

CHAPTER ONE

The College Years

Avoiding a Long Walk off a Short Pier (Blindfolded)

I was never an “undecided” college student. I had received a scholarship in high school that would pay for my college education in return for my years of service in the public school systems of North Carolina. I knew my college major and my life’s work before I even met my adviser for the first time. I was ready to plan for four years whereas other college students seemed to be planning for the next day.

I had lots of great real-world experiences in college. I had hours upon hours of coursework, observations, and other educational experiences (e.g., tutoring, attending professional development seminars, meeting with friends to “talk teaching”). I had the most wonderful partnership teacher an intern could ask for. I heard numerous guest speakers who were the cream of the crop in public education. I even heard one of the greatest educators ever, Dr. Harry Wong, speak for six hours. I was a substitute teacher for two years. I read every piece of education literature I could find. I started the fall of my freshman year with an education course, and by the spring of my senior year, I thought I knew everything I needed to know about teaching. I was very successful in college, and I heard on numerous occasions that I would make a great teacher (where were those people on the first day of school?).

Confident and eager to interview, I set out to find the perfect system, the more perfect school, and the most perfect teaching job ever. It took only two interviews for reality to hit. Of course, “perfect” is a tough thing to find, and I soon found myself looking for a job that would be “a good place to start.” As a certified Grades 9 to 12 social studies teacher, I struggled to find a high school that “fit.” Finally, I received an offer from a struggling middle school in a big urban system. I began my teaching career in an eighth-grade classroom in a new city and I was all alone.

If you had to go back and do college all over again, you would probably do it a little differently (experience is a great teacher, isn’t it?).

2 Everything I Need to Know About Teaching . . .

Here are a few things that I believe can help you succeed—and I doubt anyone in your teacher preparation program will tell you about them.

BUILD YOUR OWN ROLODEX

Create a contact book with names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and other information for people who contribute in positive ways to your career. Whenever you hear a guest speaker or have a professor whom you want to use as a resource in the future, add his or her name to your book. Anytime you complete an observation, add that teacher to your book. Start your file at the beginning of your freshman year, or as soon as possible, and by the time you graduate, you will have a database of wonderful people who will help you thrive in your teaching career. A sample of a form for your contact book is included in the Survival Guide at the end of this book. Keeping track of the date you added the contact helps; it is a useful reminder of the time in your career when you met the person. Brief information about the circumstances of the meeting or what the person said or the resource he or she might offer will also help you remember why you included him or her in your book.

BUILD A PROFESSIONAL LIBRARY

Save *everything*! A bag of tricks can never be too full. When you receive handout after handout, lesson after lesson, article after article in your education courses, *save them!* And those textbooks that you thought you didn't really need could turn out to be some of the most valuable resources you have in the first year of teaching. Bloom's taxonomy is crucial knowledge when you have, sitting side by side, a student who can barely read and a student who could make a perfect score on the SAT. Understanding multiple intelligences will be your saving grace when an administrator pops his or her head in your door to talk about alternative assessment. Make sure you collect textbooks that are not in your planned or current area of teaching. For example, you might take several courses in special education even if you don't plan to get a special education certificate. During your first year of teaching, those textbooks will be invaluable to you, as you will probably teach students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

You have to know and understand where your students are coming from to prepare them best for where they are going. Take every opportunity to learn from a new experience, even if, at the time, you think that it

may not be helpful. Your teaching career may take you places you never thought it would, so if you are prepared, you will be successful.

LEARN FROM EVERY OPPORTUNITY

Talk to the students and the teachers when you are in their class observing, and take notes on what they tell you. Teachers seldom ask their students what they thought “worked” and “didn’t work” in a classroom or what really makes a good teacher. Those same students, however, can teach you a great deal about what they find most helpful. When you are assigned to observe a particular teacher, there is a reason. Schools don’t want you to see their weakest link, so ask the teachers you observe what makes them the best of the best. They will probably know what it is that they do that other teachers don’t. Keep a notebook of what you learn whenever you learn it (see the Survival Guide for a professional development log that you can use). Encourage other teachers within your school to do the same, and plan informal meetings to share what you have learned.

TREAT YOUR FIRST TEACHING JOB LIKE YOUR FIRST CAR OR HOUSE

Most people would not buy a car without looking around and deciding on a few top choices. Nobody buys a house, sight unseen. You should not take a teaching job without knowing where you are going because you are making a huge investment and you want to be successful. Here are a few things to think about as you move from student to teacher:

- When you begin to apply for jobs, first decide what type of students you want to teach. There is a big difference between urban schools and rural schools, impoverished schools and well-to-do schools, and small schools and overcrowded schools. If you are not sure who, what, or where you want to teach, do some research. It is better to spend a few days visiting schools to see how they are different than to pay for the “lesson learned” during your first year of teaching.
- If you have decided on a location (city or county) where you would like to teach, look at schools individually. If at all possible, arrange an interview and tour of the school when it is still in session; this way you will have a sense of how things look on a daily basis.
- Even the best school systems can have low-performing schools or schools with a special focus, and it helps to know where they are, if that is where you want to teach.

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- Many school systems hire teachers without assigning them to a specific school; they wait for transfer periods to end, retirements to be finalized, enrollment allotments to be made, and other human resources issues to be settled. This means you may not know where you will be teaching until very near your first day of teaching. If this doesn't suit you, see if the range of possibilities can be reduced, and try to visit some of the potential schools.
- Web sites maintained by state education agencies are a great resource for information to consider if you have a choice on where to teach. Test scores are usually easy to find; here are some other things to consider:
 - ✓ teacher turnover rates
 - ✓ percentage of students on free/reduced cost lunch
 - ✓ dropout/graduations rates
 - ✓ student-to-teacher ratios
 - ✓ percentage of English Language learners
 - ✓ magnet programs or special areas of study
 - ✓ Special programs under IDEA, No Child Left Behind, or other federal or state initiatives

SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW WHEN YOU LEAVE THE NEST

Moving from student to teacher is an exciting transition, but often, it is one that is not “covered” in preparation programs. When you move into your first year of teaching, you will need to have a few things ready as you enter the profession.

The first is a *personal educational philosophy* that reflects the beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and values that will direct the way you teach and continue to learn as a teacher. You may be asked to share this information during an interview, but more important, your philosophy will be the foundation for what you do in your classroom and what you become as a teacher. Most states have standards or expectations for teachers, and your philosophy should blend with them. An educational philosophy is a great item to include in your teaching portfolio. As you prepare it, be sure to include your views on the purpose of education and learning, the value of a curriculum, and the role of teachers. This is also a good place to describe your teaching style and your preferences for schools, classrooms, and professional interests (e.g., extracurricular activities, special skills and talents). The length and depth of your philosophy will depend on what you want to share. Try to be concise without leaving out important information. This can usually be done in two to three pages.

When you apply for teaching positions, you will need a cover letter, résumé, and list of references, as well as records of your teacher preparation experiences. Your *cover letter* should include accurate information for the school system and contact person, an introduction, a few statements of self-promotion, information about your professional development experiences, and a summary closing statement. This document should be prepared with careful attention to details. Double-check it for grammatical, spelling, or style errors; have a friend or two proofread it. This is the first impression you will make, and you know what they say about first impressions. Take this one very seriously: You are introducing yourself, creating interest in yourself as a teacher, and trying to convince the reader that you deserve an interview. Your *résumé* is a broader picture of your abilities and experiences, which will help others to see your potential for success (see Survival Guide for a sample). As you prepare it, take one or two pages to describe yourself, including personal information, career objectives, educational experiences, teaching and related experiences, special areas of interest and expertise, and other relevant information (such as leadership positions in school and community organizations, professional memberships, awards). You can also include a list of professional *references* as part of your résumé, or you can prepare a separate document with this information. When you list someone as a reference, be sure they know that you have done it. It is also helpful to let them know your plans for applying for teaching positions.