Student to teacher transition: First Days of School Experience

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A 1990s graduate of Andrews University’s Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum (TLC) program recently returned to the university to take a course on classroom management. After years of teaching experience, was there anything new she could learn in this area? The teacher took “The First Days of School Experience,” a course not taught when she was a student.

Was the course helpful? Here’s her testimony: “When I started teaching fourth grade, the biggest challenge was how to prepare for the beginning of the year. I remember sitting at my desk and saying to myself, ‘Where do I begin?’ One day I was a student, and then suddenly with a degree in my hand, I find myself a teacher. How do I handle the transition? Others who graduated with me probably had the same question, and eventually some quit teaching because of lack of support and understanding of what it takes to move from being a student at the college to becoming a teacher in a school. Somehow I managed, but this opportunity to take the new course in classroom management brought fresh perspectives to me. What I appreciated most from the class was the worship, classroom management lectures, and practice-oriented ideas and experience.”

This teacher’s story is not uncommon. Transitioning from student to teacher requires more than learning educational theories, memorizing children’s developmental stages, and picking apart complex concepts. Public and parochial schools from elementary through secondary level all search for effective teacher candidates with a good working knowledge of core subjects, pedagogical skills, and the ability to shift comfortably into a teaching role. Too often, teacher candidates and beginning teachers do not achieve these expectations. In the United States, 40 to 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession in the first few years, according to surveys by the U.S. Department of Education.

Teacher-preparation programs have as their goal to equip candidates with the knowledge and skills to perform up to expectations as well as to make the commitment to education as a lifetime career. Research suggests that teacher-preparation programs need to regularly evaluate their performance and implement necessary changes to better serve...
these candidates. The First Days of School Experience class at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, helps teacher candidates successfully transition into their new role. The following is a brief history of the course developed at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and its plans for the future.

**Historical Background: First Days of School Experience**

In 1984, the Panel of Preparation of Beginning Teachers listed classroom management as one of the primary skills needed for new teachers, in addition to content knowledge and an understanding of students’ overall backgrounds. Many teacher candidates from educational programs, although well equipped with educational theory, lack behavior-management skills. Research has shown that integrating management skills and strategies as part of teacher-preparation programs fosters readiness and helps ensure greater success for teacher candidates. With this understanding, Andrews University’s First Days Director of Student Teaching, Dr. Richard Orrison, researched various management styles found in “Positive Classroom Management” by Fred Jones. The university’s education professors attended Fred Jones workshops, participated in role plays, reviewed current research, and developed a new course in the teacher-education program that focused on management and effective transition into a classroom. The main topics were what Jones calls the four legs of management: limit setting, responsibility training, omission training, and the back-up system. Alongside these four main themes, job preparation, humor in the classroom, evaluation, and testing were included in the course.

The First Days of School Experience started as a six-week summer intensive for all seniors who were to student teach the following year. It included lectures, hands-on application, and practical methods inside the classroom, as well as 50 hours of field experience in local schools. If schedules permitted, Andrews’s education professors partnered student-teaching candidates with experienced classroom mentors. The field experience allowed the teacher-candidates to observe and to participate in preparing a classroom for the beginning of the school term. The First Days Experience helped students understand that no instruction can occur without a management plan in place and provided an overview of how to apply classroom management. In addition, the course stressed that the first minutes of the first day are crucial and set the tone for the whole school year.

From the beginning, a core group of Andrews’s professors have taught the First Days of School Experience content, and the course has included various activities as well as expectations for the attendees:

- Desirable behaviors and strategies are demonstrated from the moment teaching candidates enter the classroom. Establishing routines and procedures creates a well-organized environment.
- The professors greet participants at the door, project board work on the screen, conduct daily devotions, and present the topic for the morning or afternoon.

**About the Course**

The First Days of School Experience, which started in 1996, is a three-week intensive session sponsored by the School of Education’s Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Department at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Prior to student teaching, teacher candidates attend this course, which focuses on classroom management, instructional strategies, interview preparation, and classroom field experience. The course is coordinated and taught by a core group of three to four professors who are assisted by graduate students each August. First Days combines practical learning in and outside the classroom. Each year, between 20 and 40 teacher candidates enroll in the course. Students are matched with a teacher in the field and learn firsthand the procedures and planning involved in getting a classroom ready to welcome students for the first day of school. The course is a keystone experience for teacher candidates in the Andrews education program that provides academic and practical strategies which will help ensure the teacher candidates’ future success in their chosen field.
In order for teachers to effectively manage students, they need to understand the factors involved in making decisions. These include one's personal background as well as belief system regarding goal achievement. Personal reflection helps educators develop an individualized approach to effective and responsible management. Gradually, they gain a better personal understanding of the experiences that shape children's behavior. The ability to recognize student differences can enhance the teacher's ability to manage curriculum and to create a positive climate for learning.

Many teacher candidates at a variety of institutions express discontent about their preparation programs. Their most common concern relates to behavior management. Many teachers in training perceive themselves as ill-equipped to manage students effectively or to deal with behavior issues. New teachers often sense a disconnect between the theory and strategies learned in their education programs and the reality of the classroom. Some studies suggest the need for classroom-management methods to be interwoven throughout the teacher-preparation program. Other studies suggest these programs deal with the teaching of classroom-management strategies, methods, and intervention separate from content and instructional strategies. Concerns and research findings such as these have provided the incentive for continuing to improve the First Days Experience course through greater emphasis on effective and diverse classroom-management strategies.

**The First Days of School Experience Today**

A review of the literature findings on classroom management and the concerns of the beginning teacher indicate that the First Days of School Experience and other such courses are just as relevant today as they were two decades ago. In fact, with the mainstreaming and inclusion of diverse students, the teaching of behavior management is even more essential in order to equip teacher candidates with the skills to make a positive difference for the students they teach—and to encourage teachers to remain in the profession. Exit surveys of student teachers who participated in the class during the past four years indicate that the First Days of School Experience is a valued opportunity in the education program. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Board of Examiners in 2011 found that the First Days of School experience was a venue that added to the knowledge base for teaching, particularly in the area of classroom management.

**Shaping Content**

The classroom-management strategies that form the main focus of the First Days of School Experience include the following: an overview of various approaches to management—from a personal-needs perspective of Maslow to the human-development approach of Erikson, the social-factor perspective of Elkind, and current brain research that helps participants understand children's cognitive development. Identifying factors that influence childhood behavior assists in shaping realistic expectations of students taking the course. Fred Jones's Positive Classroom Management techniques suggest intentional planning regarding classroom climate and structure, and building responsibility, which helps children understand what is expected at specific times such as class transitions. Jones also includes the concept of setting limits by establishing procedures and rules in the classroom that help the teacher to develop a positive attitude and consistent self-control.

In the First Days Program, candidates learn and practice simple and effective strategies that can be implemented consistently and in varied situations such as the use of body language, being business-like, working the crowd, using proximity to stop disruption, walking around the classroom to observe student behavior, and teaching from any location except seated behind the desk. The use of silence, attentive listening, and appropriate response are both an art and a science, and are an important part of classroom management. A teacher candidate majoring in Spanish and biology described the exercises taught in class as "a practical and safe environment to practice my emerging skills in classroom management and instruction." Some auxiliary topics include spiritual content, humor, inner-city strategies, and the job interview.

At the beginning of the three-week session, teacher candidates are organized into small groups called quadrad groups consisting of diverse individuals (gender, ethnicity, and aca-
demic level) because heterogeneous groupings are believed to foster enthusiasm and cooperative interaction. The activities allow students to share strengths and a variety of strategies, enhancing the group dynamics as well as providing more opportunity for student responses. Reflecting on the experience, one teacher candidate said, “It was fun to collaborate and work together while learning about effective, practical classroom management.”

Teacher candidates often have hectic schedules and harried lives. So the first official business of the course day is spending time in reflection. The devotional reading for the course comes from a digest-sized book, The Prayer of Jesus by Hanegraaff. In small groups, the students unpack and divide the reading. One professor leads out in this spiritually reflective time, and then engages the class in dialogue using a prescribed question that the groups must discuss or post on butcher paper or posters. The small-group time leads into a brief whole-class conversation that enables participants to gain insight from diverse viewpoints.

This contemplative devotion time has been extended to 15 minutes each morning, based on input from previous graduates who asked for more time to meaningfully unpack material and thoughts while allowing the modeling of a balanced Christian lifestyle and teaching in the style of the Master Teacher. From the first to the last day, teachers and students connect to the Source of true education. Most go into education as a mission: We at the TLC teacher-preparation program, and specifically in First Days, seek to equip teacher candidates with the skills to journey toward that mission. This is one way that an effective teacher-preparation program can integrate spiritual elements in order to “send forth ... individuals who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions,” who are “thinkers and not mere reflectors of other people’s thought.”

Using Humor

Seeing the funny side of situations and defusing tense moments with humor help to create and maintain balance for both teacher and student. Humor is integrated into the First Days classroom management content because it can promote a good attitude, motivate learning, and aid in classroom management. When used appropriately, humor can de-escalate awkward situations and help encourage small- and whole-group cohesion. A science teacher candidate noted, “Learning how to use humor in the classroom as a teaching tool was one method that I found to be beneficial by creating a welcoming classroom environment and allowing children to reach into their previous knowledge connecting humor with a relevant topic at hand.” A guest speaker discusses the topic with the First Days students, giving real-life examples as well as an overview of the types of humor to use and to avoid. Students are encouraged to ask questions and voice potential concerns.

In addition to the presenter on humor in classroom management, a guest teacher from an inner-city middle school discusses approaches for teaching a diverse urban population, a new addition to the course. Learning how to instruct and manage at-risk students and those from lower socioeconomic levels means dealing with some unique challenges, which can give deeper awareness to all candidates. A music director who has taught for nine years in the Benton Harbor, Michigan, district shares her unique insights into the lives of her students as well as some best practices in the classroom. Urban educational positions are often available, but frequently difficult to fill. Exposing the teacher candidates to a seasoned educator’s perspective gives them reason to consider such stimulating employment openings in the future.

Preparing for Job Interviews

Applying for their first job often intimidates teacher candidates, so the First Days Experience includes polishing a cover letter and résumé, compiling personal information for a directory that is sent to local public and parochial school administrators, rehearsing good interview protocol, and gaining discernment about the interview process from the perspective of an administrator.

The principal of a local public school tells the First Days participants that the do’s and don’ts of getting a teaching position are the same as those for interviewing for any job: Obtain and carefully prepare the required documents; wear professional attire; arrive on time; be cheerful in your responses; and don’t forget to send a thank-you note. Mock

First Days Class members dress for mock interviews and success.
interviews with local K-12 public and private school administrators have been incorporated into the First Days program. Each quadrad meets with an assigned administrator, and two of the group members volunteer to be interviewed. Excitement surrounds this event as the teacher candidates come dressed to impress as well as to interact with influential individuals in education. One of the elementary teacher candidates recalled this occasion as a “highlight . . . . the review of our résumé and asking us questions used in interviews [was] helpful . . . and demonstrated [that] our professors are concerned with preparing us for all situations that we will encounter on our way to becoming exceptional educators.” These strategies help shape teacher candidates’ understanding of the importance of structure and planning.

Organizing Structure

Over time, the First Days of School Experience has been modified from a six- to a three-week summer intensive. Currently, the primary focus is teaching and modeling classroom-management strategies. The testing-and-evaluation portion once combined with the program has been removed and is now a stand-alone class. The course is currently divided into weekly sections emphasizing particular grade-level strategies. The first week deals with secondary level, the second week with middle school, and the last week with lower elementary levels, thus ensuring that all teacher candidates learn strategies that are appropriate to the grades they will be teaching and to their degree specialization. One graduating teacher candidate praised the “wonderful complement of cooperative learning activities, practical information, physical movement, and well-sequenced topics.”

Practical Skills and Qualifications

The First Days Experience combines field work with in-class learning and activities. Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and background checks (including fingerprinting) are state requirements of all individuals working with children. In the past, each teacher candidate had to figure out how to work these into his or her schedule, or the activity might be organized separately by the university education club. More recently, Andrews’s Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Department coordinates with the university’s aquatic director to teach CPR during scheduled class time several mornings—a convenient, cost-effective, and beneficial collaboration. During breaks, the local Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) representative fingerprints the teacher candidates. These services alleviate stress for our students and are an efficient use of time.

During the three-week intensive First Days experience, 35 hours of field experience are required, during which candidates acquire firsthand knowledge of how to prepare a classroom for the opening day of school. The total number of hours devoted to this area is fewer than in years past, making it easier to fit in all of the desired topics. Andrews University’s director of student teaching, Barbara Reid, matches teacher candidates with mentors, and fieldwork begins the morning of day one of the second week. To make the program work, flexibility and creative scheduling are required. However, because fewer hours are required, the schedule is now more convenient for the mentor teachers.

Some of the practical skills participants learn in the field include: creating seating charts, developing online grade books, designing bulletin boards, attending faculty meetings, preparing textbooks and resources, as well as arranging and cleaning classrooms. A teacher candidate observed that, “Paying attention to details before one starts to teach will make learning a more pleasant experience for the students.” Preparing a classroom and being ready for students to start school is an essential task for teachers; candidates benefit from immersion in this authentic representation of their future reality.

Technology Communication Benefits

A major component of the First Days experience that has been added since its inception is technology—both its use in communicating with participants and its inclusion in the course curriculum. All communications and reading material are sent digitally to teacher candidates weeks prior to the start of the class. Digital communication (through e-mail and the university’s Moodle Website) ensures ease of delivery, decreased cost, energy savings, and the ability to send to alternative addresses when teacher candidates are traveling or out of the country. This solves the problem of candidates losing documents or not receiving them, as happened in the past. The syllabus, daily and assignment schedules, rubrics, forms, and more are all posted at the Website. Lectures, reflections, photos, and drop boxes for assignments are uploaded, decreasing the need of printed materials while ensuring timely communication. Daily schedules posted on the campus Website lessen the need to print individual copies. A single quadrad binder contains the dates for scheduled assignments and exams, making it a handy resource for students or for professors to consult when discussing upcoming or checking deadlines.

Because First Days planners recognize the value of integrating technology in schools, a technology and media expert is invited to discuss some of the digital tools, databases, and Websites that are useful in the classroom. Certain programs and Websites of special interest, such as gaming, simulations, and social media, are demonstrated and modeled. Each quadrad selects from a prescribed list of topics relating to social media, creates a handout summarizing its findings, and makes a verbal presentation to the class. Understanding the potential benefits of technology and creating avenues to integrate it across content areas help motivate teacher candidate learning.

Future Opportunity

Beginning teachers require purposeful guidance, direction, and learning experiences from a variety of perspectives. Theories and constructs of child development, psychology, and instruc-
tional pedagogy are foundational to pedagogy. However, these are insufficient to prepare candidates to teach diverse learners. The goal of First Days is to prepare teacher candidates to create effective instruction that integrates classroom-management skills and curriculum. Current research findings, technology integration, and the competitive nature of employment require the planners to conduct ongoing re-evaluation of the First Days of School Experience. Course improvement and growth are necessary to ensure the relevance of the program.

One potential future direction is to open the First Days program to experienced teachers who are returning to campus for graduate study, and tailoring it to their specific needs. Given the high rate of teacher attrition, a course supporting educators with varying amounts of experience could potentially prevent disillusionment and burnout and thus not only help to ensure transition from student to teacher, but also long-term satisfaction and effectiveness for more-experienced educators. The planners are currently evaluating whether this is a feasible expansion of the First Days of School coursework.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
9. According to Jones, limit setting involves controlling and prompting students back to work in order to save instructional time; responsibility training involves strategies to gain student cooperation; omission training involves an individual incentive system for the chronic behavior problems; and the backup system involves chronic behavior that involves traditional punishments. See Fred Jones, Tools for Teaching (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Fredric H. Jones and Associates, 2000).
10. Ibid.
37. Bettina Weston, op. cit.