

*“A Narrative of a Rookie History Teacher: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Mr. McCoog”*

Ian J. McCoog

It seems to be a consensus in the education community that the first year of teaching is the hardest. The purpose of this article is to document that trying time through my eyes. Hopefully, my experiences and descriptions can help any *rookie* who is facing the first day of school much in the same way I did.

To understand my vantage point you must first understand my school. My first year occurred at Magna Vista High School in Ridgeway, Virginia. Magna Vista is a relatively large school with about 1,200 students. The demographic is quite diverse. The majority of students are white, but there are large populations of many different minority groups. The area around Ridgeway is relatively poor. The textile industry was the major employer in this area for much of the town’s history. Unfortunately, it moved out; leaving many providers with little else to do. The 2004 average household income was less than my singular teaching salary. Some of my students, however, used this as inspiration to do their best.

A Meeting with Dr. Tomlinson

The general staff reported on August 15 for a week of workshops before the beginning of the school year. I received my agenda like everyone else but was surprised

to see a seminar with Dr. Carol Tomlinson scheduled for Tuesday. To everyone else, she was just another guru who would tell them how to do their jobs. I was a bit excited. Dr. Tomlinson's theories were the basis of the master's program I had just completed at Bloomsburg University. The seminar lasted about three hours and covered much of the differentiation strategies that I was already familiar with. Afterwards, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Tomlinson. She was very polite and accommodating. It was reassuring to hear familiar beliefs and to meet someone who my university held in such high regard.

### The First Day of School

I was one of the lucky ones. My first day was rather uneventful. We did the standard first day routine; seating, rules, routines, and procedures. A little extra that I added was an activity where I got to know my students and they got the opportunity to know me a little. These can be as simple as writing something on an index card or as in depth as a full-blown lesson. My approach was "two truths and a lie". Each student wrote down three things about themselves; two true, one a lie. It was then my job to decipher their lies. An exercise like this made me more of a person to them and less of an authority figure. It also helped me make connections about my students that will inevitably assist me in learning all their names.

### Instruction

My initial instruction routine was similar to what most new teachers do. We are all a bit idealistic and usually untested. The two most important instructional strategies

for new teachers to implement upon their curriculum are flexibility and on-going assessments. Flexibility was important to me because my instruction was completely ideological. I based it upon differentiated instruction because it was what I believed worked best. No one's initial plan, however, is perfect. Remain flexible and adjust when necessary. Change up your instructional patterns occasionally. You want your students to understand routines and procedures, but keep in mind that not all students learn in the same way. A change of pace may alter the outlook of a student who is struggling.

Constant assessment is the best way to ensure good scores on your NCLB tests. In a single lesson, I would assess at least ten times. That sounds like a lot, but it is necessary. An assessment can be as informal as asking the class if they understand or as complex as a complete closure activity. No one wants to push their students unintentionally. Nonetheless, you are inadvertently pushing them if you do not have proper assessment. It is crucial to assess at the beginning, during, and at the end of any lesson. I found it as a sure way to help your students and please your administration.

### Classroom Management

Good classroom management is vital to the success of every teacher. The key is to maintain a good balance of respect and approachability. You need to show your students that you are the adult yet at the same time not alienate them. Some of your students may see you as the only trustworthy adult in their life. If your students have a problem, be it academic or personal, it is important for you to be an available avenue for them to approach for guidance.

The best way to do this is a common sense approach. Be as fair as possible in every instance. Arbitrary punishment is the fastest way to lose control of a class. Have your rules in writing and posted in your room. Be sure to go over them with your classes on the first day of school, and refer to them when necessary. It is also important to assign concrete numbers to your punishments. A student who is told he/she will receive a warning before a referral will push to see how many warnings he/she can receive before a negative consequence occurs. Have a planned and again posted hierarchy for infractions. Also, be sure to include a “severe infraction clause” that states a serious infraction will negate the hierarchy and receive serious attention.

I base my rules upon respect. They are simple yet cover all behavior that I deem unacceptable.

1. Respect Yourself. This rule applies to both me and my students. It tells them that if they do the work that is expected of them, they will not be fooled. This ensures no unethical pop quizzes or entrapment questions.
2. Respect Others. This rule encompasses any invasion of another person’s space and disrespectful comments. It covers all of the common classroom infractions such as cursing, arguing, fighting, or unwanted touching.
3. Respect the Classroom. This rule covers anything that the first two do not. It includes tardiness, skipping class, vandalizing of school property, and sleeping in class.

### Relax

You chose this career for a reason, and if you are reading this, you are far along enough in a teacher preparation program to realize that you will be an effective teacher.

Having concerns is a natural part of starting a new endeavor. I have listed below three that I encountered. (1) A common fear initially is management. I was pleasantly surprised, however, to realize that most students will give you their trust in return for the respect they deserve; although, you must be fair and consistent to those who do not cooperate. (2) NCLB tests are another area that routinely intimidates new teachers. The best way to handle this is to teach what you state standards feel is vital and trust your assessments. The on going assessments that occur during a semester will serve as the best way of knowing how prepared your students are. (3) Your administration and the other members of your department will be your best allies. Ask questions and take positive criticism as a way to improve yourself. Do not be afraid to rely on them if a situation seems overwhelming.

Most importantly, enjoy the profession. The best recognition you will ever receive is from your students. A student will never forget you when you make a positive influence on his/her life. A school year is full of successes, failures, joys, and sorrows. Celebrate when a student gets into the college they wanted or when the football team makes a run at the state title. Nevertheless, be prepared for expulsions, drugs, and violence because they are the evil that exists in nearly every school. Take the bad with the good and know that you make a difference. You may not reach every student but take pride in knowing that you did the best you could and helped improve the lives of as many students, parents, and fellow teachers as possible.