

Chapter 4-5

Grow From What You Go Through

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“Every expert was once a beginner.”

Rutherford B. Hayes

What a humbling phrase as I reflect on my 11th year of teaching. At this point in my career, I feel blessed to have served over 1,500 students and their families. Yet, that is not to say the journey was easy or without struggle. Despite the challenges, the rewards have been well worth the growing pains. Many trials and triumphs have been woven together in this beautiful tapestry of adventure in self-discovery, developing confidence, and building relationships that last a lifetime.

Everyone starts somewhere. I firmly believe that the place in which one starts is equally as important as one’s posture during the process of growth. My teaching journey was certainly one of humble beginnings. My journey began not in a designated classroom of my own but in several classrooms and school buildings across the county as a substitute teacher. Most students graduate in the springtime. However, as a December graduate (and one with a non-typical major: Interdisciplinary Studies K-6), I had a unique entry point into the teaching profession. I had resolved to bloom where I was planted—starting as a substitute teacher—even if that meant starting in a position I had not previously considered. The opportunities that substituting gave me outweighed any other, even those in a classroom of my own, as I was able to fluctuate between grade bands, spend time in various school climates, and ultimately decide which school community would be one in which I could see myself contributing as a full-time teacher. As I continued to serve faithfully in the capacity of a substitute teacher (and actively applying for teaching positions, of course), a door of opportunity began to swing open, thus inviting me to teach fifth grade the following school year in the school in which I had student taught and thankfully had a fabulous mentor teacher.

Eager to begin teaching, I gladly accepted the position that, at the time, was contingent upon the timing of the teacher's maternity leave. As the teacher was not due until November, I would continue substituting. When the time came, I would eventually take over as the classroom teacher for the remainder of her maternity leave. Or so I thought. August began, and since substituting vacancies then were virtually non-existent at the beginning of the school year, I asked the principal if I could shadow the teacher for which I would be covering the maternity interim for the first days of school to get a feel and bird's eye view of how a school year began. He kindly agreed, and from that point on, the teacher and I continued in close contact in preparation for her maternity leave. September came, and everything changed, but not as poetically as seasons. I received a call from the teacher, who informed me that her doctor had placed her on early bed rest and asked if I would meet her at school to review plans. Shocked but still yearning to teach, I agreed. After substituting that Friday, I drove to school that afternoon, which eventually turned into late evening as we prepared for the upcoming weeks. From updating the teacher website to following IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), I quickly got up to speed on the logistics of *what* expectations awaited me in her absence. While she assured me that we would remain in close contact throughout her absence, I wondered if and *how* this would all still be possible to accomplish given the abrupt notice and expedited change of plans. As I drove away from school, well past 11:00 p.m., my head was swimming with the reality of what Monday would bring. And, boy, did it bring a lot.

I arrived at school early that following Monday in September. The air was beginning to become crisp with the much-anticipated autumn. I felt like this was my moment, and I became determined to make this a successful year despite the unpredictable circumstances that placed me there. Standing at the doorway, I greeted students as they entered. Some students exchanged smiles with me, while others still seemed concerned about whether their beloved teacher was gone or, perhaps, she was just out for the day. As students settled into their seats, I introduced myself and could feel the tsunami of their nerves and mine. I assured them that I would care for them and that their teacher was resting at home to prepare for her new baby. I immediately sensed that their teacher was irreplaceable in their hearts and lives. I empathized with their sentiment and tried to serve them well through many trials and errors. I hoped that one day, my students would hold such high regard for me as their beloved teacher, but I quickly learned that the students' admiration of their teacher is one of deep cultivation, starting from day one. This cultivation took time, and I desired to learn more about the process to develop it. By the end of my time there that year in February, I had an entirely different outlook on approaching my classroom: relationships before rigor. But *how*? I knew firsthand now that this was an important piece to effective teaching, yet the starting point remained elusive.

I continued to substitute from February until May while applying for teaching positions in a very competitive season. I attended teacher career fairs and updated my résumé, but the full-time teaching position I thought intended for me did not come to fruition as expected. So many interviews. So much anticipation. So much hope. My heart sank more and more with each rejection. So many other teacher friends of mine were receiving their first full-time teaching position, beginning their second, or perhaps even their third. I felt so

behind. Why was this happening to me? What did I do wrong? Am I not called to teach? These questions plagued me for some time, but I persevered through spiritual guidance and patience. Then, as if smiling in anticipation like a child at Christmas, I finally received the calling I was waiting for: a job offer. There were two. The first position was a long-term substitute teacher position, which then turned into an educational assistant for math in the special education department of a middle school. The second position included serving as a Reading Specialist and homework tutor for Power Hour at the Boys and Girls Club. As I was living on my own, I desperately needed both jobs to be able to stay afloat financially. I had thought it best to work full-time as an educational assistant during the school day and then work part-time in the afternoons at the Boys and Girls Club.

Middle school *and* math? Helping with homework after an already taxing day? Not exactly what I had envisioned, but I would take the opportunity to evolve as an educator and eventually as a person. During my time in these roles, I learned to see students more wholly. In working with small groups, I gained the necessary tools to engage with learners on a one-to-one basis and meet them where they were academically and, oftentimes, emotionally. This was it; I truly started to feel the connection I sought and knew was possible. I loved interacting with those students and will always carry their impact with me. While serving at the Boys and Girls Club, my heart became lighter and more childlike as I saw what students were like after the school day: just kids. Kids who are silly and messy seek connection just as adults do but may do so in different ways. What a delight to lead the Club Code for children each day before Power Hour and eventually have children volunteer (sometimes reciting the Club Code with pretend finger mustaches). I still have some pictures they created for me, and I keep them at my school desk as a reminder to always see students as kids, too. Not only were the students and Club kids pivotal to my evolution, but the school and club environments also contributed to this metamorphosis.

Of particular intrigue was the school climate that sought to meet all needs of students—starting from the basics of food and safety to a sense of belonging, empowerment, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Some of my best memories of that experience included the annual Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) lock-ins (a statewide assessment program), culture food festivals, and awards day that encompassed more than just grade point averages and instead highlighted grit, growth, and various personalities, too. Similarly, the Boys and Girls Club would host gift giveaways at Christmas, fall festivals, and community events like fishing outings and field trips, and they would provide dinner twice a week for all children at the Club. Beautiful times. This part of the journey was truly Maslow before Bloom¹ in full action, and my heart was full. Little did I know this season of my career would soon launch me into my official teaching career at the same school as a seventh-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher the following August. In retrospect, both bookends of serving in a middle school and being involved in the social cultures of the Boys and Girls Club were necessary to embed within my teaching practice.

The next school year was about to begin. I tearfully said goodbye to my math intervention and Boys and Girls Club children. It was now time to take what they had so graciously and preciously given me and to build my

classroom using all the tools and experiences I had acquired. It was mid-July, and my mother had volunteered to help me set up my classroom—complete with homemade owl curtains. I looked forward to creating a sound environment where students could learn, grow, and fail safely. Before I planned any curriculum, I knew I needed to craft a place that children wanted to abide in each day. Once the last drop of hot glue had dried, I stepped back and admired how far I had come. What a journey. What a growing process. What determination and humility I had to get me to this point. But the journey was just beginning.

Seventh graders. What a fun bunch! They were the perfect blend of not being afraid to be silly and wanting to be treated like grown-ups. It is such a balance to uphold but an exciting challenge. While the year began with optimism and fresh eyes, it was nothing short of a baptism by fire. Oh, the preconceived notions that I had of teaching and student learning! That notion quickly vaporized once I stepped into my very own classroom where it was just me and them. Slowly but surely, I began connecting with my students and did my best to provide the ELA curriculum accurately. I spent many evenings after school past 6:00 p.m. After Christmas break, I eventually had to set my timer to leave by 4:15 p.m. as staying that late consistently was not serving me (or my newlywed marriage) well. By 4:15 p.m., I would head to the gym, giving my body and mind a change of scenery and space to grow and reflect. My energy increased, and my classroom management became less of a strain as I could work out most of my frustrations through movement at the gym. Spring came, and with it, TCAP testing. While a daunting task to facilitate, I had a supportive team all year and an administration willing to assist. May came, and while I felt accomplished, I knew there was still so much to learn. Overall, it was a great first year, which I think about often.

I was promoted to Writing Department Chair the following year and received my first Residency II teacher candidate. I had neither asked for nor inquired about either position and thus felt gratitude for being considered for such leadership roles. During my first year of teaching, I made it a point to seek out strong teachers who displayed positive rapport and made connections with their students. I became a student of these teachers, gleaned everything they could teach me, and contributed as actively as possible with activities and ideas. As this was only my second year, I maintained the same posture and sought out these same teachers and other leaders in the building to seek their input and perspectives on authentic leadership. I also knew that much of what I would need to lead would come from research, so I invested my time and energy into pursuing servant leadership and best practices for teaching writing. I continued to evolve and grow in my teaching practice, always trying my best to learn from mistakes gracefully and to stay committed to my *why* each day, regardless of title or perceived influence. Throughout the years, I have continually felt blessed with leadership positions such as Grade Level Chair, Department Chair, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Lead, In-service presenter, hospitality committee member, Ask Me Squad member, and mentor teacher.

Fast forward to today, I am blessed to continue to serve in consistent leadership as ELA Department Chair, Curriculum Lead, PLC Lead, Resilient Schools Team, and In-service presenter. I have taught as an adjunct

professor for at least two semesters. I have also presented at national conferences sponsored by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) and the American College Testing (ACT) Southeast. I recently completed my Ed.D. in Assessment, Learning, and Student Success: Higher Education Concentration from Middle Tennessee State University. I genuinely believe that each path I have taken up to this point has led me to where I am today. I encourage anyone who is considering teaching or who is currently in the field to 1) surround yourself with positive influences, 2) take pride in what you do, as your students will take notice, and 3) be willing to learn from those around you—seek out others who are better than you and who will challenge you to be your best. Our students deserve it.

REFERENCES

- Mullen, G. (2024, August 24). “*Maslow before Bloom.*” Exploring the Core. <https://www.exploringthecore.com/post/maslow-before-bloom>
- Summers, R. S. (1996). *Rutherford B. Hayes*. POTUS. <https://potus.com/rutherford-b-hayes/>

Endnote

[1] A concept that bridges together Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives and is often used in education, psychology, and leadership contexts to emphasize the importance of addressing basic human needs before focusing on higher-order learning or cognitive goals.