-teacher orientation to start. It was not until the day before the first day of school, as I sat alone in my newly leased apartment furnished with nothing other than a bed, a dining room table, and four chairs, that I realized what I had done. I had moved far from home to a state where everything was so unfamiliar, and I was about to stand in front of a group of students—many of whom were taller than me—and teach music.

It is challenging to be a first-year teacher. Researchers have found that beginning teachers experienced loneliness and isolation during their first year of teaching (Conway & Christensen, 2006; Jones, 1977; Krueger, 1996). Students are socialized in groups of other students in similar grade levels, which means they are close in age to one another. They typically take the same classes and have many common issues over which to commiserate. This type of socialization does not exist once students leave their academic studies, especially when starting a new job. The adults that surround first-year teachers are in different phases of their lives, and the social rules regarding age no longer apply. Young teachers have colleagues

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who are old enough to be their parents and who often have children of a similar age. Their colleagues may be getting married or having children. It is rare for there to be several other new teachers, or even younger and experienced teachers, who are in a similar life-phase for new teachers to befriend.

If you are lucky, there may be two or three music teachers in a building; however, there is often only one. It can also be difficult for a young music teacher to find colleagues who can relate to the problems and issues that are idiosyncratic to a music program, especially if you are the only music teacher in the building. As such, it is important for you to avoid locking yourself in your classroom or office to complete the never-ending checklist. You must venture out of the confines of the music room and reach out to other colleagues! Reach out to veteran teachers in your building or veteran teachers in your discipline at other buildings. Most of the time, they appreciate having a fresh point of view that new teachers may provide. They are also happy to share their wisdom and experience to help others. It is important that you establish strong positive relationships with veteran teachers so you can learn vicariously from their experiences and allow them to help you.

During my first year of teaching, I found myself consistently asking my much older and experienced middle school band and choir director colleagues questions ranging from classroom management to upcoming performance assessments. The guitar teacher, who was also early in his career but still more experienced than me, was impressed with how easy it was for me to ask questions and appreciated my willingness to learn. Although I did not think I was doing anything special, his approval of my inquiries stuck with me, and I never stopped asking questions. New teachers are often afraid

to ask their more-experienced colleagues questions out of fear of appearing incompetent. They want to prove that they can successfully lead their program on their own, and they often make mistakes that could have easily been prevented if they had asked questions. I was lucky to have lunch at the same time as my middle school music teacher colleagues. Due to this particular schedule, I was able to ask questions candidly in an informal and relaxed environment. We also had a habit of staying after school hours after the dismissal bell to socialize and share all kinds of stories and experiences. I encourage you, as young teachers, to seek these conversations and establish relationships with your colleagues.

## **Leading a Professional Life**

Most teacher preparation programs teach and enforce professionalism among their preservice teachers. Preservice teachers are expected to dress professionally during school observations, practicum experiences, and while attending conferences. They are also expected to be professional in all correspondences with their professors, advisors, cooperating teachers, and potential employers. This demonstrates discipline, proper manners, and overall "good class." This habit should not change once you become a teacher. You must adopt and maintain a high level of professionalism in terms of behavior, attire, and overall presentation in order to distinguish yourself from the students.

During my first year of teaching, a middle school student approached me, pointed to the logo of a name-brand clothing company on my button-down shirt, and said, "I didn't know you were cool!" I was wearing a clothing brand that was often worn by my students. After that incident, I made it a priority in my budget to add more professional attire to my



wardrobe and avoided clothing that my students might wear. You may also be tempted to wear jeans on jeans day or to dress more casually during spirit weeks. You may also see your more experienced colleagues wear more relaxed clothing on a daily basis. Remember that you are a new and young teacher. Sometimes your appearance of age is indistinguishable when compared to that of your students. Therefore, wearing appropriate and professional clothing is important if you want to be viewed as professional.

## **Concert Day**

I learned one important lesson when it came to planning any major event, and it was the importance of delegating tasks to students. For my first concert, I attempted to do everything myself:



setting up chairs, keeping track of student attendance, preparing programs, tuning instruments, fixing broken strings, and the list continues. I was exhausted before the performance even started. One of my more-experienced colleagues asked me why I did not delegate certain tasks to my students—I did have section leaders after all. After much thought and planning, I decided to try it.

A month before my next concert, I drafted a list of duties and responsibilities that would be delegated to my section leaders. Once the list was complete, I trained each section leader to do each task. I taught them how to tune with pegs confidently and quickly, to replace a broken string, to repair a chin rest, and other simple fixes. I showed them where I stored certain equipment, extra

sheet music, and how precisely to set up the stage. I trusted them to take concert attendance, to fold music programs, and to collect music after the concert. I also asked additional students to volunteer for various concert duties such as moving equipment, setting up the stage, handing out programs, and serving as ushers.

A few classes before each concert, I would give a brief lecture about Murphy's Law, its significance, and what can be done to prepare for it. Additionally, I reviewed the hierarchy of our orchestra. If students needed help, they should first ask a friend. If the friend did not have an answer, then they should ask a section leader. If the section leader was unable to answer, then the section leader could ask me. The crux of this hierarchy was that only section leaders were allowed

to ask me a question. Although this may appear cold, most questions could be answered before they arrived to me, and thus, I only handled high-priority situations. What I learned from this was that the students were able to be efficient and independent, and the concert went smoothly. Delegating tasks to students and preparing them may take additional time at first, but it teaches them how to be independent, and it makes the concert a less exhausting experience for you.

### **Classroom Management**

During my first year of teaching, I was the fourth orchestra teacher at the middle school in four years. My eighth-grade class had experienced a new set of routines each year, and the lack of consistency was apparent in the students' behaviors. As a new teacher, I struggled with classroom management in general, but this class had a student who was a special case. The student—we will call her Laura—disrupted the class by continuing conversations during instruction, by taking her time preparing materials, and by interjecting her thoughts at whim during rehearsals. I tried everything I could think of in my tiny toolbox of discipline techniques, and unfortunately, nothing appeared to work. After sharing my frustration with my music colleagues, I realized that I was not utilizing my greatest resource, Laura's parents. In fact, I was afraid of talking to parents and avoided it as much as possible. One day, Laura was being especially disruptive, and my usual disciplinary protocol was not effective. During my planning period, I decided to call home and explain her behavior to her parents. Unfortunately, I did not get to speak to her parents, so I left a voicemail. The next day, I overheard Laura's friends asking her to come over for the weekend. She said she was grounded for a week because I had

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called home. Needless to say, Laura was well-behaved after that.

Classroom management appears to be the biggest concern among preservice teachers (Campbell & Thompson, 2007; Kelly, 2000) and new in-service teachers (Krueger, 1996; Madsen & Hancock, 2002). It is a skill best learned in the field and improved upon with actual students, but how do we know we have a solid foundation for managing a class? Classroom management must be a multifaceted process that begins with the lesson plan. Students must be kept engaged and on task on a continuous basis; otherwise they may get bored and move to an off-task behavior that is not conducive to learning. Once an effective lesson plan has been created, it is now up to you as the teacher to maintain order. You must be able to identify students who are off task and quickly adjust your interactions to help them correct their behaviors. You can make simple adjustments such as changing your proximity to students, identifying positive behaviors in other students and using them as models, or reprimanding students who are exhibiting off-task behaviors. You must also have a protocol for students who misbehave, and you must be prepared to follow through with the protocol. Demonstrating consistency is the key to managing a class. If being late to class three times results in a lunch detention, you must be prepared to give the student a lunch detention immediately after the third tardy.

Another principle of classroom management is having a good support system. This includes fellow colleagues, administrators, and parents. The disciplinary protocol you established in your classroom will be strengthened if it aligns with a building-wide protocol. Additionally, if students see that teachers are consistently following through with a schoolwide disciplinary plan, they may be less likely



to test the limit of each teacher through various classroom interactions. It is also important that you follow the procedures that were put in place by your administration. A good administration will support you in any way they can; however, they will be more inclined to support you if you follow the procedures that are already set building wide. Many parents are also supportive of their child's teachers. Parents do not want their child to be a disruption in class, and many will support the teacher if they believe the teacher is fair and just. If you are consistent with your classroom management, parents can be your strongest allies.

## **Self-Care**

Early in my teaching career, I wanted to teach evening private lessons at a local music studio. I knew I did not want to overload myself with private students, so I attempted to be careful about accepting new students. Unfortunately, I had trouble saying no to additional students,

and I found myself teaching many more students than I wanted to over the course of three nights. As an itinerant orchestra teacher, I had several evening commitments at two different schools, and I found myself overwhelmed with trying to keep up with rescheduling lessons as well as my regular teaching responsibilities. I frequently forgot to eat meals and did not get adequate sleep, which did not help my overall health. I knew something had to change, and I needed to reserve more time for myself. Eventually, I learned to say no to incoming students, I lowered the enrollment of my private studio, and I limited my teaching to one night per week. I was able to establish myself as a private teacher, keep up with my responsibilities as a school teacher, and have time to take care of my own personal needs.

Being a first-year teacher is hard. Many new teachers feel overworked, overburdened, overtired, and overwhelmed (Jones, 1977). Even veteran teachers



experience a moderate level of burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion (McLain, 2005). It is important for you to practice self-care and to take a break. Self-care is defined as the practice of activities that people can initiate and perform on their own behalf in the interest of maintaining life, healthful functioning, continuing personal development, and well-being (Orem, 2001). There are several forms of self-care that many people practice at varying degrees such as exercising, eating well, prioritizing sleep, drinking plenty of water, and practicing good personal hygiene. Due to the demands of teaching and our responsibility to our students, however, we may place the needs of others in front of our own needs.

Self-care is a learned practice that must be performed deliberately and continuously by each individual (Orem, 2001). Taking the time to wash your hands and cover your coughs are learned habits that help prevent sickness. Another learned habit is knowing that it is O.K. to say

no. When you are asked to complete an extra task that is not considered part of your regular responsibilities, such as put together an additional performance or be in charge of a major event, as a younger teacher you may feel obligated immediately to say yes. But you must take time to determine if the extra task will prevent you from performing your primary responsibilities as a teacher or negatively impact your ability to prioritize your own self-care. If you believe you are up for the challenge, then of course, you may say yes. If you are already feeling overwhelmed, it is important to remember that you can say no. Ultimately, you must practice this in order to balance your personal life with your work life and learn how to decide what you can or cannot handle.

### Conclusion

It is tough to be a first-year teacher, but the good news is that you are only a new teacher once. If you stay at your school the following year, teaching will be much easier for you. If you decide to work at a different school, it may be your first year at your new school, but you are still no longer a first-year teacher. Either way, you get a second chance to introduce yourself on the first day of school, to prepare for the first concert, to establish your expectations with your students, and so much more. You will have a better understanding of how to manage a class, teach your lessons, interact with colleagues and parents, and solve problems as they arise. Your teaching identity will be strengthened as you have one full year of teaching experience on your own, and you can put your first year of firsts behind you.

Although you will be excited to move on to the next step in your teaching career, do not forget the new teachers who will follow you. Take some time to get to know them, to help them, and to guide them. Take a few moments to have a conversa-

tion, to share your experiences, and to help ease their fears. Do not forget that you were, after all, a first-year teacher at one point in your life. ☰

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