

Introduction: In For A Reality Check

I had undergone the full initiation process, and was ready to begin my first year of teaching. Or, at least that was what I believed. I was in for a reality check—a *virtual* reality check. I had a six-year-old girl try to wed me. I spent three months leading a group of students who spoke nine different languages. I stood and watched in horror as I witnessed a 60-pound girl tear a classroom to shreds, beat her aide to a pulp, demolish the principal's office, and then nearly conquer five adults attempting to restrain her. Halfway through my student teaching internship, I was asked to step in and restore order to a classroom full of students who had decided to provide their long-term substitute with a practical social studies lesson on the concept of anarchy. I recall the day that a student with special needs escaped from supervision, stripped himself naked, fled freestyle down the hallway all the way to the cafeteria, climbed into the sink, and then saturated my vice-principal from head to toe with a hose.

When I was younger, my vision of a teaching career and the images that flashed through my mind were a far cry from what I have actually experienced up to this point. Growing up the son of a teacher, I knew *Working for The Weekend* would probably be the worst theme song for the profession because my mother never had a weekend off to gleefully anticipate. My shoulders were sore each week from helping her carry bookbags full of endless piles of homework, which felt like sacks of concrete blocks. I remember all the 8:00 pm Friday nights she and I spent together having pizza in her classroom. She always used to emphasize to me how the concept of free time ceased to exist once you entered teaching. When anyone would ask either her or one of her colleagues how many hours their work week entailed, their reply was simple: "all of them." My mother always reminded me of this, and encouraged me to pursue a field where I would enjoy a lower stress level and more leisure time. I was the classic son who did not heed the advice and counsel of his mother.

When I first revealed my intentions to her to change my course of study, it was a memorable conversation. "You can't be serious!" she gasped. "Are you crazy?! You've *seen* how much there is to do for this job! You *know* there's no such thing as free time when you're a teacher! I busted my ass to make sure you could have a happy, peaceful life— not so you could work 24/7, have your blood pressure jacked up every day, deal with tachycardia, and do nothing but homework every weekend!" "I know its not easy," I replied. "I've watched you do it my whole life. But you always say how rewarding it is to make a difference for your kids." "You're right, it *is*— but you don't understand how stressful and overwhelming this job is. Trust me! I've done it for almost 40 years, so I know! Don't be stupid! Listen to your mother for once— she *knows* what the hell she's talking about!" my mother insisted.

I could not deny the logic. It was passion that I succumbed to. Out in public, my mother was bombarded with former students approaching her, me by her side. I remember one summer evening when a man in his late 20s approached her while we were in the grocery store together. From behind us, we heard, "Hey! It's you! Do you recognize me?!" As my mother turned

around, her face lit up. “Oh yeah! I remember you! How are you? What are you doing with yourself?” she inquired. “Because of you, I learned how to read. I hated school and thought I wouldn’t ever graduate, but you pushed me and forced me to learn even though I fought you every step of the way. I actually just finished my master’s degree. I want to say thank you for not giving up on me!” he proclaimed. At the moment, I realized the true extent of the powerful and influential role a teacher plays in a child’s life.

The hugs, the ‘thank you’ notes, and realizing her impact were what she always called “her true paycheck.” Her love of knowledge and passion for inspiring others were highly contagious.

From a young age, I was certain that regardless of alternative career path ideas I would often entertain, I would eventually end up in education for at least part of my life. The internal reward I received from helping my classmates and having my peers look to me for help was priceless. My senior year of high school was when I truly contracted the bug for shaping young minds.

Leading an enrichment group of fifth grade young Sheldons every Friday afternoon gave me such a high that could not be matched. I remember how quickly they cracked the secret behind my math mind reading trick, whereas most gullible youngsters would just conclude that I had psychic abilities. “Okay guys, so today I am going to demonstrate proof of extra sensory perception by reading each of your minds.” I declared. “But first, I will need you to follow a series of steps in your minds to allow me to connect to your chakras.” “Yeah, alright. Whatever you say,” they laughed, rolling their eyes. “Okay, so first... think of a number, but keep it to yourself. Now, take that number and double it. Next, add two. Then, divide your number in half.” I could see the wheels turning their brains as they followed each of these steps. “Alright peeps... I’m almost inside your minds. There’s just one last step for me to fully connect with you— subtract the number that you originally started with from the number that you have right now. Almost there, almost there... We’re connected—your final answer is 1!” I confidently declared.

I expected to hearing gasping, see widening eyes and jaws dropping to the floor. Instead, the initial reaction I received from one of my four geniuses was, “Hey! You’re not psychic! That’s a number trick!” One girl chimed in, “Yeah! He’s right! I figured out what you did. Our final answer is just half of what you told us to add!” This time, it was my jaw that nearly hit the floor. “Seriously?!” I said in disbelief. “There’s no way you figured out my secret that quickly!” “Oh yes, we did!” Snickered one of my four, star pupils. Friday afternoons were the highlight of their week, and mine too.

I reflect back with great nostalgia on the probability lesson I implemented with them, where we created edible butterflies to practice with tree diagrams. I brought in a bag of pretzels, three different flavor icings (vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry), an assorted pack of gummy

worms containing four different colors (blue, red, green, and purple), and five different flavors of jelly beans. “Your job is to figure out how many different combinations of a butterfly it’s possible to make with the supplies I have here.” I explained to them. “Each of you is going to build a tree diagram to determine how many different ways you can build your butterfly. Once you solve the problem correctly and I check your tree diagram, you’ll get to build your own butterflies and then eat them.” Each of their faces lit up as they gasped with excitement. The lesson was a success, and they especially enjoyed the consumption portion of the lesson.

The hands-on projects, the bonding, and the feeling of being loved unconditionally by these youngsters won me over to this crucifying, yet gratifying crusade. This did not mean that I was expecting a fairytale.

I was under no false delusions that the incessant demands placed upon me would be comfortable and painless. I already knew that my daily lessons plans would merely just be plans— never guarantees. Of course, there would be days when I would feel up to my ass in alligators, especially during report card weekend. Then, there would be the outside of the box kids, the contentious parents, and the performance observations from my administrators which would have me sweating like a pig.

When I committed to joining this profession, I accepted these inevitable truths. I conditioned myself to always expect the unexpected. I facetiously assert that I am flexible enough to bend, but not to break. Although, when I enlisted myself for this wild ride as an educator, I believed that if nothing else, at the very least, I would get to ride this rollercoaster in a brick and mortar school. My vivid imagination had led me to create many scenes and images of what my first classroom would look, sound, feel, taste, and smell like. However, even my potent imagination lacked the capacity to depict myself teaching a group of students who were not standing or seated in front of me. I never envisioned a virtual reality where I would not only be deprived of personal contact with my students, but also where I would have to manage all aspects of my job electronically. My tool bag was filled with hands-on, paper and pencil, and game style lessons. In no way, was I prepared to teach remotely. The education field is comprised with a variety of different personalities, and mine is certainly unique.

I remember a particular practicum seminar at my university, where my peers and I seated in a circle of desks. My university supervisor, a woman in her late 60s, about 5’3, and short grey hair, was seated in a desk directly across from me, in between two of the female students in my group. She adjusted her additional set of eyes, as she glanced down at the list of icebreaker questions attached to her brown clipboard. Then, lifting up her head, she smiled and exclaimed, “We’re going to go around the circle. When it’s your turn, I want you to share one adjective that *you* feel *best* describes your personality and explain why.” The 22-year old strawberry blonde seated to my left began, “A word for me is definitely optimistic. No matter what any situation looks like at the moment, I believe that when you have a positive attitude it can always be turned around for the better,” she exclaimed, batting her eyes and brushing her thick hair to the side.

“Mm, I love it,” the supervisor replied, smiling and nodding in approval. The instructor then tilted her head toward me and asked, “So, what’s yours?” “Well,” I answered, “I think the best word that describes my personality would be realistic.” “Hmm,” she replied with a furrowed brow. “Would you mind elaborating on that?” “A lot of people say that when life throws you lemons, you should just make lemonade,” I started. “But like I always say— you can’t make chicken salad out of chicken shit, no matter how hard you try!” My supervisor simply shook her head and rolled her eyes. These words of mine have definitely proven tried and true with the great educational experiment we call remote learning.

When the unforeseen zombie apocalypse, also known as COVID, struck the masses in the early months of 2020, I was a teacher with dual certification in both elementary and special education, working as a long-term substitute teacher in a district that I desperately aspired to teach in permanently. This district had a long-standing reputation for their cutting-edge curriculum, supportive administration team, responsive parents, and teacher-friendly policies. The cutthroat competition to secure a permanent position in this district, however, was unreal; clearly something I was not expecting. Veteran educators with years of experience from other districts, and even in neighboring states, would vie for their shot at an interview. It also was not uncommon to find one’s resume lumped into, and competing in, a pool of roughly 250 applicants for a single position. Although I adored this district, one of their main focuses was the implementation of state-of-the-art technology. I was quite vocal about my anti-technology sentiments. Even to this day, I still attest that technology has a personal vendetta against me. During my practicum and student teaching experiences, technology was the one area that always worked against me. My childhood background consisting of mere books, pencil, paper, an occasional hour of television. Having never played a single video game in my younger years probably contributed to my technological deficiencies as well. One of my favorite jokes was that if I was ever to be subject to eternal damnation, my everlasting torment would involve enslavement as hell’s I.T. person. I could fathom fewer fates worse that would be impossible for me to elude. Therefore, I remember my initially horrified reaction when the term “remote teaching” rang through my ear drums for the first time.

People automatically make the hasty generalization that since I am a millennial man in my mid-20s, I must have achieved the highest level of technological proficiency possible. I am accustomed to the surefire reactions of astonishment I receive from those who naively rely on my expertise in these areas. The typical response I hear is, “You’re young, kid. You’re supposed to know how to do this techy stuff.” Even during the second half of my undergraduate program, I only earned one “C” and, of course, this grade was in my prerequisite instructional technology course.

Virtual learning would inherently demand a level of technological expertise that superseded anything I believed myself to be capable of. I faced two simple options: embrace a technology baptism by fire, or desert the profession. Fortunately, my passion and love for the craft triumphed over my inhibitions regarding technology.

The first shutdown in March 2020 placed both my brain and I on the shelf for several months. The emergency version of learning that was rolled out in panic mode at the beginning of the zombie apocalypse crisis was done so in limited capacity. At that time, only full-time, permanent staff were included. Since my position did not fall into this category, I found myself without an occupation for the next several months.

The first two weeks felt like a bizarre, yet much needed vacation; however, the euphoria quickly dissipated. Working with my father on a few small painting and wallpapering projects helped curb some of my boredom. I also invested in a Lifetime Movie Club subscription, and binged on just about every thriller they had to offer.

During my time on the shelf, I was also recovering from an irritating upper back injury. One-week prior to the mandatory lockdowns, I was rear-ended at a four-way intersection on my way to pick up some fast food after work. The four-hour car trip to my aunt's funeral out of state that I had to make a few days later was a nightmare as well. The stabbing, burning agony kept me up nearly every night for two months. On the positive side, at least this injury did not require me to miss time from work or lose any pay. Those sleepless nights did, however, lead me to the strangest epiphany; I needed to resume teacher mode before my cheese completely slid off my cracker.