

# Introduction

---

Welcome to teaching! The future of our children is now in your hands. You are entering a complex and challenging profession. We believe you deserve as much help as possible to do an outstanding job. *Keys to the Elementary Classroom, Third Edition* will provide you, the new teacher, essential keys for a successful first year. This third edition of *Keys to the Elementary Classroom* incorporates the input of many new and veteran teachers, including a new Chapter 1, “A Guide to Planning and Creating the Environment,” updated assessment materials, new English as a second language materials, and several new classroom activities.

Our revised textbook guides you in using your first month as a foundation for a successful year. Following are the elements used to create a rich learning environment:

- ◆ Build a sense of community to include all students
- ◆ Establish clear routines and procedures for your class
- ◆ Assess your students’ strengths and needs
- ◆ Create an environment that fosters a love of learning

These elements are at the heart of a good beginning and are important to keep in mind, not only at the start of the school year but throughout it. *Keys to the Elementary Classroom’s* third edition offers greater detail and a more expanded format than the original text. Following are chapter highlights:

- ◆ Chapter 1, A Guide to Planning and Creating the Environment, offers an approach to long-term planning used in establishing the appropriate standards-based context for daily activities. Templates are included to help you think through approaches to each subject area. It also assists you in organizing your classroom and in providing your students with a stimulating learning environment. Also included are suggestions on classroom arrangement and instructional materials.
- ◆ Chapter 2, Assessments, assists in designing classroom-based assessments. Knowing your students’ skills and abilities is crucial in providing them with appropriate instruction.
- ◆ Chapter 3, Routines and Procedures, suggests ways to establish both rhythm and structure to your days. Students feel more comfortable when they know what is expected. Clear, consistent routines and procedures eliminate most behavior problems. New teachers often need

the most help with this topic. By following the suggested practices, your classroom will run more smoothly.

- ◆ Chapter 4, *The First Two Weeks of School . . . A Detailed Account* guides you through the first weeks, day by day and minute by minute. This detailed account provides a daily structure, plus a timeline for introducing new routines, procedures, and activities. Greater detail to K–1 is provided here, with the assumption that those procedures will be incorporated into other grades. However, as a new teacher, you may wish to read the entire chapter before focusing on your specific grade level. This chapter is a treasure trove of thoughtful teaching, based on years of teacher experience.
- ◆ Chapter 5, *Activities for the First Month*, describes tried-and-true activities that can be used as the core of your program, or as a back-up plan. Student worksheets, copy-ready, are provided in English and Spanish. These can be included with planned activities or used as “easy assignment” for a substitute.
- ◆ Chapter 6, *Fingerplays and Songs for Oral Language in English and Spanish*, provides community building activities for language development and transitions for K–3 students.
- ◆ Chapter 7, *Home and School Communication*, suggests ways to develop relationships with students’ families and provides a simple letter for adapting to English and Spanish.
- ◆ Chapter 8, *Resources*, offers many excellent books for the advancement of professional development.

*Keys to the Elementary Classroom* is certain to get you off to a good start. In addition to the suggestions and resources provided, we urge you to find an experienced teacher to serve as your mentor—either someone at your grade level, or one with an out-of-classroom position. Their support will be invaluable. New teachers should not attempt this complex job alone. *Find a mentor!*

## **PHASES OF TEACHING: THE UPS AND DOWNS OF A FIRST-YEAR TEACHER**

Over the past two decades, the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP) worked with and conducted research on over two thousand new teachers. Their results will help you understand you are not alone, and that most new teachers have similar struggles during their first year. The project’s research shows that new teachers experience five basic phases: (a) anticipation, (b) survival, (c) disillusionment, (d) rejuvenation, and (e) reflection. These are described below, including *new teacher quotes* for each phase. Descriptions are followed with suggestions for moving forward during each particular phase.

## Anticipation

This phase begins during the student teaching portion of teacher preparation. New teachers enter with a tremendous commitment to make a difference, coupled with an idealistic view of how their goals will be accomplished: *I was elated to get the job, but terrified about going from the simulated experience of student teaching to that of the person in charge.* (This feeling of excitement often carries new teachers through the first few weeks of school.)

*Suggestions: Check out as many classrooms as possible. Try to get organized in advance. Set up your classroom environment as soon as you obtain a copy of Keys to the Classroom.*

Before starting your teaching assignment, visit a variety of classrooms. If already teaching, search out opportunities to visit other classrooms during recess or lunch for a *reality check*. Your visits will be more meaningful if you have specific questions in mind.

## Survival

Your first month may be overwhelming. As a new teacher, you are constantly learning at a rapid pace. New teachers are instantly bombarded with many unanticipated problems and situations. *So little time, so much to learn: I feel like I'm constantly running. It's hard to focus on other aspects of my life.* (It is not uncommon for new teachers to spend up to seventy hours per week on schoolwork—with minimal time to reflect on the experience. Particularly overwhelming is the constant need to develop curriculum.)

*Suggestions: Time to cut back, save your creative energy for the essentials. Seek out support for time management and organizational strategies.*

When in the survival phase, decide where planning can be reduced. Can you borrow an established reading/math curriculum to avoid daily inventing? Or, is it possible to reduce the number of student groups? Reassess your plan now, admitting you are only human and cannot be creative about each curriculum aspect during this first year. Set time limits for planning. Take at least one day off each weekend. Borrow lessons from colleagues, when appropriate, and rely on prepackaged curriculum.

## Disillusionment

New teachers enter this phase following six to eight weeks of nonstop work and stress of varied length and intensity. Low morale, extensive time commitment, the realization that things are not proceeding as smoothly as they wish—all these contribute to the disenchantment period. At this stage, new teachers begin questioning both their commitment and competence; many become ill. Also during this time, new teachers are confronted with family conferences, Back-to-School Night, and their first formal evaluation.

Classroom management may also become a major source of distress: *I thought I'd be focusing more on curriculum, less on classroom management and discipline. I'm stressed because I have some very problematic students who are low academically, and I think about them every second that my eyes are open.*

In this phase, new teachers express self-doubt, have lower self-esteem, face complaints from family and friends, and question their professional commitment. Managing this phase may be the toughest challenge they face as a new teacher.

*Suggestions: Double-check your routines and procedures, pare down intricate planning, do something nice for yourself. Remember to breathe! Take care of yourself or you will become ill. Take time to sit on a rock, go for a walk, and listen to music. Working more does not mean life will be smoother. Reduce your level of complexity without decreasing your expectations for students.*

This week, a basic math lesson from the book will be fine. Research keys for new activities to carry you through the next few days. Hints: get help from a mentor, borrow a lesson plan from another teacher, talk with fellow new teachers—they are experiencing the same thing. You are not alone. You will get through this!

## **Rejuvenation**

This phase is characterized by a rise in new teachers' attitude toward teaching—a fresh sense of hopefulness starting usually in January, or following your first extended break. Breaks offer opportunities to relax, reflect, organize materials, and plan curriculum. Teachers acquire a new perspective, with a better understanding of the system, a more realistic acceptance of their teaching, coupled with a sense of accomplishment at having made it through the first, and most difficult, time of the school year. Although still months away, school year's ending becomes the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Now, teachers begin to feel more confident about their management skills: *I'm really excited about my story writing center, although my organization has at times been haphazard. Story writing has definitely revived my journals.*

This phase may last into spring, with many ups and downs along the way. Near the end of this time, new teachers worry if all can be accomplished prior to the end of school. Once more questioning their effectiveness as teachers, they wonder how their students will perform on tests: *I'm fearful of these big tests. Can I be fired if my kids do poorly? I don't know enough about them to be cognizant of what I haven't taught, and I'm sure it's a lot.*

*Suggestions: Review long-term planning and year-end expectations. This is a good time to take another look at these plans, using more realistic expectations. It is also a good time to determine what is expected for year-end exams, so students can be prepared in advance. Discuss your school's expectations for end-of-the-year closing with a mentor, resource teacher, or principal. This helps to spread out wrap-up activities over several months, without being caught off guard during the last month.*

## Reflection

This phase occurs during the last six weeks of school and can be an invigorating time for first-year teachers. Reflecting back, they can highlight successful events, and review changes to be made the following year in management, curriculum, and teaching strategies. The end is in sight. You've almost made it! More importantly, a vision for your second year emerges—a new phase of anticipation: *Next year, I'd like to start letter puppets earlier, so the kids can be introduced to more letters.*

*Suggestions: Take notes on your reflections.*

Review what worked and what did not. Make notes in your plan book to assist in planning the following year. You might think you will never forget this experience, but by the end of summer vacation, all will be a blur. Save yourself from repeating the same mistakes; benefit from new insights to create better lessons. Write it down!

We hope our research helps you realize that your experiences during this first year are normal phases of entering a complex, intense profession—one that cannot be mastered during any first year. Give yourself a break. Rely on *Keys to the Classroom* to get you started. When mistakes occur, remember: Be as kind to yourself as with any student in your classroom. Just like your students, you are doing the best you can!

**Have a good first year!**