

## Finding the Light

by Ashley Harmon, Science Teacher, Blythewood Middle School

As the early sun begins to rise from the horizon, I turn my classroom key to a series of clicking sounds as the lock's mechanisms shift. I step into my dark, silent room and begin my daily routine. Slowly, I walk around the room, turning on each light and lamp, and then walk to the board to write the day's plan. As I do each of these tasks, I find peace in the stillness as I prepare for the day ahead. I begin to anticipate the learning, collaboration, and joy that I know will soon occupy this same silent space. Through these simple, mundane moments, I reflect on my current classes and the classes I've taught in the past. During these times, I remember my journey from an excited and slightly naïve first-year teacher into the kind of professional educator I aspired to become.

Throughout my life, I have always wanted to be a teacher. I attended college and stretched myself to reach my goals. I wrote lesson plans with precise details for the highest level of engagement, created a thorough management plan to help all students learn, and was emboldened with a determined spirit to achieve great things in my first year of teaching. Before I realized it, I was at school for my first day, welcoming my first group of students into the classroom.

The day was a blur of learning about new students, sharing about myself and science, and going through our first collaborative activity together. When the last student walked out the door that day, I realized that the day was successful, and I hoped it was a sign of how great the rest of the year would be. However, as the days started turning into weeks and the weeks turned into months, the reality of teaching began to slowly set in. What I thought was a great management plan disintegrated quicker than paper in water, and my lessons full of engagement fell short of anything



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spectacular. As I stared at the sunrise and sunset from my classroom, I realized that my aspirations of a perfect first year were now a distant dream, shattered in front of me.

It was in one of my silent early morning car rides, driving from one interstate to the next, that I thought about the mess of my first year. How could I become a better teacher? How could I create a more cohesive and successful classroom environment? Would my students be better with a different teacher? I began drowning in feelings of isolation and hopelessness. I considered turning my classroom lights off and never walking back through the door that once held my big, bright dreams of teaching.



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My coach supported me through the highs and mostly lows I experienced in my first year. She gave me encouragement when I was heartbroken, and she gave me moments of laughter when all I wanted to do was cry. She visited with me at school to offer in-class support, and she met with me every time I needed to vent. She helped me find the light and stay focused on it all of the time.

My coach helped me realize that my desire to get every single thing right was part of the problem. In my mind, if every single detail was not right, then everything was wrong. There is an old saying that teaching is messy, and it took time and reflection with my coach for me to embrace this truth. With their help, I was able to mitigate the problems that had arisen as I lost my direction. On one March afternoon, I began to recognize the results of my efforts. My principal came to observe me, and she left a note telling me that she saw improvement and enjoyed watching my lesson. When I had a free moment that day, I rushed to take a picture of the note to send to my CarolinaTIP coach. We celebrated this tiny win like it was the best thing I did that year. Though it was a small, short message, it was what I needed to realize that I could achieve my professional aspirations.

As my first year began to wind down and I began boxing my supplies, I reflected and prepared for the next year. Over the summer, I took the first CarolinaTIP graduate course, which gave my reflections structure. On the first day of my second year, the familiar clicking noise and slow lighting of my room greeted me as an old friend. As each light turned on, I reminded myself that I was ready for all the challenges and successes I would face that year and every year to come in my teaching career.