



# When the Spirit Speaks: My Battle with Change

by Matherine Dixon, Literacy Coach, Arden Elementary, Richland County School District One

Have you ever loved something so much that it made you crazy? Perhaps not in the sense of being deranged, but out of your mind. Maybe even literally?

I was a teacher. A song-singing, esteem-building, data-analyzing teacher. I poured everything I had into my chosen profession, and I reaped the benefits. Being with my students gave me energy, and that energy fueled more creative ways to reach them. Throughout my eleven years as an educator, that never changed.

*That never changed.*

The legislation changed. The standards changed. My schools changed. I changed states.

There was always change.

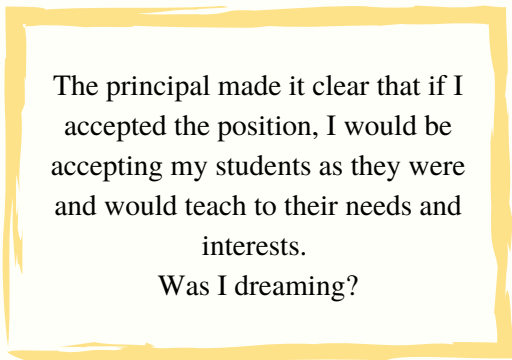
So, I taught my students to be lifelong learners and conditioned myself to do the same. Each time change reintroduced itself, I embraced it. After all, it was an opportunity to learn something new.

Then one day, the turns of each change left me emotionally entangled and sobbing on my classroom floor. In that moment, my personal expectations of motherhood became the bricks that weighed on my chest, while each task at work built the walls that enclosed me. The safety net that I crafted from tenacity, perseverance, and flexibility crumbled. And there I was, drowning in obligation and sinking in a pit of change.

*How did I get here? How could this be happening to me? Was I dreaming?*

As I stand in the gift of hindsight, I now realize that I should have seen it coming. My behavior patterns were shifting around the same time I experienced my meltdown. My attention to detail and passion to engage in critical dialogue were no longer a match for the endless emails and piles of grading. The internal struggle was overwhelming. My duties and my desires were set against each other on a pendulum.

As if the inundating tasks were not enough, I had been feeling an overwhelming pull to return to a school with students who were not afforded the advantages of my current ones. A place where parents were not always able to provide support in traditional ways. I applied for a transfer, and the timing could not have been more perfectly aligned. A new school had positions available. A new school whose heart and veins pumped Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The principal made it clear that if I accepted the position, I would be accepting my students as they were and would teach to their needs and interests. It was as if God himself had given me that nudge in order to prepare me for this opportunity, and I took it.




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I learned so much during my investigations with my new students and colleagues. The rigorous instruction I learned to deliver from my previous school was a North Star that guided my work with my new students, while the responsive teaching of my current school laid the foundation that bridged a pathway for my students' success.

My situation and hardships remained, but the novelty of my environment and the professional learning sustained me. The bricks that weighed me became a boulder of support and a new string underpinned the tattered ones.

But the contentment did not last long.



Around the same time that I wept in silence, I was accepted into leadership training programs with my district and the state department. Apart from emphasizing the importance of leading from one's current position, the sessions opened my eyes to other entities of the educational system beyond what was visible each school day. My love for mentoring also bloomed as I welcomed preservice teachers into my classroom and mentored new colleagues. I blindly relished in these opportunities, filling a missing void. But the void was replaced with dissonance as the training sessions and mentoring seemed counterproductive to my self-proclaimed calling as an elementary school teacher.

I wanted to do more. I needed to do more.

I must admit. I was intrigued. Was God guiding me down a new path — something different than the one I chose? If this was indeed the case, I ignored the signs again. That was not a change that I was ready to accept. My students needed me.

My students needed *me*. In my mind, I had to be the one delivering instruction and building efficacy. The students who were placed in my class were assigned to me with purpose. I couldn't fathom passing the baton to someone else.

Yet in my eleventh year of teaching, the walls closed in even closer. The tears I once cried morphed into a sea of paralyzing anxiety, engulfing much of the motivation and joy that I relied on to fuel me. I couldn't repeat the cycle another year. I knew in my heart that it was time to leave.

I can only remember the peace that came with the decision, but in this moment a trail of tears traces my face as I relive the memory. I loved teaching. But at some point, I had to ask myself, "Did teaching love me back?"

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My passion for students and public education was unwavering, but for the sake of my sanity the role I played had to change. The skills I acquired during this most challenging period in my career ended up being exactly what I needed to propel me into my next phase as an educator. The impact of the change was nearly instantaneous. The walls crumbled, and the bricks became feathers.

In the spring of 2019, I accepted a position as a literacy-based instructional coach in Richland School District One. It was love at first sight. The marriage of two worlds that I had grown to absolutely love merged as one harmonious balance between leadership and coaching. I listened to my spirit and have been in a constant state of awe at the results.

Changing positions led to my professional learning experiences with the *Center for Teacher Quality* (CTQ), and CTQ's partnership with the *University of South Carolina's Center for Educational Partnerships* has led to this moment: me sharing my story. Not a story that is complete, but a story that is whole. A story that is intertwined with various support systems and relevant to a purpose and plan designed for me. The changes and the frustrations were all necessary learning posts that served as decision guides and contentment crushers. The culturally relevant philosophies that I learned were not only critical for my scholars, but they were also the crux of self-awareness that I needed to acknowledge my own personal changes. I developed another layer of identity; one suitable for the growth within.

Being a teacher is a rewarding experience. The depth of service, the connections made with every life touched, and the personal growth experienced is unmatched to any other profession. Yet, receiving these benefits is contingent upon our ability to sustain the journey. That sustenance may come from the camaraderie you've formed with colleagues or the refreshing new beginnings that come with each school year.



However, when the constantly changing conditions are no longer sustained by what has previously motivated you, something has to change. That change can be supplemental, substitutable, or eliminatory. Supplemental changes are tweaks that you make to add to your systems of support. Substitutable changes replace counterintuitive activities or activities that hinder personal goals or growth, while eliminatory changes remove them altogether.

Self-awareness is integral in determining when changes must occur since tolerance varies between individuals. If self-awareness is something you're still working toward, try asking yourself the following questions to help get you started:

- Which of my actions are helping me reach my personal or professional goals?

- Do I speak more from a negative lens or a positive one?
- What changes have I had to face in the last week, month, or year?

Here's the key: Continue asking yourself *why* after each response until your response reveals clarity and transformation.

I wish I would have known then what I know now. Change is a pathway for our journey. Respect it. Embrace it. Yes, there will be grief and mourning of at least an idea that we've nourished, so take the time to celebrate what once was, but don't stay there. Instead, listen to your inner voice, be aware of little things that feel like strands of coincidence, and be amazed when your purpose-driven identity reveals itself.

Table 1. Types of changes

Supplemental Changes	Substitutable Changes	Eliminatory Changes
Exercise	Healthier lifestyle choices	Poor eating habits
Journal	The company you keep	Procrastination
Read devotionals	Find the joy and purpose in your current state instead of focusing on the negative	Negative or fixed mindsets
Use prioritized checklists		Being judgemental
Listen to inspiring podcasts	Transfer to a grade level that aligns with your natural patterns	Workplace gossip
Play encouraging music		Manipulation
Fellowship	Contribute to your field in other roles, but give yourself permission to return to the classroom	Blaming others
Create a social media account that solely uplifts you		Self-loathing
Take advantage of personal and professional learning opportunities	Relocate	Unrealistic expectations
	Collaborate with other trusted individuals, instead of working in isolation	Doing everything on your own
		Self-righteousness



Matherine Dixon has been an educator for thirteen years and currently serves as a Literacy Coach in Columbia, South Carolina. With the ambition to close the academic achievement gap in marginalized communities as her motivation, Matherine is studying to obtain her doctorate in education at the University of South Carolina.