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MY YEAR AS A TEACHER Part 2

LEARNING TO TAKE CHARGE

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My challenge with classroom behavior became clear early in the school year -- soon after the Boy in Row Three, Seat Six smacked his neighbor in the face with a wadded-up piece of paper.

Going into the school year, I had vague expectations of instilling a cerebral atmosphere. My students would silently revere the learning process, and I would quell the occasional whisper with a firm-but-not-stern shake of the head.

All that fractured with the whap of paper's impact on a rosy cheek.

Probably the biggest surprise about teaching was how much of it is devoted to controlling the students. The education euphemism for that is "classroom management."

Experienced teachers had given me some advice on the topic, and early in the first quarter, I went to an "effective-environment seminar." But nobody told me that discipline problems often would come from sources far beyond my reach. Those sources were sometimes complex, sometimes sad -- and usually impossible for me to change.

But of course I didn't see any of that looking at the paper-thrower. All I saw was his obvious chagrin at getting caught.

I barked one word at him: "Outside!"

Then I dispatched him with the school's standard "time-out" form. It was designed to make the offender reflect on how breaking the rules affected not just him or her, but also the teacher and the rest of the class.

When he finished, he sheepishly brought the form back. I read it -- or tried to.

Which rule did you break?

"I trove a think to my freend"

How did it affect the class as a whole?

"I affect by interect hem"

How did it affect the teacher's ability to teach effectively?

"mad"

Describe how you must change your behavior.

"be guelity in the class room"

At the time he threw the paper wad, Third Row Boy was supposed to be completing a dialogue-writing exercise. It was the first step to writing a fable that included dialogue.

And that was the problem.

If he could not write "I threw something to my friend," you might surmise that he could not write a dialogue assignment, let alone an original fable.

You might also surmise that he would struggle to be "guelity in the class room," whatever that meant. (I eventually figured it to mean, "Be quiet in the classroom.")

Third Row Boy's problem wasn't hostility toward his neighbor, or laziness or stupidity. When I read the form, I realized his problem: He didn't speak English well enough to understand the assignment.

Like him, many students came into the class bound up in a tangle of outside issues. Those issues often were invisible to me. The only thing I could see was the problems they created.

Some students, I discovered, suffered learning disabilities or attention disorders. Some suffered nightmarish problems at home. I had kids with jailed parents, kids with abusive parents, kids with no parents.

For others, the problem was merely a matter of language. I had several students who had been switched over from Spanish instruction to English. For weeks I wondered whether one of those kids, Nathaly, spoke any English.

Sometimes these kids sat in meek and utter silence, like Nathaly. More typically, they misbehaved.

The longer I taught, and the better I got to know my students, the better I understood why they acted up. The problem was -- no matter how well you understood the source of their behavior, and how much you sympathized -- they were still disrupting the class.

They weren't violent (at least, not in my class). But they couldn't restrain themselves from incessantly talking, or drawing on each other, or shooting staples with rubber bands. And while there were only a few of them, they distracted everyone.

So, for everybody's sake, I devoted sizable chunks of my time and energy to maintaining order. Assistant principal Caren Black was in charge of discipline at Brownell Academy. "If you're going to teach," she told me, "you've got to be a cop."

At the effective-environment seminar, other new teachers and I got a primer on classroom management. The advisers gave us a laminated handout depicting management methods. Once I got a translation for the terms, I began to employ them. (For example, "proximity," symbolized by a shark, meant you were supposed to move ominously toward the source of trouble and stay there until it stopped.)

Sometimes the techniques worked. Sometimes they didn't. There were other methods. I termed these "whatever works."

For example, I started hiding my stapler, so that certain students couldn't steal staples and shoot them. This stumped them for maybe a day or two. Then they resolutely turned to folded-up paper as missiles.

At least those were easier for me to see and confiscate.

The Third Row Boy problem actually turned out to be easy to solve. We were able to find room for him and several others (but not Nathaly) in a language-learners class, where the subject matter was more accessible.

Most of the time, though, the solution was more elusive. Certain students on certain days weren't going to be engaged, no matter what you were doing. There were days when I could have brought in TV character SpongeBob SquarePants to teach, and that wouldn't have engaged the Piston.

The Piston's moods alternated between up and down. Some days she came into class happy and cooperative. Other days she swooped in breathing fire from a mouthful of braces.

One day, I mildly chastised her for some forgettable offense. As I walked away, she yelled, "That is just rude!"

This was a severe violation of my Classroom Rule No. 1, as written on the board: "In this class you must respect the teacher."

I took her outside and briefly lectured her.

"I expect you to talk to me respectfully," I told her. "And if I ask you to observe the class rules, I expect you to cooperate. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Do you understand?" (I was employing the laminate's "broken record" technique.)

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. I understand."

Despite this understanding, we continued to battle off and on.

Finally I scheduled a conference with her mother. She turned out to be your basic well-adjusted, concerned and befuddled mom.

The girl's main problem at school seemed to be in my class, and she had a suspicion about that, because I was the only male teacher on my team. A lot of my students were having typical adolescent conflicts with their parents. Piston's struggle with her father was an extreme example, the mother said. And, "She told me the other night that you remind her of him."

So. What was I supposed to do about that? I could put a student with a language problem with another teacher. I couldn't put the Piston with another dad.

I arranged to have her switched to one of my better-behaved classes, where she fared better. And I cut her a bit more slack than I did many of the others. But we still had conflicts intermittently for the rest of the year.

A couple of times, I sent her to the office. This was called a "referral." Teachers knew the administration frowned on a lot of referrals, because they were expected to handle most matters themselves.

That became a matter of discontent among many faculty members, who complained that the administration did not adequately support the staff. I was hardly the only one having problems with classroom management. Many veteran teachers told me they thought kids' behavior in general was worse than ever.

Brownell has the reputation of being a safe, calm school. And most of the time, the misbehavior was disruptive and annoying, not dangerous. But there were exceptions.

One teacher told me a student threw a rock and hit her. And toward the end of the year, some teachers were furious when a student slapped a teacher hard on her back and received only a five-day suspension.

Black, the assistant principal, acknowledged that students are getting harder to teach. But her idea of solutions differed from that of most teachers.

"I keep hearing teachers say, 'Get this kid out of my classroom!' " she said.

"To where? Where exactly would you like them to go? This is a public school. We are here to educate the public. . . . We can't change who is coming through the door."

Actually (in my own clueless way), by the middle of the first quarter, that was exactly what I was about to try to do.

I couldn't change their life circumstances. But I thought I at least could make them behave with a little more respect.