

Normal Struggles of Young Band Directors

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The first few years of band directing are hard! Many of us come out of college firmly believing that our new conducting baton coupled with a can-do attitude will change the world. We get a lot of good advice about how to get our first job like what to wear, how to manage our money, how to clean up our social media profiles, etc. But what comes after our first year of teaching?

I can distinctly remember the feelings I had at the end of my first year of teaching. I was relieved that summer break was just around the corner and that I wouldn't have to be a first-year teacher again. I was excited at the prospect of being "better" in my second year than I was in my first. Then, the next year I felt like a first-year teacher again in many ways. I was better at certain aspects of teaching and classroom management, but my students still didn't play very well compared to the top students in the region. I knew how to manage my grade book and enter attendance, but I didn't feel like I was much better at teaching my band how to play in tune. Now that I am completing my seventeenth year of teaching and have had the honor of mentoring several first-year teachers, I can offer encouragement that there are "normal" struggles band directors experience as they complete their first several years of teaching.

Is it normal to struggle teaching your primary instrument? Yes! A common misconception is that because we can play our primary instrument well, we will teach it well. I have found the opposite to be true when band directors are first starting out. Playing our primary instrument is second nature to the point that we often struggle to understand why our students struggle. Most directors teach instruments outside of their primary instrument family with more attention to detail because they are figuring it out as they go. Try teaching your primary instrument with the same level of detail.

Is it normal to struggle hearing tuning problems or ensemble sound? Yes! Most young teachers struggle to hear tuning issues, balance, and blend for several years. This is especially true when you are the one teaching from the podium. Try recording your class or have another director teach your students while you walk around and observe. You will be amazed at how quickly a recording or a guest teacher will open your ears to different sound issues. This is true for band rehearsals, sectionals, and beginner classes.

Is it normal to forget pedagogical and teaching tricks several years in a row? Yes! We have all been frustrated with ourselves when a mentor must tell us the same thing several different times. However, certain concepts and skills require numerous reminders

before they become a readily accessible tool at our disposal. No one can remember everything. Make a list of needed improvements and focus on improving at least one thing per day.

A complete list of "normal" struggles that are common to young band directors could fill an entire book. The main thing to remember is that if you struggle you are normal. I was told once that it takes five years as a band director before you feel like you are coming into your own as a teacher. While the five-year mark won't be the magic number for everyone, we must all realize that there is no substitute for time. Be patient and try to improve little by little from year to year. Small improvements add up to big improvements. The willingness to ask for help and persevere through frustrations can be the difference between a quick burnout or a long fulfilling career.

My final advice? Enjoy your summer, get refreshed, go to the TBA convention, and hit it hard again next year.