

# Preparing for the Beginning: **THE "FIRST DAYS OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE"**

**T**ootsie-Pops, Cabbage Patch dolls, posters, banners, a wall-hanging, and smiling instructors . . . Is this a university classroom? The students entering the classroom look like undergraduates, but what gives them this eager, expectant air? What would make senior education majors congregate so willingly when their summer jobs and vacation plans had to be cut short to take yet another class?

The First Days of School Experience at Andrews University (AU) in Berrien Springs, Michigan, has been offered each August since 1993 and is required of preservice teachers who will do student teaching during the next school year. They meet for coursework and field experience for five weeks just before the beginning of the fall quarter, which starts in late September. This session coincides with the opening days of school in local public and private elementary and secondary schools where the preservice teachers will later do their student teaching.

The purpose of the First Days of School Experience is to prepare prospective teachers to successfully begin the school year, manage a classroom, and evaluate student progress.

The seeds for this innovative program were planted when the teacher-preparation faculty at AU recognized the need to

Picture  
Removed

*Richard T. Orrison, co-author of the article, guides a quadrad in discussing classroom-management issues.*

**The purpose of the First Days of School Experience is to prepare prospective teachers to successfully begin the school year, manage a classroom, and evaluate student progress.**

train preservice teachers how to begin the school year and better manage a classroom. When Dr. Richard T. Orrison joined the faculty in 1991, developing this program became part of his job description. As he began visiting AU graduates

**BY RICHARD T. ORRISON AND RHODA C. SOMMERS**

Picture  
Removed

**On the first day of school, when students have their initial contact with the teacher, first impressions are formed that set the tone for the remainder of the school year.**

### ***Preservice teachers practice on their peers.***

in their first year of teaching, it became evident that they were well prepared to teach but were weak in classroom management and organization. A number of these graduates quit teaching after only a few years because of their discouraging experiences.

Dr. Orrison realized that the university either needed to better equip preservice teachers to deal with the challenges of classroom management or quit calling them to a profession touted as rewarding and satisfying, but which they found miserable and demoralizing. This led to the development of this program.

The First Days of School Experience has four phases:

1. Daily field experiences, which involve observation, assistance, and actual classroom teaching;
2. Daily university classroom instruction, focusing on beginning the school year, classroom management, and student evaluation and assessment;
3. Weekly conferences with an instructor to discuss progress; and
4. Individual research, reading, writing, and reflection.

Students acquire theory during classroom instruction time and research reading; their field experiences allow them to put the theory into practice.

### **The First Day of School—An Important Time**

Various studies support the idea that the first days and weeks of the school year are very important. In order to decrease management problems, teachers need tips on how to begin the school year successfully. On the first day of school, when students have their initial contact with the teacher, first impressions are formed that set the tone for the remainder of the school year.<sup>1</sup> Students begin sizing up their teacher to determine exactly what he or she is like and what to expect for the remainder of the year.<sup>2</sup> The teacher must set the tone, planning each activity for the first days and weeks of school accordingly. Unfortunately, very little has been done to prepare preservice teachers for this task.<sup>3</sup>

Emmer, Evertson, and Anderson conducted a study of 27 third-grade classrooms.<sup>4</sup> They divided teachers into two cate-

gories: more-effective managers and less-effective managers. The researchers then analyzed the activities and behaviors of both groups of teachers at the beginning

of the school year. Differences between the two groups were most obvious in the areas of classroom rules and procedures, monitoring students, and delivering consequences. The more-effective managers planned for extensive contact with pupils during the first day and maintained control over classroom behavior. During the first week, they spent a considerable amount of time explaining the classroom rules and procedures to the students and reminding them how important it was to follow them. Though they valued academic content, these teachers' major goal for the first weeks of school was to acclimate students to the classroom environment and social structure.

A similar study was conducted at the junior high level.<sup>5</sup> Data were gathered through classroom narrative records, time use logs, student engagement ratings, and ratings of teacher and student behavior. This was then used to classify teachers' effectiveness as managers. Comparisons were made of behaviors and activities during the first three weeks of school. The more-effective managers rated higher in these areas:

- Clarity of giving directions and information,
- Stating desired attitudes and behavior more frequently,
- Providing activities and assignments with higher levels of student success,
- Presenting clear expectations for work standards, and
- Responding consistently to appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Students enter the classroom on the first day of school with questions they need answered: Am I in the right room? Where am I supposed to sit? What are this teacher's rules? What will I be doing in this course? How will I be evaluated? What is my teacher like? Is he or she going to be interested in me as an individual?<sup>6</sup> How a teacher addresses each of these questions will affect the entire school year and his or her relationship with the students.

On the first day of school, new teachers need to establish positive perceptions of themselves and their competence.<sup>7</sup> Teachers need to face their first day with confidence. This requires specific training on how to plan and structure this im-

portant time of the school year—not only for the students' sake, but also for the teacher's self-concept. If the profession is to retain competent first-year teachers, they need to be trained in how to successfully start the school year.

### **An Overwhelming Time**

Though there are induction programs for first-year teachers that include information on beginning the school year, many neophyte teachers report that they are overwhelmed by all the responsibilities and information and have difficulty processing, assimilating, and internalizing content.<sup>8</sup> Induction programs generally occur immediately before the school year begins, which limits the amount of time first-year teachers have to plan for the first day of school. Since preparing for this day is merely one of myriad tasks facing the first-year teacher, adequate preparation can easily be overlooked.

### **Participation in the First Days of School Experience**

During the First Days of School Experience at AU, participants are divided into groups of four, or quadrads, for classroom instruction and activities. This gives them the opportunity to collaborate and bond with peers, and provides additional support and encouragement. Through assigned readings and designated worship times, participants learn about the techniques used by Jesus, the Master Teacher, and become aware of the timeless insights of Ellen G. White's writings on education. In their weekly journals, many of them share feelings of inadequacy in emulating Jesus and being a role model to their students. But they also acknowledge that God didn't call them to this ministry and demand that they reflect Him on their own. He is by their sides to help them relate to students as He would, to see students through His eyes, to plan challenging lessons to point them to the One who is the source of all knowledge, wisdom, and meaning in life, and to guide them into a closer relationship with Him.

Each class time begins with worship that the participants share in their groups. One of the main activities is

to pray for the first-year teachers who have recently completed their teacher training at AU and are beginning the first days and weeks in their own classrooms. Because participants are vicariously experiencing through their supervising teacher the responsibilities involved in beginning the school year, they are able to pray specifically for their friends who are going through these activities in their own classrooms for the first time. They have the assurance that the following year, when they are novices in the field, other preservice teachers will be praying for them in much the same way.

Worship times conclude with singing the *Teacher's Hymn*, retitled from "O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee." Initially, students question the wisdom of singing this hymn daily for five weeks, but by focusing on its words, they come to realize the pertinence of its message. One student teacher acknowledged, "I thought [the hymn] was a little 'hokey' at first, but after reading over it several times, I think it truly does reflect the mission and prayer of a Christian teacher. What higher goal can we have than to point our students to the 'home-

**Students enter the classroom on the first day of school with questions they need answered: Am I in the right room? Where am I supposed to sit? What are this teacher's rules? What will I be doing in this course? How will I be evaluated? What is my teacher like? Is he or she going to be interested in me as an individual?**

Picture  
Removed

***Students enjoy opening their "zuchertutte," a horn of goodies to sweeten the first day of school.***

ward way'? In order to be able to do that effectively, we certainly do need to have the Master walking with us day after day" [Janice].<sup>9</sup>

During the First Days of School Experience, participants are taught in detail to actively practice Fred Jones' Positive Classroom Discipline model<sup>10</sup> while also becoming knowledgeable about four other management models commonly used in area schools. This helps calm the preservice teachers' fears and convinces them that they can control a classroom. After they practice these techniques on their peers in the university classroom, the student teachers know better how to use them in K-12 classrooms. One student teacher wrestling with this transition pointed out, "It [feels] odd to use the stare tactic on someone who is your friend. . . . Maybe this is why teachers are not to be the student's friend. It is nearly impossible to discipline a friend. . . . Discipline must be administered by a teacher" [Eric].

Team teaching plays an integral role in the First Days of School Experience.

Instructors emphasize modeling strategies and techniques they expect preservice teachers to learn. Modeling includes creating the proper ambiance for the classroom and activities for the first 10 minutes of the school year. Classroom decor includes Cabbage Patch dolls ready for school, a quilted wall-hanging, and Back-to-School banners. Small flowerpots blooming with Tootsie-Pops create a relaxed environment as quadrad members begin establishing relationships. Student teachers learn through these efforts:

## **On the first day of school, new teachers need to establish positive perceptions of themselves and their competence.**

Picture  
Removed

*A preservice teacher is actively engaged in her cooperating school classroom.*

"We had our own personal places to sit; we were given candy and pens; and the whole place was decorated in a way that said something both special and important was going to happen there. This created an air of excitement and anticipation among the students, while permanently imprinting in our minds a picture of what the first day of school should be like" [Amy].

"I began to look around, and it dawned on me that the instructors were modeling what the first 10 minutes of a class were to be like" [Carol].

### **Results of the First Days of School Experience**

The First Days of School Experience helps calm the fears experienced by many preservice teachers and gives them needed confidence. After hearing horror stories told by first-year teachers, participants found it reassuring to discover tools that lead to success. Student teachers reported that fear actually changed into excitement and anticipation as they looked forward to the day when they would begin their first year of teaching. One student said that "every day, that big, bad teaching world becomes more and more exciting" [Joy]. Spending so much concentrated time in a K-12 classroom gives preservice teachers a firsthand glimpse of what it's actually like there day by day and helps initiate "change in [their] comfort zones" [Patti].

First Days of School participants are often surprised that the early days of the school year actually set the tone for the entire year. They discover this not only through reading and class discussions, but also field experiences. Working side by side with supervising teachers in preparing the classroom for the beginning of school and actually experiencing the first day of the school year helps participants "[obtain] valuable skills that will make [their] first days in the classroom a time to look forward to rather than a time to dread" [Beth].

An important transition for preservice teachers is to see themselves as professionals rather than as students. The first step of this transition often occurs during the First Days of School Experience. Student teachers collaborate with professional educators as equals in addressing issues related to curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and parent-teacher relationships. They begin wrestling with how to put theory into practice as they carefully observe what occurs in their supervising teacher's

# The First Days of School Experience helps calm the fears experienced by many preservice teachers and gives them needed confidence.

Picture  
Removed

classroom. They see effective practicing teachers “breaking rules” taught in university courses and are challenged to find answers to this dilemma and to consider what adaptations they will make in their own classrooms.

First Days of School Experience participants begin to feel more confident as they approach their student teaching. The uncertainty and trauma commonly associated with student teaching are markedly diminished. They do feel apprehension during the First Days of School field experience, but this is a safer period in the students’ preservice training to deal with insecurity. Though participants are expected to do some teaching during these five weeks, university supervisors mostly play a supportive, not evaluative role. The student teachers’ role is that of observation and assistance, instead of assuming responsibility for classroom planning, instruction, and evaluation.

First Days of School participants leave their teacher-training program with a better understanding of the entire scope of the school year. Traditional programs place student teachers in a designated classroom for a specified number of weeks with little exposure to what occurred before they arrived or after they left. The First Days of School Experience requires them to be present for the beginning of the school year and to maintain weekly interaction with their supervising teacher and pupils until they complete student teaching. This shows them how to prepare the classroom and plan instruction at the beginning of the school year, as well as how to follow through and implement and refine their skills throughout the year. It allows student teachers to develop an early rapport with their pupils and supervising teacher, which results in more positive, nurturing relationships during student teaching.

The First Days of School Experience plays an integral role in preparing competent, committed, and compassionate teachers. Though the program is altered somewhat each year, its basic mission remains the same—to:

- Prepare preservice teachers to successfully begin the school year;
- Manage a classroom; and
- Evaluate and assess student progress.

Both faculty and students recognize the value of this concentrated experience in promoting excellence in training preservice teachers. A recent report by the National Council for

**The First Days of School Experience orientation includes a university instructor, the supervising teacher, and the preservice teacher.**

the Accreditation of Teacher Education identified this aspect of the AU teacher preparation program as “exemplary” and worthy of emulation by other universities.<sup>11</sup> ✉

**Dr. Richard T. Orrison** is Professor of Teacher Education and Director of Student Teaching in the School of Education at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. **Dr. Rhoda C. Sommers** is Assistant Professor of Education at Mount Vernon Nazarene College in Mount Vernon, Ohio. While a doctoral student at Andrews University, she team taught the First Days of School Experience.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See the following sources: Douglas M. Brooks, “The First Day of School,” *Educational Leadership* 42:8 (May 1985), pp. 76-78; Leslie Huling-Austin and Edmund T. Emmer, *First Days of School: A Good Beginning* (Austin, Texas: Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, ERIC, No. ED 262 031, 1985), p. 3; and Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong, *The First Days of School* (Sunnyvale, Calif.: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1991), p. 3.
2. Richard I. Arends, *Learning to Teach* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p. 476.
3. Douglas M. Brooks, “The Teacher’s Communicative Competence: The First Day of School,” *Theory Into Practice* 24 (Winter 1985), pp. 63-70.
4. Edmund T. Emmer, Carolyn M. Evertson, and Linda M. Anderson, “Effective Classroom Management at the Beginning of the School Year,” *The Elementary School Journal* 80:5 (May 1980), pp. 224-225.
5. Edmund T. Emmer and Carolyn M. Evertson, *Effective Management at the Beginning of the School Year in Junior High Classes* (Austin, Texas: Research and Development Center for Teacher Education [March 1980], ERIC, No. ED 241 499).
6. Brooks, 1985, p. 77.
7. Huling-Austin and Emmer, p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. Student teachers’ comments cited in this article are taken from weekly reflective journals written during the 1997 First Days of School Experience. Names have been changed to protect student privacy.
10. See Fredric H. Jones, *Positive Classroom Discipline* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987).
11. See NCATE Board of Examiners Report, Continuing Accreditation Visit to Andrews University, November 16-20, 1996, p. 20.