

The Unexpected Turning Point

From September 2017 to June 2018, one or more members of the Knowles Teacher Initiative community will write a blog post each month exploring the role of small victories, mistakes and failures in their growth and learning. In this blog post, Knowles Senior Fellow Lindsey Quinlisk shares a classroom incident that underscored her need to leave the classroom.

I left the classroom this year after eight years of teaching. It was not something I wanted to do or expected to do. When I started my teaching career, I saw myself in the classroom for the long term. After all, I had already made a career change from engineering to education. A move that surprised no one as numerous friends and peers had said all along: “You should be a teacher.” A career as an educator fit my passions, strengths and skill sets. I determined that I would be in the field of education for life and indicated this on the annual survey conducted by the Knowles Teacher Initiative. If anything were to change, it would be that my students were no longer high schoolers but teachers-to-be.

Yet here I was, at year eight in my career facing a gut-wrenching decision. My internal state of being was clashing with my mapped-out career plan but I didn’t

see the pressure building. Unfortunately, when it came to the surface, my student was burned by my internal turmoil.

It was a routine day in geometry. Students were working together on their pythagorean triples task. I called the class back together to discuss and review their work. It took a few seconds for A.J. and Nick to put their pencils down and look up, and for Jessica and Carly to rearrange their desks so they could see me but the class was responsive. And I had their attention . . . except for Ann who was still chatting, talking loudly to her buddy Rita across the room. I looked at Ann and she continued to talk.

“Ann, stop talking!” the exasperation bubbling from my lips.

“I am not talking,” Ann retorted.

“Get OUT of my room!” my words erupting in a scream.

“But I wasn’t . . . ”

“Just GET out now!” my words and shriek spewing in a fiery mess.

Ann grabbed her stuff and walked out, her disgust trailing behind her. The room was still. Each student solidified in place by the overflow of my emotions, unsure of what I would do next because I had shattered the hitherto predictable behavior of their teacher.

The shock waves of my mind reverberated with the anxious thumping of my heart. My head knew I had grossly overreacted towards Ann and I was as stunned as my students. While I have been angry at students and lost my cool before, never was it to this extreme. It was as though I had been possessed by a different person; both my students and I were equally terrified.

That moment was the turning point in my career, though I didn’t realize it until the next day when my supervisor called me into her office. “Lindsey, is there something going on that we need to be aware of? Are you under stress? Do you need help with anything?” she asked me with compassion. I couldn’t give her an answer in the moment as to what was going on but upon leaving her office I knew it was time for me to leave the classroom. I had been in denial about my own unhappiness and my frustrations and unfortunately, when it erupted to the surface, it was directed at Ann.

All year I had a nagging inner feeling that I needed a change. My rational brain was fighting it because to me it didn't make sense. There was so much going on in my current teaching context that many other teachers would crave. My colleagues wanted to discuss student data and strategies for effective instruction, my supervisor supported me in handling challenging parent interactions, our schedule allowed for 90 minutes of collaboration time every other day with my department (this is hitting the jackpot in teacher currency), and my students were cooperative and willing to learn (on most days). I knew numerous other teachers facing immense challenges in their teaching contexts who were staying strong in the profession. So why was I feeling this tension?

Over the last three years of teaching, there were factors that were subtly eroding at my core calling as a teacher. Frustrations with a system that sets students up to fail despite my efforts to find the best fit for them, exasperation with state standards that put unrealistic expectations of the depth and speed at which students can learn, annoyance with parents who tell me how to do my job when they haven't been trained and licensed to teach, vexed by a curriculum that left little room for student creativity. These factors are not new or personal to me; they are common complaints in teacher lounges across the nation. Yet, what I realized in the aftermath of my incident with Ann was, while there are a number of factors that were causing my unhappiness, there was one simple answer for me: my heart was not in teaching anymore. My passions had changed and this was not something I had ever taken into consideration the multiple times I filled out the Knowles survey with "I see myself in education for 20 plus years."

Though I knew leaving my supervisor's office that March day that I needed to leave the classroom, it still took several weeks for me to accept my decision. I felt that to leave the classroom was to fail. I felt that I was abandoning my students and my colleagues, that I was letting down the Knowles community who invested so much time, energy, and resources specifically to make sure I did not leave teaching. And most of all, I felt like it was the death of my own dream to be a lifelong educator.

In walking through this decision process, I talked with several key people. I called my mentor who journeyed with me during my student teaching days and the first two years in my own classroom. I sought input from my colleague who I shared my classroom with and, other than my students, spent the most time watching me

teach. I talked with **Linda Abrams** from Knowles. It was Linda's personal story that helped give me the courage to resign, specifically this quote she shared: "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?" (Valarie Kaur). Linda pointed out that by leaving the classroom, I am giving room to birth a new season in my life which can lead me to career opportunities that I couldn't have imagined before. And who knows? Those opportunities could lead me back to the classroom.

I still grieve over how I wounded Ann that March day. As much as I profusely apologized to her afterwards, things were not the same between us. I feel like I left a scar on her that should not have ever come to be there in the first place. However dark that moment was, I am hoping that it truly was the birthing moment of something greater, both for me and for Ann. And that one day, I will be back in the classroom with my passion rekindled and the joy of learning overflowing to all my students.

¹ All student names are pseudonyms.