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Now That I Know What I Know

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Looking back at his first disastrous year of teaching, a veteran shares what he's learned.

It takes a village to raise a competent teacher, but I didn't know that as a rookie.

Descending P.S. 85's stairs to pick up my students on September 8, 2003, my first day as a real 4th grade teacher in the Bronx, I thought I had things figured out. I was 22 and newly graduated from New York University, a prestigious institution where—just as in high school—I'd earned top grades. The New York City Teaching Fellows, a selective alternative certification program, had accepted my application and deemed me qualified to teach in a high-needs public school. Up to then, I'd done pretty well as a student, so I expected that teaching—just a stone's throw from studenthood, I thought—would offer me a similar equation:

> *effort + intelligence + people skills = success*

I loved kids, had a career-teacher mom, and was willing to dedicate myself full-time to my students. How wrong could it go?

Once my kids and I arrived in the classroom, I talked at them about teamwork, rules, and respect. They looked at me while I delivered my speech, a response that I interpreted as tacit and complete agreement with everything I had said. A few students even spoke up to define respect and provide real-life examples. Their participation elated me, and I let them know it with fist bumps and celebratory hand gestures.

About 45 minutes into my teaching career, Fausto, a boy I'd been warned about in the faculty lounge, stood up from the reading rug during my reading of Taro Yashima's *Crow Boy* and wandered toward the door. The other students went silent, watching me confront the first brazen challenge to my authority.

It didn't go well. Fausto's shout of "This story wack yo!" drew raucous laughter, and I doused gasoline on the flames by replying, "The story is *not* wack. Are you ready to stop acting like a kindergartner?"

I never finished the sentence. The class had already degenerated into a whooping fracas ("Mr. Brown said *wack*!"), and I gracelessly scrambled to silence everyone. My desperation was obvious, the calm from moments before irrevocably lost.

The remaining 99.9 percent of the school year felt defined by this initial blunder. I perpetually battled uphill to gain command of the class, an often fruitless effort. Instead of teaching fractions, I struggled to avert fisticuffs.

I scratched out minor victories as the year wore on, but my students hadn't learned nearly as much as I aspired to teach them. Our classroom didn't resemble school as I had experienced it as a youngster. If my own daughter had been in that turbulent environment, I'd have had a heart attack. At the end of the school year I resigned, joining the legions of teachers who bolt the profession in their first years. I was sure that my initial power struggle with Fausto had cost the class a stable school year.

More Than Just Jumping In

I did return to teaching a year later, determined to get it right. Since then, and especially after the release of *The Great Expectations School*, my memoir about that rookie year, I've shared in dozens of conversations with educators and stakeholders about how to mitigate the steep learning curve of new teachers. Invariably the question comes up, Now that you know what you know, what would you have done differently on that first morning in the Bronx?

For a long time, I offered convoluted answers about classroom management systems or not letting the students see me sweat, but the truth is, I didn't really know. I was still looking at the Fausto debacle as a personal failure, through the lens of my equation for success that had served me as a student when the variables were all within my control. As a new teacher, I had approached my job with the same mind-set: I'm the authority figure in the classroom. I deserve the credit or the blame if my effort, intelligence, and people skills succeed or fail.

But as a new teacher, you don't know what you don't know. My grit and wit alone couldn't bring about a positive 4th grade year for my students. I had bought into the fallacy—propagated by the marketing for my alternative certification program—that basically anybody smart and willing can jump in and do this.

A New Equation for Staying Afloat

Now with a master's degree, years of experience, and National Board certification, I realize that a much more accurate equation for a teacher's success encompasses a sea of factors. The first three I list are within the teacher's control; the rest are not. The absence of any of these elements risks sinking the whole ship, as I learned in the Bronx.

Comfort with Your Teacher Persona

As Dan, I don't really care if a kid tucks in his shirt. As Mr. Brown, little matters more. As Dan, I utter a curse word every now and then. As Mr. Brown, foul language offends me deeply.

You can't entirely be yourself as a teacher; you have to cultivate a *teacher persona*—a blend of your real self and the benevolent pedagogical manipulator and authority figure that teachers must be. Kids can sense phoniness or fear; they certainly sniffed out and exploited my greenness on that first day in the Bronx. Losing your composure in front of students is bad, bad news. Many young people have a perverse desire to push their teachers' buttons; if you wear them on your sleeve, they're going to get pushed. My nascent teacher persona was a panicked one. I screamed at my students several times in my rookie year. When I did, I accomplished my short-term goal of achieving momentary silence but wreaked unknowable damage to my hopes for a nurturing team atmosphere.

Finding and embracing one's teacher persona takes time and practice. It's especially hard for new graduates venturing for the first time into the professional sector, when they are often charged with teaching students only a little younger than they are. Still, it's an important realization for new teachers to make—that they must build a hybrid between their authentic personalities and their roles as professional educators. The best way to do this is to closely observe and reflect on a variety of teachers in action, then try out some of their strategies.

It all boils down to coming across as well-organized and kind—these are the two qualities that stand out to students more than any other. To get there, follow the first teaching standard from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which is "knowledge of students." The first part of that is learning students' names as soon as is humanly possible. New teachers have a lot on their plates, but all is for naught if you offend a student two weeks into the year by blanking on her name.

Familiarity with the School Community

In the Bronx, my classroom was my fiefdom—Mr. Brown's room. It was the one place where I was in charge. I loved shutting my door on all the outside unpleasantness. I believed that if I could just get my room under control, I'd be on top.

This was an incomplete view of a teacher's role. Teachers, especially rookies, shouldn't be islands. Relationships among adults beyond the classroom walls make all the difference in a school. This includes administrators and colleagues, of course —but also parents.

Parents need to feel good about communicating with the teacher; new teachers need to present themselves as available and welcoming. Especially in low-income areas, some new teachers' negative preconceptions about parents of "these kids" can be highly damaging. Phone calls, e-mails, and conversations on the blacktop are very important. Indeed, a standard for every National Board certificate is "partnerships with colleagues, families, and the community." Not every outreach to a parent will bear visible fruit in a student's performance in class, but then again, teachers often don't see the full fruits of their labors. We plant seeds and are delighted when we see a real payoff in a student's growth.

Dedication to the Job

I wasn't used to failure when I stepped into my first teaching job—and it stung. Part of persevering in this profession involves carrying a high threshold for bureaucratic blunders, miscarriages of justice, untimely copy machine malfunctions, misguided policies, betrayals of trust, and other epic travesties—as well as one's own mistakes.

Being a dedicated teacher means picking your battles where you can and fighting them hard. One battle new teachers can always wage is with their own inexperience with lesson planning. On paper, my job in the Bronx was to teach several subjects to my homeroom of 26 4th graders between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. At first, I wrote up lesson plans on the template I'd been given and arrived at school determined to stick to them. They were my bedrock.

The reality is that as a teacher, you make countless decisions each day. The act of crafting and executing a lesson plan is like creating a delicately nuanced work of art—infinite adjustments based on your knowledge of your students are necessary. The ability to reflect and adapt your takeaways to the next lesson is what separates teachers who are getting stronger in their craft from those who are treading water, going nowhere.

School leaders should provide opportunities for collaboration between rookies and veterans, where new teachers can test out their plans, learn about good practices, and be observed in the classroom. However, if the school structure doesn't make space on the schedule for these connections, it's crucial to make them happen underground. Novice teachers can only figure out so much on their own. Dedication to the job means forging relationships and creating opportunities to pick colleagues' brains, figure out what works, and apply it to your class.

New teachers can be easily demoralized. Failure hurts, and the mixed messages in education can be baffling. Teachers are caught in a paradox of buzz phrases; they're pressured to "meet students where they are" while "setting high expectations for all." Idealistic preservice teachers tend to believe strongly in the latter, only to be confounded with how to handle real live students with skill levels all over the map.

Real dedication means working to differentiate instruction and never throwing up one's hands. I didn't understand this at my induction. The dedication and vigor I'd imagined in myself before starting the school year became much harder to marshal once my best-laid plans fell to pieces.

High-Quality Preparation Programs

The first time I spent more than an hour in a functioning classroom during the regular school year, I was put in charge of it—a setup for failure. The alternative certification model of several weeks of frantic summer training instilled in me more terror than confidence.

Teaching is an art and a science, and it takes a lot of time to figure out. Extensive observation and student teaching must be a bare minimum before any teacher tries to run a classroom. I doubt that any policymakers would welcome their child being taught by an underprepared alternative certification rookie.

Models of success outside the traditional graduate school route exist. The Urban Teacher Residency United, with partner programs in Boston, Chicago, Denver, and several other U.S. cities, is a revelation in teacher preparation. Recruits spend a full school year as apprentice teachers learning the craft. It's expensive; districts invest in the future teachers by subsidizing stipends and offering graduate-level coursework for highly motivated career changers. The program works. The coalition's website reports that 85 percent of residents remain in the classroom after their first three years, compared with 50 percent of urban teachers who have not participated in this program. The extra preparation time makes all the difference.

Supportive School Leaders

In the Bronx, my principal showed no interest in developing her staff. She addressed the faculty as "you people" in meetings and frequently cut colleagues off in conversation. The assistant principals took cues from her.

For much of my first year, the sight of administrators filled me with dread. The idea that they could help me become a better teacher was not even a passing thought; they were menaces to avoid. When my class teetered into chaos, I had no idea whether I could count on the higher-ups to help; sometimes they would undermine me with public castigation. One administrator told me the day before school started, "Don't need us too much, especially in the beginning. Prove you can handle yourself."

I'm currently in my fourth year at the SEED Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. Head of School Charles Adams and Principal Kara Stacks are both in their fifth years, and they are energetic, supportive former teachers. Under their leadership, staff turnover is low, and the continuity they have engendered is invaluable to the school culture. Test scores are also way up, but not because of drilling; it's a natural by-product of a higher-functioning community.

Adams and Stacks have also supported me in forming external partnerships with such local organizations as the Shakespeare Theatre Company and the PEN/Faulkner Society. These connections have been invaluable in exposing students to cultural opportunities and boosting student learning. It's energizing when my school leaders encourage me to try new stuff.

Kids in my class are now far less likely to freak out than my 4th graders in the Bronx were, but if they do, both the students and I know the exact consequences and chain of command for dealing with it. For better or worse, administrators mold the

culture of the school.

High-Quality Curriculum

High-stakes testing and its attendant army of prepackaged test-prep curriculum vendors are waging a formidable campaign to tear the soul out of public education. It's up to educators to fight this and make sure that standardized assessment is a tool, not a way of life. However, new teachers have virtually no clout when it comes to their curriculum.

Scripted curriculums are boring for students and teachers. People don't have breakthroughs or epiphanies, and it's deadening for intellectual curiosity. In the Bronx, test-prep season dominated several months—it wasn't what I'd signed up for. The idea of facing another school year with that pressure-cooker tension over testing was a factor in my decision to leave.

Conversely, a high-quality curriculum activates students' and teachers' curiosity and individual gifts. And there's so much exciting and empowering stuff out there. Administrators who choose scripted test prep are operating from a position of fear. I wouldn't want my kid in one of their schools. I also wouldn't want to teach there.

District Policies That Promote Good Teaching

Some people in power obsess over cosmetic things—like bulletin boards. This was the case my rookie year, when the regional superintendent was universally feared for her penchant for visiting classrooms hours before school opened, photographing your bulletin boards, and putting stinging critiques of them in your permanent file.

Even worse, the craze over high-stakes test scores has forced schools to distort budgets, schedules, and curriculums in a thousand ways. New teachers can't thrive when their supervisors' priorities do not involve excellent teaching.

District administrators need to hire strong school leaders, get them what they need, and stay out of their way. Part of what they need is high-quality professional development that directly applies to work with students, fosters collaboration, and stretches out much longer than a single drive-by experience.

Don't Forget the Village

For each of these factors, it's crucial for veteran teachers and school leaders to build the infrastructure to support new teachers' success. Rookies don't grow into strong teachers if they're in hostile environments or under attack.

Trial by fire isn't fair for anyone. For me in the Bronx, this approach invited Fausto to make a bombastic test of my authority and consigned 25 other students to education purgatory when his challenge exposed my inexperience.

New teachers can't do it alone, but with supportive leaders, student-centered policies, solid curriculum, and opportunities to learn their craft and connect with the community, they'll be in a position to earn those student breakthroughs and experience those epiphanies that provide the rocket fuel to continue and improve.

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