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Student Teachers Strive to Learn, Moment by Moment

It's fifth period at San Francisco's School of the Arts and Bobby Pelz, a second-year student teacher enrolled at USF, is urging his class to get to their seats. He has a PowerPoint presentation on screen and a pointed critique of the class's latest writing efforts. "You're thesis statements weren't quite what I was looking for," he tells his senior English students. "Let's try it again." As if with one voice, the 22 teenagers in the class moan, "No."

It's just another challenge as Pelz navigates his first semester as a teacher. This fall, USF's School of Education has approximately 100 student teachers like Pelz enrolled in their second year in the teaching certificate or master's programs. With a nationwide shortage of teachers, especially in rural and urban areas, according to the National Education Association, giving teachers an induction period in which they can work and learn from a seasoned mentor in the school district gives them a necessary foundation for their complex job. The first time they teach is a make-or-break experience, the period when aspiring teachers roll up their sleeves and wade into their own classrooms for the first time. And chances are it will take everything they've got.

"I've been told I keep good control but I'm still saying 'guys be quiet' 50 times every class," Pelz said. "When lessons don't work you think, 'God, can I do this? Am I a good teacher?'"

Nervousness and inexperience naw a student teacher on the inside while nearly infinite challenges await them on the outside. Timing, proper communication, creating a sense of authority, and seeking out the proper resources are skills to acquire. There are also a hundred and one tricks of the trade to master, from how to get a first grader to hold a book properly to guiding a high school senior successfully toward graduation. And as education struggles to keep up with a technological society, there's students' prototypical short attention spans with which to work.

"All the planning and work that student workers do is about dealing with short attention spans," said Kathy Rosebrock, a master teacher in residence at USF who



School of Education students Julie Halferty (top) and Bobby Pelz work to master curriculum and classroom management during their first semester teaching.

trains student teachers for the classroom. She added that elementary school children can focus for about six minutes at a time, high school students for about 30 minutes.

Pelz has another challenge as well. He wears hearing aids. He scans the room often, checking to see if students are leaning close together or glancing at him often, indicators that they are talking during class. He relies a great deal on gentle insistence, a dose of cajoling, and patience to steer his students through his lesson plan. He battles his students' restlessness with creativity. He played hip hop music to make poetry more accessible and asked the students to write insults in Shakespearean language as a way of introducing *Hamlet*. His biggest challenge, however, is making them responsible for their education. "I hold the ideal that they're going to change the world, but how are they going to do that if they don't turn in their work?" he said.

While high school students are notoriously restless, first graders nearly explode with energy. Julie Halferty, a USF student teacher assigned a first grade class in San Francisco's West Portal School, says learning classroom management skills from her mentor is a major part of her preparation. "Everybody stand up," she sings after switching the lights on and off to get her students' attention. Like her mentor, she uses sign language and facial expressions to help her communicate with the class of 20, which includes some English language learners and a student with mild autism. Each student needs special help mastering phonetic sounds and reading simple sentences, the curriculum standard required by the state.

"You have to be compassionate, you have to be patient, you have to want to learn about things," Halferty said. "You never stop learning in this profession."

Halferty and Pelz say they were drawn to teaching because of a passion for social justice. Halferty because she believes teachers make a big difference in children's lives, Pelz because he sees education as a precious opportunity for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"It may seem like it's in small ways and you may not see the outcome but at least you know you're giving students some love and support everyday that they may not receive otherwise," Halferty said. ■

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