

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING: THE PHASES OF FIRST-YEAR TEACHING

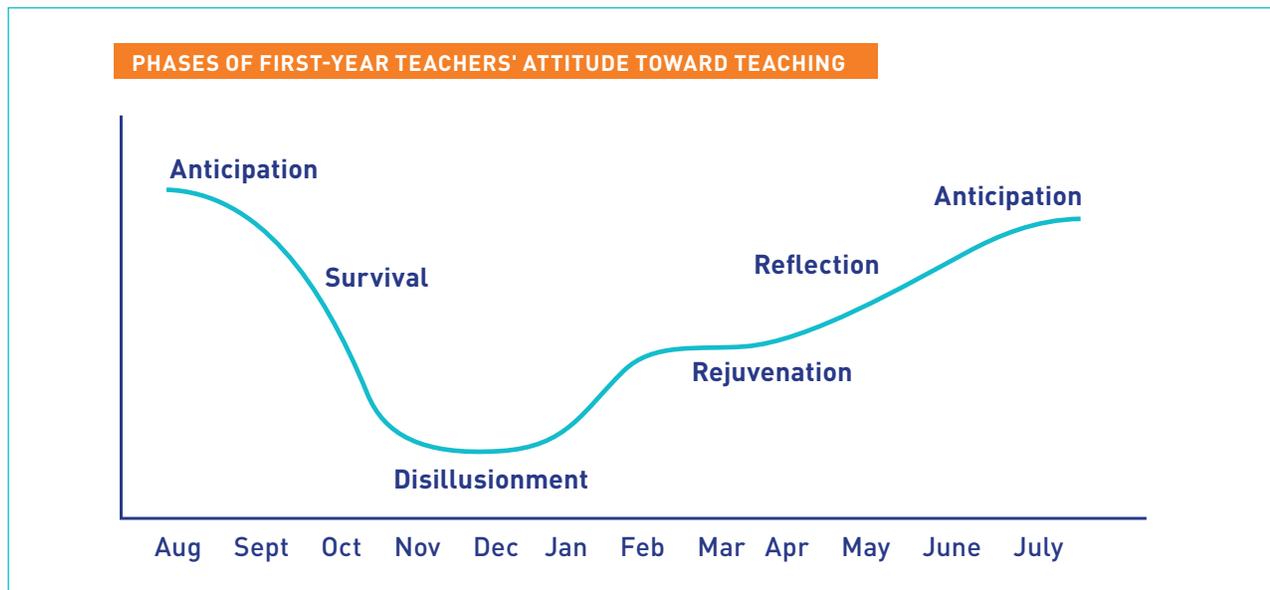


A teacher's first year is difficult, there's no denying it. With new students, new schools, and new districts come entirely new classroom dynamics—some of which teachers might never have encountered before. New students bring new challenges, new opportunities, and new teaching methods that must be implemented or even developed in the moment. This, then, leaves new teachers the task of not only understanding their own social and emotional competencies, but also their students' and how it all impacts instruction.

So, what do teachers actually need? Strong supports from teacher, school, and district leaders to feel confident in the classroom and better help students succeed. We need to build teacher and school leaders, instructional coaches, and teacher mentors who can provide evidence-based, consistent feedback on classroom instruction and a system that allows for such support.

Understanding what new teachers face in the classroom, the potential struggles they will encounter in their first year, and the different ways they react is the first, critical step for district leaders as they design and integrate support programs that make the first year of teaching a more positive—and successful—experience.

While not every new teacher goes through this exact sequence, these phases are very useful to support new teachers.



1 ANTICIPATION PHASE

From preservice preparation through first few weeks of school

The closer student teachers get to completing their assignment, the more excited and anxious they become about their first teaching position. New teachers enter 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.

2 SURVIVAL PHASE

The first month or two of school

This time is very overwhelming for new teachers. They are learning a lot and at a very rapid pace. Despite teacher preparation programs, new teachers are caught off guard by the realities of teaching.

"I thought I'd be busy, something like student teaching, but this is crazy. I'm feeling like 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 very focused and consumed with the day-to-day routine of teaching. There is little time to stop and reflect on their experiences.

It is not uncommon for new teachers to spend up to seventy hours a week on schoolwork.

Particularly overwhelming is the constant need to develop curriculum. Experienced teachers routinely reuse excellent lessons and units from the past. New teachers, still uncertain of what will really work, must develop their lessons for the first time.

“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, harboring hope that soon the turmoil will subside.

3 DISILLUSIONMENT PHASE

Six to eight weeks into the school year

The intensity and length of the disillusionment phase varies. The extensive time commitment, the realization that things are probably not going as smoothly as they want, and low morale contribute to this period of disenchantment. New teachers begin questioning both their commitment and their competence.

Compounding an already difficult situation is the fact that new teachers are confronted with several new events during this time frame. They are faced with back-to-school night, parent conferences, and their first formal evaluation by the site administrator. Each of these milestones places additional stress on new teachers.

During the disillusionment phase, classroom management is also a major source of distress.

“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 of the first-year teacher, coupled with months of excessive time allotted to teaching, often brings complaints from family members and friends. This is a very difficult and challenging phase for new entries into the profession. They express self-doubt, have lower self-esteem, and question their professional commitment. Getting through this phase may be the toughest challenge they face as a new teacher.

4 REJUVENATION

Post-winter break through spring

Having a winter break makes a tremendous difference for new teachers. This breath of fresh air gives novice teachers a broader perspective with renewed hope.

A better understanding of the system, an acceptance of the realities of teaching, and a sense of accomplishment help to rejuvenate new teachers.

Through their experiences in the first half of the year, beginning teachers gain new coping strategies and skills to prevent, reduce, or manage many problems they are likely to encounter in the second half of the year.

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 raise concerns about whether they can get everything done prior to the end of school. They also wonder how their students will do on tests, questioning once again 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.”

5 REFLECTION

May and June

Reflecting back over the year, they 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 importantly, a vision emerges as to what their second year will look like, which brings them to a new phase of anticipation.

“I think that for next year I’d like to start the letter puppets earlier in the year to introduce the kids to more letters.”



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