The Unanswered Question: Coping with How Much You Can Do As a Teacher

It was a rainy, cold fall weekend where I sat alone in my room and just cried. Then another weekend when I called up my best friend late at night and vented about everything. And then one day, as I was driving to work, I just pulled over into a parking lot I saw on the side of the road, slumped over my steering wheel for a few minutes and thought to myself, “Do I actually care about this anymore? Do I want to do this job?”

The answer has always—eventually—been yes. Of course I want to teach. I’ve known I wanted to teach since my junior year of high school. Scratch that. My parents would say I’ve known I wanted to teach since I was five and my favorite make-believe game was “School School.” (The repetition is important!) Occasionally, I wonder what it would be like to do something else, but at the end of the day, I’ve always come back to teaching.

Teaching is difficult. I know that.

Everyone says the first year of teaching is supposed to be the most difficult—that it’s okay to not be great the first year. It takes practice to get it right. Even after

student teaching, which is its own process of learning and developing, the first-year solo teaching can be rough for everybody. I knew about the first-year challenge, and I was prepared for that.

But I realized the second year can be just as rough. I had just gone through a few Knowles Teaching Fellowship meetings where I was asked to think deeply about how the Common Core math practices were being used in my classroom and what it meant for a student to do math in my classroom. I did a year-long inquiry into what group work looked like in my classroom for students and how they collaborate. These ideas made me think deeper about my role in the classroom and about the purpose of what my students were learning. I was still learning.

I told myself that once I cleared my state credential and achieved "permanent employee" status at the end of that year, I would feel more at ease with my teaching prowess. I knew I'd still be learning (and I am excited for that; I hope to still be learning even in my 25th year of teaching), but I thought maybe the day-to-day stresses would decrease. I thought I would feel more confident in my ability.

My third year of teaching came, and I thought I was ready. I was teaching two courses that I had taught before, and I was more comfortable changing things in my teaching practice to reflect what I had learned from the last two years. I was implementing new learning from my credential program, in-district professional development, and from my Knowles Teaching Fellowship work. I was experimenting with grading math on a standards-based system. I was trying to incorporate retake systems and new homework policies into my classes that better reflected my ideas around learning. I had fully bought into the professional learning community (PLC) model after going to a conference and thinking through it more with others at my school, and both of my PLC teams nominated me as their lead teacher.

In this third year of teaching, I thought, I was prepared to focus on these experiments with my practice. I thought I was ready to continue questioning my practice and continue improving.

I was not ready.

How do I know if I'm succeeding even a little bit?

To my surprise, my third year of teaching was the most stressful and made me feel the most like a failure.

I had the day-to-day stuff mostly down. My lesson plans were ready in time, my copies were made in advance, and my grading was (mostly) finished in a reasonable time frame. I still worked on inquiry in my classroom and continued thinking about how I could serve my students better. These were the challenges I expected to face, and I was comfortable dealing with them.

But some larger questions crept in and started troubling me—what was even the point of being a math teacher? How do I know if I'm successful?

Who was I, as a 24-year-old, third-year teacher, to make big changes in my school when I couldn't articulate my ideals properly?

My district provides PLC leads with coaches to help with leadership skills and implementing PLC processes. When I was feeling completely hopeless and exasperated with what I saw as my failure, my coach asked me a question that made me continue thinking about the purpose of math education. She asked me where my ideas about what math education could look like came from. My credential program? Knowles? Jo Boaler? Dan Meyer? The Freakonomics podcast about the state of American math education (Dubner, 2019)?

It was difficult to articulate an answer to her question. I kept doubting myself on what I believed was an ideal outcome for a math class. Every time I thought I had an answer like "I want students to problem-solve because it's useful in life" or "I want there to be more equity for student learning by detracking math at my school," I immediately went down an endless spiral thinking about what the underlying purpose was.

Who was I, as a 24-year-old, third-year teacher, to make big changes in my school when I couldn't articulate my ideals properly? Who was I to question the decisions of far more experienced teachers in my department and try something different from them? Why did I want to do this job and what change was I hoping to create?

Fragments of an answer

The trouble is, I do not think I have a complete answer to that question yet, nor do I think I will find a satisfying one. There are pieces of my answer that I know can go together. For instance, I know I want to help my students grow as mathematicians and I want them to see something interesting in the math I teach them. I also understand that teaching doesn't exist in a vacuum, and if I want there to be a lasting effect on students, the solution cannot only come from what I do in my classroom. Developing my students' mathematical knowledge and interest in the field also depends on their previous math classes, their future math classes, and the messages they hear about math from their friends, parents, and society at large! Even when I got to this conclusion for what my solution could be, it felt ridiculously overwhelming.

Spending some time thinking about my reasons for being a math teacher and what I hoped to accomplish, even if it is still unclear, made me more confident to talk about what I believe in. I could trace back to how my previous experiences as a math student affect my desire to teach math, how other teachers I've observed have inspired me to implement certain strategies in my classroom, and how different books I've read have factored into my view around the purpose of math education.

Yet I was still frustrated by not being able to have the clearest of answers. Even now, I can only talk about my vision for math education in vague broad statements rather than specific, narrow ones. The systems and policies that I think will support improved and equitable student outcomes are not definitive solutions.

I do not control the big systems, but I am in control of how I interact with students, and that's where I can make the most impact.

And, even if I achieve some small amount of success in my classroom, there are still so many other students on whom I do not have an effect. This was what was driving me into bouts of hopelessness around the purpose of teaching. It was

severely affecting my mental health and on a few occasions brought me close to quitting.

I managed to open up to a few teachers about these struggles, and they told me that they had similar questions and struggles themselves around their third or fourth year teaching. It was then that they had time to think about the bigger picture and their role in the education system. While I wasn't alone facing this issue, the other teachers I spoke with seemed to have reconciled it for themselves and figured out how to work in the system by compromising and changing.

I, too, had to learn to cope.

The big picture and coping

The most frustrating thing has been narrowing down my locus of control. I am one teacher. I can make some changes, but I cannot change the entirety of the American education system. While still unsatisfying to me, it is a way to cope with the bigger problems I am not able to affect. I do not control the big systems, but I am in control of how I interact with students, and that's where I can make the most impact.

Somewhat contradictorily, I've also found it helpful to zoom out to look at the big picture sometimes. Change is slow, especially when there are so many moving parts. I teach in the same district where I went to high school. Even in the seven years since I graduated, so much has changed. Change might be happening right now too, but it is not easy to see when I am right in the middle of the situation and unable to see it from a distance.

In the end, it seems like the best way to cope with the uneasiness and lack of control is by leaning into the uncertainty and lack of clarity in this work. Seeing that uncertainty as an opportunity for more growth, more inquiry, and more work to be done can be exciting. I cannot imagine what teaching would look like if I could just box it up, wrap it with a nice bow, and say, "This is done." And frankly, I think it would be boring if I could.

Every year brings new challenges and new perspectives. In order to keep finding joy in teaching, I need to be willing to continually refine and reevaluate not only my practices, but my beliefs—and be open to change. At first, this idea made me

feel a bit discouraged; after all, this means I will never feel completely comfortable with my teaching. More importantly, however, it makes me feel excited and energized—I'll never feel stalled or stagnated, and also, I'll never feel alone.

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