

One More Time

by Alexis Kelly, Fifth Grade Teacher, H.E. Corley Elementary

There I am, nervously pacing around the room as students slowly filter in. It's the first day of in-person learning for the year and I don't know who is more worried – me or the kids? One by one they quietly find their seat and eat breakfast. I watch them scan the room looking for friends they haven't seen in months. I take a deep breath and run through my introduction in my head.


As the day gets started, I lead students in the morning greeting. I break the ice and get them to laugh. Then, I look up and lock eyes with the principal and a bright-eyed, brown-haired boy I've never seen before. "We want to welcome your new student this morning!" the principal says as I stand frozen. A part of me shifts into auto-pilot. I shakily greet him, help him find a seat, and wish the principal a good day. I'm grateful to have a planning period in ten minutes because I can feel my first good cry seeping out of me. That was the first time I felt like I was in way over my head.

As the year continued, more challenges presented themselves, from technology to ever-changing protocols to new students constantly joining my class from the virtual program. Each new student was incredibly behind. They were frustrated with school and tired of asking for help. It broke my heart to see them so defeated. And it made me angry. Angry that I was getting students who were so far behind, and that I was expected to magically catch them up. How was I, a first-year teacher, supposed to figure this out alone?"




Alexis Kelly is in her second year teaching at H.E. Corley Elementary School in Irmo, South Carolina. She currently teaches fifth grade and previously taught fourth grade. Kelly graduated in 2020 with a Bachelors of Arts in elementary education from the University of South Carolina. In her free time, you can find her watching Disney movies or anywhere close to the water.

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Mostly, I was angry that this mess was all left up to me, a first-year teacher, to figure out alone.




I spent so much time upset and angry at the situation that I changed the climate in my classroom. My once radiant room full of laughter and learning was now cold and stoic. I had students constantly asking if I was tired because I had stopped smiling. I had a short temper about things that, quite honestly, didn't matter. There was a black cloud looming over me and my classroom, and every day I grew angrier about the impending storm.

One day in math, we were focusing on multi-digit multiplication. There I was, a whole week into this content and ready to pull out my hair. I felt tired and irritated explaining the basics over and over. I was sitting at my small group table with my kids who needed an extra push. We had all worked tirelessly the past week to try and understand multi-digit multiplication, but it still hadn't clicked. That day, I decided to try one more way of explaining the concept: "Imagine the numbers are cars, and they're driving down a road. When they crash, you multiply them." This analogy changed everything.

In teaching, we thrive on the ah-ha moments. When I was stuck in my own storm cloud, I ignored a lot of those moments. But not this day. I watched them nail problem after problem and cheer for each other as they succeeded. Their lit-up faces were the sun peeking through the storm clouds, and I accepted the warmth, allowing it to bring me out of my slump. I started to believe in myself and my ability to do right by my students. I chose to change the tone I had set in my classroom. We smiled, we laughed, we cracked jokes, but most importantly, we started meaningful learning all over again.

I am embarrassed by the blinders I put up worrying about my feelings and ignoring what was sitting right in front of me – children who needed my help. I am grateful for the days I spent venting to my CarolinaTIP coach. Through those conversations, I started to unpack my feelings. She served as an unbiased listening ear who didn't know my school or my students. She allowed me to speak without a filter and gave advice when I asked. She also helped me accept that I was the only problem in this situation that I could control. I set the climate in my classroom, and I was the only one who had the power to change it.

Now, I think back to that bright-eyed, brown-haired boy who was probably just as scared as I was when he walked into the room. I think of how much he grew that year and how sad we all felt when he moved away. I also think of how, on our first day, I tried my greeting just one more time. And I remember when I felt I couldn't explain multiplication any other way, I tried just one more time.



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