



Crafting Multiple Personalities in Education

By Brooke Ferguson

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Abstract: This piece highlights the everyday challenges within the classroom and without. Further, it explores the recourse teachers can take to mitigate those challenges. It is an anecdotal piece from the perspective of a teacher, leader, and advocate in education. It serves as a reminder to fellow educators of the reasons we need to be active in our own profession, not just in our classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to be willing to reflect and ask questions, to be flexible in the field, and to maintain an openness toward trying something new. The author shares her own challenge in navigating the multiple personalities that she adopts within her field in order to remain a relevant teacher and also to serve as an advocate. Teachers are encouraged to join in and take ownership in elevating the profession so that others must take notice. Having a system of support is critical for teacher survival and relevancy. The author attempts to address the growing concerns of teachers and why it is crucial that we become leaders while sharing ideas on how teachers can lead in order to effect real change in the educational system and the legislature.

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My husband and I have this running joke about how he gets songs stuck in his head on nearly a daily basis. He is a “music man” (to quote Sir Elton) so there is always some line of lyrics, some guitar riff, or some beat buzzing away in his mind’s ear. While I fancy myself as a singer and a lover of music, this almost never happens to me. Today though, today, it actually happened to me. I have the song “With a Little Help From My Friends” stuck in my head. Really, it is not even the whole song but simply the repeating line, “I get by with a little help from my friends.” I started to simmer on why this song would pop into my mind and why this line specifically. I have not heard the song recently. There has been no conversation or television references to it as of late. It is just in there. “Why?” I thought. It seems as though my multiple educational personalities were all subconsciously sending me a collaborative message.

I took a personal day on Friday (gasp!), and there is always some sense of guilt knowing your students are in class when you are missing work, especially if you are well. I felt at ease, though, because one of my friends made sure to hold my students accountable to the sub and for the grade they were getting. Another one of my friends did my morning and afternoon duties (on a Friday, no less) without a single moment’s hesitation. My colleagues are truly great friends and have been a source of strength during tough teaching days and tougher personal days. They spark ideas, they keep me sharpened, and they support and encourage me. When I think about it, I have such a great community of support at work.

My hall is all English teachers and— on our best days— is full of laughter and positivity and encouragement. The other day, we were all standing in our beloved Hallway 3 visiting; even the teachers from down the hall had walked over to join us. We were lined up on both sides. We joked about how we looked like the run-through tunnels that begin each football game. And then, out of nowhere, we all started high-fiving students and giving

them a school spirit “woo-hoo” as they walked down the hall. Sure, some of them just shook their heads like, “crazy teachers,” but many walked through there with smiles on their faces, laughing and feeling appreciated—even loved. This impromptu moment set a positive tone for every classroom on our Hallway 3. The best part of it all is that hallways and friends like these go on and on throughout the campus.

I guess all of this is to say that I do get by with a little (and sometimes a lot of) help from my friends. They keep me encouraged, laughing, inspired, appreciated, and driven to bring the best “me” that I can be for my students. I do not take that for granted for one moment. At least I try hard not to, which is why my heart is so invested in being a professional educator—in exploring all of the many components and all of the specific nuances and of all the multiple personas I must navigate in this field: the teacher, the leader, the advocate, the person.

The Teacher, The Leader, The Advocate

As we speak, I am knee-deep in “DEVOLSON”: the Dark, Evil Vortex of Late September, October and November (Love Teach, 2014). In the last two weeks, I have attended training for mandated ESL certification, graded essays and projects, answered Remind 101 messages at 9:30 at night about said projects, negotiated a partnership for a teaching conference, been one of the lead authors of a legislative memo, disaggregated data, attended PLCs, coaxed confidence from a young writer, listened to a 17-year-old girl talk about her battle with homelessness, made study cards for ESL certification, entered grades, attended a mentor meeting, provided professional development to integrate technology, navigated a confrontational parent, written “intentional” lesson plans considering TEKS, IEPs, 504 plans, ELPS, gifted students, and on-level students, and even cried.

My first day in education led me to these moments—a collection of stressors, challenges, and opportunities to grow. When I began my journey, I had in mind that I was about to waltz into the lives of young minds and make a difference. I was thrown into the school year with barely a second glance, and my go-to instructional strategy was fake-it-til-you-make-it. The biggest lesson I learned was not that I would have the opportunity to change these students’ lives, but it was the humbling impact that knowing—and loving—that each one of my students changed me. They made my life richer. When I think back on this time, I can still channel the idealism that ran through my veins and the promise I made to myself to always be open to new ideas. I taught my first five years in all on-level courses of English IV at a school that is over 70 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged. I was evaluated by both my alternative certification program representative and my school appraiser a total of six times. I was never voted as a favorite teacher by high performing students, I was never teacher of the week, and it felt as though I was never even noticed. But I was wrong.

A colleague of mine was seeing her own career blossoming. She was the Texas State Teacher of the Year, was involved in fellowships and organizations, and even met the President. With all of that going on in her life, *she saw me*. She had the opportunity to nominate some teachers to attend the national Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teaching and Teachers (ECET2) convening. It changed my life. For the first time in my life, I felt comfortable in my craft. For the first time in my life, I realized there were many more teaching personalities to explore.

The national ECET2 convening offered the chance to apply for a grant to host a regional ECET2 convening in my area. This year will make for the third year in a row that my team and I have been awarded this grant. Seizing that opportunity has allowed for and opened up new avenues to be a teacher-leader for my regional area. Being involved in teacher leadership led to even more opportunities. I applied for and was selected as a fellow for the Texas Teach Plus Policy Fellowship. Teach Plus instructs teachers on the best ways to effect change through legislative action. Now I have the opportunity to effect real change for my students by advocating for educational policy.

When I think of all of these moments, these roles, I think of all of the personalities that teachers across the nation must adopt each day. I am reminded that we are charged with elevating our profession within our own craft so that others must take notice. There are times when so much of our day as teachers is dictated by those who are long gone from the classroom or worse, by those who have never stepped foot in our shoes. I get it. Sometimes I even lived in that thought. But then I moved on. I realized that I had never walked in their shoes either. See, the current zeitgeist in education endorses the idea of “us against them” when it comes to legislators. Admittedly, there is a disconnect between the two groups, but that fault lies with both legislators and with educators. In her book *How To Be Heard*, Celine Coggins (2017) tells teachers, “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu” (p. 132). She means to impress upon teachers that the burden is upon us to get involved.

Yes, there are problems with accountability, testing, healthcare, and funding. You and I could jot and scratch issues down on sticky notes that would cover the Texas Capitol Building. However, without interacting with legislators—whether local, state, or national—we are simply holding signs for a day and then packing it up and going about our lives. Do our districts ask too much of





us without compensation? Sometimes. Do we feel inundated with administrative tasks that take away planning time? Often. Do we have an iota of extra time to take on these issues? Never.

With the new ELAR standards coming into our classrooms, we all have the opportunity to take that momentum and put it toward some positive change. I plan to approach these standards the same way I approach most of the changes and many of the personalities that I employ. I try to consistently adopt the attitude of ask, bend, and try—not cry but try.

Ask, Bend, Try

Oftentimes, we teachers forget to look up from our proverbial desks. I like to say that I am “in the weeds” because I am self-aware that I cannot see my way around at the moment. Managing all of these personalities I own and all of the changes that come my direction requires a certain willingness to accept my own fallible nature and simply ask questions. Ask your evaluators what you are doing well and lean on them in times of need. Ask your colleagues what strategies they find successful. Ask your students when they were most and least engaged. Ask yourself to find one change you can make to ensure that you stay flexible.

I have taught the same prep for six years: senior English. This school year, I added two sections of Pre-AP English II to the mix. I do not even have to tell you how a new prep can set you back on time, ideas, and resources. I found myself going back to my own dishes of comfort food that I had been feeding my seniors. They were not ready. I was not ready. After some reflection, I realized I was being rigid in the way I was approaching this school year. I was rigid in my planning process, in my educational philosophy, and in my attitude toward assessments. I can remember sitting through one of the most beneficial professional developments I have ever experienced (Capturing Kids’ Hearts) and being dismayed at the veteran teachers who were complacent—resistant, even. I promised myself then that I would always be willing to bend. Teachers, we have to be willing to bend. This might mean understanding the difference between

being rigorous or just plain ridiculous. This might mean adapting your style of discipline or classroom management. This might mean being open to trying ideas, methods, or strategies that are really working for that brand-new teacher who talks too much. None of this is comfortable when we are faced with it, but the truth is, if you cannot bend, you are bound to break. There has to be a genuine effort to navigate our roles, our passions, and our responsibilities.

Before I begin to sound like a generic how-to book and project the idea that I have it all together, you need to know that I cried this week. And I am pretty sure I cried last week as well. Some days, I fantasize about having an office job and being able to go to the restroom any time I want. Some days I leave an hour-long department meeting feeling defeated and underappreciated. But without fail, I get up, and I try again the next day. We all do. Good teachers stay in the profession because they have a heart for it and are willing to keep trying in order to maintain all that we are asked to manage. Great teachers make an effort to branch out beyond maintenance and ask themselves to try just one new thing. One of the most helpful actions I have ever done for myself was to communicate to my evaluator one of my most important needs from my school. I needed permission to fail. I explained to her that I was holding off on trying new approaches because I was afraid they could end in disaster. She granted me that permission. I have never looked back. This might be the biggest tool I use. Can I be a teacher and a leader? Try and see. Can I be a teacher leader and an advocate? Try and see. Can I be a teacher, leader, advocate, and meet all of my and my students’ needs? Try it out, and give yourself permission to fail.

Hallway 3

Those of us who adopt the Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2015) instruct our students to adopt the attitude that when we fail, we are learning. Imagine if we all adopted that attitude to just one single educational change. When you sit down at your desk with your pretty pens lined up and your planners crisp and full of promise, remind yourself to ask, bend, and try. And when the day is too long and the times too hard, keep yourself plugged into a supportive and productive teacher network to keep you sharpened. If you do not have a Hallway 3, ask yourself how you can be flexible with your time and try to create one. Chances are, someone needs you too. In this job, no ... this *calling*, we have many demands on our minds as well as our spirits. We need one another. At this moment in time, when teachers feel so marginalized, so misunderstood, and so overlooked as professionals, we should stand together as one voice, demanding change, living encouragement, and being the difference to students who may only ever see it in us.

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