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5. BALANCE: IS IT OBTAINABLE?

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The image is a screenshot of a Google search result for the word "balance". At the top, the Google logo is on the left, followed by a search bar containing the text "define: balance" and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar are navigation tabs for "Web", "Images", "Videos", "News", and "More", with "Web" being the selected tab. The main content area displays the word "bal·ance" in a large font, with a phonetic transcription "/ˈbæləns/" and a speaker icon below it. The word is defined as a Noun: "An even distribution of weight enabling someone or something to remain upright and steady." and as a Verb: "Keep or put (something) in a steady position so that it does not fall: 'a mug that she balanced on her knee'." Below the definitions, there is a section for "Synonyms" with two entries: "noun. scales - equilibrium - equipoise - poise - scale" and "verb. poise - weigh - equilibrate".

Google writes that balance is “an even distribution of weight enabling someone or something to remain upright and steady” when being used as a noun, and “to keep or put (something) in a steady position so that it does not fall” when being used as

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a verb. While Google is not a “scholarly” source, I think we can agree that this is an accurate definition for the word balance. My question to you as a reader is, “can balance be truly obtainable in a bigger sense?” Is balance obtainable at work? Is balance obtainable at home? When it comes down to it, is balance obtainable in your life?

Quite often as a dance teacher, I find myself discussing the word “balance” with my students. A dancer uses balance in everything they do – from standing in first position to doing single pirouette turns to doing fouettés. I also found myself using the word balance quite often within my teaching experiences as a student teacher. My hope is that after you read this chapter, you will have a better idea how to balance the activities or experiences in your student teaching experience, and even in a larger sense... in your life.

Step 1: Prepare

The first step to doing a turn is the preparation. While there are several different ways to prepare for a turn, it is always important to get to a place where you are steady enough to begin your turn. You must understand what steps come next, and you must be fully committed before you can begin turning. If you are not fully committed and prepared, you may fall down – and as we all know, no one wants to fall on their face!

BALANCE OF FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

As I embarked on my journey of student teaching, there was a great deal of emotion. I was unsure whether I should be excited or scared, nervous or joyous, stressed or calm. Because of this uncertainty, all of these emotions hit me at once. I went from being excited and anxious to frustrated and overwhelmed in such a short span of time. I began to think to myself, “What am I getting myself into?”

My first fear was “Is this going to be too much?” I could not help but think about the workload. I had recently bought a dance studio, and although I felt confident that I could do both dance and student teaching at the same time, I began to grow a little apprehensive. Working as a business owner, giving my all as a graduate student, and as a student teaching intern... I must be crazy, right? My thoughts exactly! However, I took a deep breath and realized that I was just going to have to take it one step at a time. For me, this was no easy task. I am infamous for taking things 100 steps at a time instead of focusing on just one step. I knew, however, that no workload was too large if I paced myself correctly.

I was nervous about the teacher because I would be in the same school, in the same classroom with her all year long. All I could think about was “Is she going to be like me?” and “Is her brain going to work the same way as mine?” This was something that I knew could make or break my experience. Although I firmly believe that every experience is a learning opportunity, I knew that I would be

miserable if the teacher I was placed with was unorganized and a mess. This was a grave concern of mine.

Though the workload and my placement overwhelmed me, I think the most crucial of my worries was “Am I good enough?” I frequently questioned whether I was a good enough teacher. I did not want to fail my students, my mentor teachers and supervisors, the school, the community, or myself. I thought I would have all the confidence in the world, and right before I started student teaching, I realized that my confidence had turned into fear. Starting the year, I knew that I would have to put my fear aside and give it my all. I was committed to my job as a student teacher, and I was committed to my students. Fear or no fear, I knew I had to buckle up for one crazy ride.

My expectations, admittedly, for the year may have been a little clouded and even emotionally driven. I knew I would have to stay at school all day with the teacher and my students. I knew I would have to teach a certain amount of lessons and earn a certain amount of hours. I also knew that I would have to work hard inside and outside of my 3rd grade classroom to give the students everything they needed. Finally, I knew my weaknesses – flexibility and time management – and I expected myself to work on them. It is what I did not know that scared me, and in the end, the unknown is what always made me question, “What am I getting myself into?”

Just like when preparing for a turn in dance, your prior schooling and college years have prepared you (to some extent) for student teaching. You must trust that it is going to be enough to get you through that time, and even if you encounter something that you have yet to learn, you should take the initiative to try to learn as much as you can. Student teaching is not a time for worry. Although I can promise there will probably be a little stress and a little fear, you must commit yourself to what you are doing, and you must always remember your purpose!

Step 2: Arms

The next thing you must think about when doing a turn is your protection. How are you going to prevent yourself from falling? Your arms are one way that you can prevent yourself from falling. While there are several different ways you can put your arms, knowing that your arms are there to help you get around in your turn is one of the keys to success. For example, if you just treat your arms as if they are not there and throw them around or put them down, the force of gravity is bound to work against you, and as a result, you will fall. If you can imagine watching an ice skater turn, their arms start out, but then they strategically pull them closer and closer in to their body. This motion helps them to turn faster- it is actually quite a simple physics lesson!

BALANCING YOUR ROLE AS A GUEST

Entering into student teaching, it is crucial to understand and remember that you are a guest in your host school. You are not there to take charge and do things “your” way. You are there to learn and absorb all of the information you can while you are there. With that being said, it is often hard to balance your role as a guest with your role as a teacher.

With the first few weeks of school, I found myself struggling with role balance. Because I am the type of the person that naturally wants to take control and do things my way, I really had to think and reflect about when I would jump in and when I would sit back. For two weeks, I decided to be in an “observation” phase. In this phase, I literally sat in the back of the classroom taking notes. I wanted to learn about my mentor teacher’s rules, routines, and procedures. While I wanted to be a part of her classroom environment, I felt it was my duty to let her shape that environment before I tried to weave my way into it.

This observation stage ended up being crucial for my entire experience. This was imperative with one student in particular: Jason. Jason was diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) before he even stepped foot into our classroom. I was unaware of this diagnosis until he decided he was going to “test the waters” during the first few weeks of school. My thoughts of this can be seen in my earliest reflections:

On Friday (8/17), Jason was having an off day. We had put his desk isolated from the rest of the class because he said he wanted to be by himself. Throughout the day, he became more and more frustrated. Eventually, he started writing all over his desk. I could tell he was so frustrated when Lacey asked the class a question about charts in math and he mumbled something like ‘enough already’ under his breath. He was sick of talking about that subject, and it was obvious he wanted to get his way. Lacey ignored his behavior and continued to teach the other 17 children who were waiting to learn. A few minutes later, he picked up his book-bag and slung it down in front of him. My back was turned at the time because I was helping students in the classroom library, but Lacey immediately told me that she was going for a walk with Jason. Another 3rd grade teacher came in to help me supervise while Lacey was out of the room. When the day was over, I couldn’t help but think about what would have happened if he hurt another student. Would the penalty have been worse? I also couldn’t help but wonder what I would have done in such a situation. Would I have acted as calmly as Lacey did? At the end of the day, I discussed this with her, and she told me that she was in an “observation stage” where she was watching his behaviors and what works and doesn’t work for him. She explained that he had been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) before, and this was merely a glimpse of his anger.

This was the first time that I was unsure of what to do, and it was a scary feeling! Lucky for me, I had a mentor teacher who really knew what she was doing. I admired the way that she was able to decide when to correct Jason and when to sit back and watch. I also realized at this point that I was not the only one taking notes in the room. Lacey was also using the first few weeks to get a feel of her students. She did not automatically react; rather she used the time to figure out what was the most proactive thing to do.

It is interesting when you think about it. I am an “authority” figure in the room, but really, I decided not to have authority at all for the first few weeks. Watching Lacey and the students was actually probably the smartest thing I could do. I not only noticed that Jason was testing the waters to see how we would react, but I was able to determine all of the other students’ personalities at that point as well.

I also learned a lot about my role in those first few weeks. From the way the classroom was run to the parent teacher conferences we had, I quickly noticed that Lacey saw me as a very valuable asset to the classroom. She viewed me as more of a co-teacher than a student teacher. This was another blessing that occurred during my student teaching. I know that if I would have been placed with a teacher who was not as open and willing to let me experiment and test the waters myself, then my experience would have been completely different.

As the year progressed, I often felt an internal struggle with my “guest” self and my “teacher” self. I find that this struggle seemed to occur when I did not agree with something. I am typically a very outspoken person yet, I found myself questioning when I should speak up and when I should just keep my mouth shut. This oftentimes happened when it came to working with the other third grade team members. Luckily, Lacey and I have the same style of teaching and very similar teaching philosophies so in most cases; she spoke up without me having to speak up. In one case though, our methods seemed to haunt us for the remainder of the year.

It was science fair time, and all of the other third grade teachers decided they wanted to send their science fair projects home for the students to do. However, Lacey decided that we should do our science fair projects in class with the students. She planned out 18 different projects based on students’ personalities, and made a schedule of when each of those projects would be completed. She also made a list of materials so the parents could help purchase some of the materials needed. None of this was a problem until after all of our projects were finished.

I distinctly recall sitting in the hallway with our students and some high school helpers putting their project boards together. Suddenly, all of the other teachers had a major problem with the fact that we were doing our science fair project during class time. Now, I would understand if we actually did the projects and not the students, but that was not the case at all. I would also understand if the projects caused us to fall behind or if they were disruptive in some way. However, we were still on target with the other teachers, and I really do not think we were disruptive.

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For some reason, the other teachers starting talking about how Lacey was “not a team player.”

What does this have to do with being a guest and being a teacher? Well, I quickly realized that if I were a teacher at the school, I would have spoken up to support Lacey. She was merely trying to help the students learn the scientific method and trying to prevent the project from becoming a “parent project.” As a teacher, I would have applauded her efforts to stay on track yet go above and beyond to prepare the students for their future. However, I also realized that I was not a teacher – I was a guest in the school. Therefore, I decided not to speak up because I was there to learn from these teachers, not to cause drama or issues among them.

Now, I am not saying that student teachers should always stay quiet and never speak up. I am saying that it is wise to pick your battles. It is all about finding a balance. Sometimes, it is quite appropriate to share your thoughts and opinions about an issue. Other times, it is probably in your best interest to just watch as things unfold. In this case, I decided to watch. Because of this, I learned that I strongly believe in what Lacey is doing. I also learned that I should never rush to talk about people or their methods. I should first ask them their reasoning, and then decide if I agree or disagree. Furthermore, I should always at least attempt to be supportive of my team members. That does not mean that I always have to agree with them, but I should at least hear them out.

Looking back, I would have to say that taking the first few weeks to get to know the environment and the students was one of the smartest things I have done. While instinctively you want to jump in and start right away, it is sometimes better to take a step back and observe. This observation period not only helped me to understand my students and my mentor teacher, it also helped me to understand my role in this classroom. It is very wise to pick your battles within the school. Sometimes it is appropriate to speak up, especially if it is something you really believe in, but other times, it is your job as a guest in the school to just sit back. Oftentimes, the hardest part is going to be finding a balance between when you want to just keep doing what your team members are doing and when you want to just run your classroom as you would without them. Keep in mind that you are not there to “step on anyone’s toes.” You are there to learn and to grow. In the end, you must always remember that while you are a teacher (to some extent), you are also a guest, and you must find a balance between those roles in order to have a successful student teaching experience in the classroom.

It is imperative to find a balance of your roles within the classroom; it is also important to use your mentor teacher like your arms. She/he is there to help you keep your balance in a world that could seem to be spinning without her/him. Not taking advantage of your mentor teacher, it is like not using your arms in a turn: you may just fall.

Step 3: Passé

Once you prepare, commit, and understand where your arms are going, you can pick up your leg into a passé and turn. Although you start with two feet on the ground, you eventually have to pick one up. You have to commit and have confidence in yourself that you can do it.

Step 4: Spot

“Spotting” is one of the most crucial parts of a turn. “Spotting” is keeping your eye on one spot as long as possible in order to prevent you from getting dizzy and/or losing your balance. You have to know where you want to go to “spot” where you want to land.

BALANCING WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

Time? Anyone have some time that I can buy? You just wish you had more time, right? More time to watch television. More time to clean the house. More time to go on vacation. Unfortunately, we do not have as much time as we would like to have in a day. Sometimes, it feels like the time flies by, and we did not get anything accomplished. Especially in a classroom, time is very minimal. We always wish we had more time to teach or more time to give assessments or more time to spend just playing outside with our students. Because we have so little time with our students, it is imperative that we prioritize and balance the many things we must do as teachers.

Often in today’s schools, teachers either teach strictly using a traditional approach or strictly using a hands-on approach. The traditional approach to teaching includes much more teacher-centered instruction with the students doing very little of the work. In a hands-on or inquiry-based approach, students are the center of instruction, and the teachers are there to guide and facilitate the students in their exploration and learning. Through student teaching, I have learned that neither model is completely successful on its own; it is imperative to find a balance between several different ways of teaching.

Throughout my college experience, I was constantly told that I should “always” teach hands-on and “never” use textbooks. Needless to say, before I started student teaching, I believed that textbooks would never work, and I should never use them. However, when I arrived at an actual school with real students, I learned this was not true. It did not take long for me to realize that such a diverse classroom cannot solely rely on a traditional teacher or a hands-on approach. Because these two types of teaching are on completely opposite ends of the spectrum, it is imperative that we find a middle ground.

Naturally, I am a very hands-on type of teacher. I always want my students to work together and explore. I never want to tell my students the answers; I want them to work through their difficulties to figure out the answers on their own. I

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also believe that it is important that students understand why we learn the things we learn. I feel like this helps students have a more meaningful experience if they can understand how it pertains to their own life.

Luckily, my mentor teacher had a very similar philosophy of education so we worked very well together. While this sometimes caused problems with our team members, who do not have the same teaching philosophy, we were able to make things work very well in our own classroom. With that being said, sometimes we had to find a balance between how we would typically do things and how they wanted us to do things.

It did not take long for me to realize that there is just not enough time in the day. Initially, I would teach lessons that were solely hands-on, and I would end up spending days letting the students figure out the material on their own. While this would be acceptable in an ideal classroom, it just does not work that way in the real world. I would end up spending too much time on a certain topic, and therefore, my third graders would end up being a week “behind” all of the other third graders.

I use the word “behind” loosely here. I firmly believe that because my students spent more time on the material and were able to get a more in-depth approach, they will not be behind the other third graders. However, according to the state-standards that were in place in Louisiana prior to the Common Core State Standards, my students would end up being “behind” the other third graders in the material. Here is the issue: try explaining that to an administrator or another teacher when you are merely a student teacher!

As a student teacher, it is not worth your time trying to fight a battle over the state standards or the amount of time you are able to spend on the material or the fact that you think the curriculum is “a mile wide and an inch deep.” It did not take long for me to realize that I just have to pick my battles within the classroom as well. Sometimes, I would end up teaching a concept really in-depth and strictly hands-on. Other times, I would use resources like the textbook or library books. I would like to point out that I think it is okay to use the textbook as long as it is used as a resource. There is not enough time in the day and you as a student teacher do not have enough power to try to justify why you are teaching one way or another.

Please do not get me wrong when I say this. I am not trying to say that as student teachers, we have no voice or no opinion. I am, however, saying that this is a time where we should find ourselves, understand what works for us and what does not, reflect on our experiences and learn from them. Student teaching is not a time to try to teach one way or the other. It is not a time to try to fight battles. It is, however, a time that you should use to experiment and explore your own philosophy. Then, as you become a teacher, you take what you learned from student teaching and use it to find a balance or a middle ground. Because we end up having a completely different group of students every year, this balance or middle ground may be shifted from year to year or even week to week. Regardless,

student teaching is a time to learn and grow. If you are not open to learning, you will not get as much out of the experience.

I also learned quite quickly that there is not enough time in the day. There is not enough time to teach the way I would teach in an ideal world. There is not enough time to analyze assessments and data like I want to analyze. There is not enough time for all the other “stuff” that comes with teaching. Therefore, teachers must find a way to balance all of the “stuff” in such a way that it is most meaningful to their students.

Assessments, Assessments, Assessments...

Assessment is a word that seems to take many forms in education. Each week of my student teaching, there seemed to be talk of another benchmark test or writing assessment or reading assessment. Now, I believe in assessment, but I do not believe in assessment as strictly a means to come up with goals for myself. I think assessments should also be used to come up with goals for our students. I also think that some teaching should actually occur between the assessments. It does students no good to have assessments all the time if we are not going to analyze the results, find out where our students deficits lie, and do something about it. It becomes just a meaningless mountain of paperwork instead of a measure to drive instruction.

With so little time, it is imperative that we take every opportunity we can as educators to evaluate and assess our students. It is also important to take the results of those assessments and use that data to inform our instruction. While this may seem like an extra step to some teachers, this should be one of the first steps in planning your lessons. It is imperative that you balance your time well enough so that you can give meaningful lessons and meaningful assessments. If there is no balance between the work and the assessment, your students will be affected in a major way.

Looking back, I think I learned a lot about balance within the classroom. First, it is important to use a variety of styles of teaching within your student teaching experience. You should be open to trying as many options as possible so that by the time you finish student teaching, you have found a good balance of what works for you. Next, it is important to have a balance between teaching and assessments. Because so many schools are so focused on assessment, they tend to lose sight of the reason for taking the assessment. It is imperative that you give meaningful lessons and meaningful assessments, and use the data you collect to drive future instruction. Finally, it is imperative to balance your time. With so much to do and so little time it imperative that you find a balance. This may seem impossible during student teaching, but this balance will come with experience.

While it may be hard to find a balance within the classroom it is important to work toward achieving. Just like “spotting” is crucial in dance, it is always crucial to keep your eye on the goals that you have for yourself and your students. With all

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of the assessments and changes that occur in education, you always have to remember where you want your kids to go and where you want yourself to go. That may mean balancing assessments with hands-on or inquiry-based activities, if you keep your eye on the target, you are more likely going to land there.

Step 5: Awareness

Although there is quite a bit of technique involved in turning, there is also the idea that you must be aware. There are a lot of outside forces like props or the stage or even the formation of other dancers that may affect your turn. It is important to be aware of and actively think about these outside forces as you are turning so that you do not lose your balance.

BALANCE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Of course student teaching has an effect on our lives within the classroom, but what about our lives outside of the classroom? Initially when I was reflecting on my hardest part of student teaching, I thought, “Well... there isn’t really one hardest part.” Each week, there seems to be a different “hardest part.” One week, I may think having students leave is the hardest part. Another week, I may think it is lesson planning. The following week, I may think graduate schoolwork is the hardest part. Another week I may think dealing with drama and gossip is the hard part. Sometimes, all the paperwork is the most difficult part. Other times, having a work life or personal life is the hardest part. While it seems that each day or week could have a different “hardest part,” after much thought and reflection, I have realized that finding a balance is most definitely the most difficult part of my student teaching. I carry so many roles inside and outside the classroom.

First, I am a student. Finding a balance between my student teaching and my university learning is sometimes a struggle. Because I am a graduate student, I am required to do certain assignments including data collection, lesson plans, sketch plans, and so on that some student teachers (and even some teachers) are not required to do. I oftentimes find myself having to pick whether I think my LSU schoolwork is more important or my student teaching schoolwork is more important. If I manage my time correctly, I can do both, and my LSU work will ultimately help my student teaching work, but sometimes, there is just not enough time in the day.

Next, I am a business owner. Because I own a dancing studio, I have a responsibility to my dancers and their parents. If I do not manage my time, I find myself overwhelmed with payments, dance costume orders, lighting paperwork, program setup, choreography, and other recital preparations. Although I am stressed because of the business aspect of it, the art of dance is something I love. It is my therapy at the end of the day, and I truly feel blessed to have a gift I can express and pass on to others. With that being said, it is something I am not willing to give up, and therefore, I must find a balance.

Finally, among other things, I am a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, a girlfriend, a friend, and a mother of two dogs (and while they are not children, they are like my children). Family and friends are extremely important aspects of all of our lives. They are our support system and for that reason I could not do anything without them. However, because I am so busy ALL the time, I struggle with finding time to have a social life. I find myself having to pick between schoolwork and family. This ends up being a struggle over which will be a more important priority at the time.

With this many roles in addition to the important roles of student teacher, co-teacher, and 3rd grade team member comes sacrifice. Prioritizing and time management seems to be my weaknesses, and I will definitely always work at becoming better. A great deal of the time the other teachers in my host school amaze me. There are teachers who have children and husbands. There are teachers who are coaches and tutors. There are teachers who go above and beyond all the time. I oftentimes wonder how they do it all. How in the world do they possibly teach the same thing (or more) that I am able to teach and still leave with a clean classroom at the end of the day to get home to their babies? Even when I do give it my all, I feel like I am not getting as much accomplished as they are. I wish I could be a fly on their wall sometimes so I could see how they get it all done. I admire those teachers, and I can only hope that one day I will have the experience and knowledge to manage my time so wisely.

I am the type of person who wants to give 100% to everything I do. However, with so many roles in addition to my major role of student teacher, I often find myself doing a constant juggling act that seems to go on and on forever. With that being said, I know that I will have some of these roles in addition to wearing other hats when I get a real job as a teacher. Therefore, I have come to realize that balancing is just a part of the profession, and although it may be the hardest part now, having this experience will help me in the long run as I strive to be the best teacher I can be.

Just like the outside forces that may affect your turn, there are outside forces that affect your student teaching. Because we are all human, things happen in our relationships and in our lives that are out of our control. As a teacher, it is our job to find balance between work and school so that neither is affected in a negative way. We must try to be as aware as possible of our surroundings and outside forces so they do not knock us off balance.

Final Step: Land

When you are done with your turn, you land. Sometimes we land on our feet. Sometimes we land on our face. Regardless of where you land, it is up to you to think about the turn you just completed. You must reflect on that turn in order to improve the next turn.

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LOOKING BACK

Looking back on my experience, I have realized that it did not do me any good to stress before I started. My placement ended up being perfect (or at least close to it). I was with a teacher who does have a brain just like mine (thank goodness), and I was in a school that welcomed me as one of their own. Not only did I accomplish my schoolwork and student teaching, but my business is also up and running smoothly. I feel like I did a pretty good job of balancing everything. At times I was exhausted, and I still find myself getting overwhelmed, but I just have to take a step back and realize that it is usually not worth stressing over. I have to take it one day at a time. I have also come to realize that every experience is a good experience to have as a student teacher because I am more than likely going to be faced with the same obstacle at some point in my career, and I would much rather learn now how to get over it than next year when I am an actual teacher.

That brings me to my biggest fear: being good enough. I have learned that I am always going to have room to grow. I went into the experience wanting everything to be perfect all the time, and I have quickly realized that not everything can be perfect. Things do go wrong and unexpected things do happen, especially in a classroom full of 3rd graders. There is no need to stress over the little stuff. After all, teaching is a profession where you are constantly learning and growing.

ADVICE

After looking back at student teaching and reflecting on my experiences, I have two pieces of advice for other student teachers and even teachers. Each piece of my advice is preceded by a small piece of advice from the father of education himself, John Dewey.

Experiences in order to be educative must lead out into an expanding world of subject matter, a subject matter of facts or information and of ideas. This condition is satisfied only as the educator view teaching and learning as a continuous process of reconstruction of experiences. (Dewey, 1938 p. 87)

First, take every experience as a learning experience. You are there to learn and grow so there is no need to stress. If something goes wrong, you just have to learn a lesson from that experience and carry it on with you to make your future lessons even better. It is imperative that you learn from one day to improve the next. It is good that things happen to you during your student teaching so that you have a better idea of how to handle them whenever you are teaching in your own classroom. "The belief that all genuine education comes through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25).

Second, reflect. Because it is a learning experience, you should reflect as often as possible. Just like you have to analyze your students' tests, you should analyze

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your experiences so you know what to take from them. You will realize that not everything can be perfect. You have to admit your weaknesses and try your hardest to grow. Furthermore, if you reflect now as a student teacher, you are more likely to get in the habit of it and reflect when you have a job as a teacher. Do not forget that you always have room to improve and grow.