

MY YEAR AS A TEACHER; Thoughts on a Year in the Life Back outside with a new perspective

Series: MY YEAR AS A TEACHER. Chapter 8/Epilogue

BY EMILY SACHAR. Newsday [Long Island, N.Y] 05 Dec 1989: 06.

This series is reporter Emily Sachar's account of her year as a teacher at IS 246, the Walt Whitman Intermediate School, based on her journal and interviews conducted after her return to New York Newsday in September. The students profiled in the series appear with the permission of their parents. Their names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of their school records.

EPILOGUE

ONE SHELF IN my den has workbooks. Another has bags of smiley-face stickers, and another has dice and protractors. Next to my computer is a filing cabinet filled with puzzles I used in my year as a teacher at Walt Whitman Intermediate School in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

They were my teaching supplies, and I haven't been able to throw them away. After teaching math for a year, I decided not to return. But I still feel like a teacher, and I often imagine I'll go back to the classroom someday.

My eighth-graders, most of whom I last saw on graduation day June 19, are attending high schools all over New York. Many have lost touch with each other, and all but a few have lost touch with me.

I miss some of those kids - like Margaret and Ariel from my top class, who stopped by my homeroom one day last year to give me a pin they had made in shop class. "No. 1 Teacher," it said. I showed it to my tough-as-nails supervisor, half-expecting her to laugh. She told me to wear it. "It's true," she said. True or not, it made me feel great.

Now that I'm out of the classroom, I think often of the things I learned as a teacher that years as a student, a parent and an education reporter had never taught me. I am still in touch with the friends I made at Whitman and I'm often reminded of the tough life many teachers lead - days that start before sunrise and end late, and days that were consumed after school with planning, grading papers and making connections with parents. I am still stunned by how little teachers are trusted by the school administration. I had to post a time card each morning and each afternoon, and I had to stay in school until the dismissal bell rang, even after I was done teaching for the day. I could not get tests mimeographed or order my yearly allotment of supplies without a supervisor's approval.

Yet Whitman teachers were, for the most part, forgiving of this system, which often treats them rudely. While some of them say they hate their jobs, the majority are exhilarated by teaching and, even after 20 years, are still modifying lesson plans and trying to do a better job.

Some Whitman teachers are counting down the days to Christmas vacation and the years until they can retire, but many others are busily planning field trips or dance shows for the kids and classes for themselves. I expected competent teaching; what I saw in many classrooms was inspirational.

I now understand some of the reasons students are graduating with weak skills and little knowledge. The system has few standards for kids, and even the standards it does have are not enforced when it isn't convenient to do so. I felt pressured to pass students, even when they knew little, because I knew that a difficult kid who was held back would only create problems the next year for the teachers I had come to like. And I saw many kids who were passed on simply because they were too old to stay in Whitman one more year.

Yet, I saw the other side of the problem, too: There is no reason to hold a student back in a system that has little to offer him the second time around. And the administrators at my school, all of them pragmatic and humane, recognized this reality.

I think about the many kids I didn't know, but who came to life through the proud tales of their Whitman teachers - kids who wrote poignant essays and poems or who mastered complex math or science, kids who said they learned about life in their health class or learned to dance in the annual spring show. FOR ALL THE talk of accountability I had heard as an education reporter, I found a system where excellence is rarely rewarded and incompetence is rarely punished or helped. Even a simple thank you is rarely uttered by an administrator to a teacher. Great teachers usually are great because they care to be great, not because the system demands it. Lazy teachers are allowed to stay that way. A tenured teacher who minds his kids and his paperwork is rarely dismissed, even if little teaching goes on in his or her classroom. By the same token, teachers who want and need good words rarely get them. Although I notified the principal when I had posted bulletin boards showing off my students' work, I still don't know whether he saw them, or what he thought. And many teachers who did more extra work than I said they also were rarely recognized.

I saw the obstacles teachers face in trying to help students - classrooms that have too many students and too few materials, and teachers and supervisors who have too many responsibilities that have nothing to do with teaching. Much of the work I felt I had to do as a teacher - everything from sweeping my room, to recording daily and monthly attendance, to blackening little circles on standardized test forms - could have been done on a computer or by a clerk.

And supervisors don't have it much easier. They have at least as many paperwork responsibilities as teachers - in part, checking up on the teachers' paperwork - and also must organize school activities, monitor functions like attendance, promotion and graduation, and ensure that the school is safe. They have virtually no time to help teachers teach.

I was ashamed to distribute many of the materials designed for students and parents because I thought they ignored the reading abilities of the families. One form letter sent home to parents at the beginning of the year, discussing homework, was nine paragraphs and two pages long. I asked several parents if they understood it, and a few admitted they couldn't make their way through the first paragraph.

I saw how important discipline is in the classroom, and how hard it is to achieve until you know exactly who you are and what you're trying to do. I had heard, before I began teaching, that many of the kids in city schools, particularly junior highs,

have severe discipline problems. But I didn't know what to expect. Nor did I realize the extent to which I would have to cope with these problems myself.

And I realized, when I was done, that making theoretical topics relevant to kids who are years behind takes more than a knowledge of the subject; it takes intense patience and years of practice, and the courage to deviate from the written plan, from the Board of Education's often-unrealistic philosophies and the state's curriculum requirements.

Ultimately, I saw a system that often does not have the time or the inclination to care about the kids inside it. Most of my eighth-graders, for instance, never got even a five-minute block of time with a guidance counselor to help map out their future or to discuss which of the city's 117 high schools might be appropriate for them. Since I didn't understand the verbose and tedious high school directory, I couldn't help the kids much myself.

And, unless they're participating in a special program, kids may not stay after school. Without special permission in writing from a supervisor, they may not enter school early, either. Although the need for security was real, I felt sometimes like I was working in an institution that considered its clients - the kids - to be dangerous intruders.

YET, FOR ALL the system's problems, I left my first year as a city schoolteacher feeling hopeful. The breadth and depth of faculty talent is staggering. Most of the kids, even the toughest ones, want to make something of themselves. And, although I heard rumors about politics affecting appointments at my school, most of the people in key administrative posts struck me as knowledgeable and concerned about the kids.

Among the students I taught, some made it to good high schools; I know of one at Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics and another at Murry Bergtraum, both well-regarded schools. None of my students was accepted to the city's most prestigious specialized high schools - Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech or LaGuardia. And some of those who had problems in my classes continue to struggle, though several were placed in alternative high schools where, supposedly, they'll get more attention than I was able to give. As far as I know, none of my students has dropped out, although a few are 16 and old enough to do so. And one of my 14-year-old students had a baby in September; I didn't even know she was pregnant.

Doreen is at a 300-student job-training school in Brighton Beach, where learning-disabled kids can stay until they're 21, taking classes to be coffee shop clerks, nurse's assistants and janitors. Doreen, who otherwise would have attended the 3,000-student Erasmus Hall High School in Flatbush, told me she is happy at her new school, and the principal there said she is doing well.

Roberto, another of my slow students, is attending William H. Maxwell, a 1,250-student vocational high school in East New York, where his dream of becoming a doctor probably will slip further out of reach. Maxwell trains students in dressmaking, cosmetology and medical office work. Roberto says he still doesn't study much.

Larry, at Franklin D. Roosevelt High School in Bensonhurst, says he's working especially hard on improving his reading and writing, but may seek a transfer to a

school with a football team. "I thought they had one at FDR," he told me. After school, he writes music and is trying to make contacts with people who will help him cut a record. He said he dreams for a piano.

Jimmy attends New Utrecht High School in Bensonhurst, where he already is misbehaving. His mother was called to the school five weeks after classes began. Perhaps counselors there will be able to help Jimmy. Hopefully, he'll pass through adolescence with his relationship with his mother intact.

And Laura, who hopes to become a professional dancer, commutes to Martin Luther King Jr. High School on Manhattan's Upper West Side. She is earning near-perfect marks in math, and is taking dance classes in school, for the first time.

All of my students say they're glad to be done with junior high school.

I RETURNED TO Whitman in October, and a few of the new eighth-graders asked me if I was coming back to teach. One girl saw me in the dean's office, where she had been sent for fighting in her math class. She told me she's in the bottom class in the eighth grade. "You would have been my math teacher, right?" she said.

I sat with the principal, Claude Winfield, for nearly two hours, and he spent much of it telling me that, after only one year at Whitman, I didn't know much about the school. "There was a lot I didn't let the other teachers tell you," he said. "I felt you should come back as a journalist and ask."

But, surely, I said, I had seen the reality of classroom life at Whitman. "Yes, that's true," he said. "In that sense, you saw a true reality. You can't change what goes on when the door closes."

He talked about numerous programs and projects the school had going on last year, most of which I knew something about. And there are a few new projects, he said, including one that I wished the school had had last year - a program with Brooklyn College to train math teachers to work with inner-city kids.

I asked him if his teachers were meeting his expectations. He said 20 percent "are giving what I ask for." Another 10 percent or 15 percent "are making the effort. They are trying." He said he wishes he and his five assistant principals had more time to train teachers, like me. "Do you always have the opportunity?" he asked. "No, because you're dealing with mundane things, like attendance and paperwork and discipline."

And, he said, teachers don't have enough time to learn from each other. "We don't have enough time to communicate. And we have to change that."

Winfield, 46, who started his teaching career at Whitman in 1970 and became its principal in 1984, reminded me of some of the school's successes - the Whitman alumni who have made it into good colleges or college prep schools; three recent Whitman graduates who have gone on to become semifinalists in the Westinghouse Talent Search science competition; a student who placed second in the citywide storytelling competition last year, and another student who was selected to read her poetry at the memorial service for the late Chancellor Richard Green.

Whitman's enrollment this year is around 1,500, down about 200 students, though still 150 over capacity. And, there are many teachers new to Whitman - four in the math department alone, 15 overall out of 107. The beloved ceramics teacher, Rita Berg, 39, who had been at Whitman since she started teaching in 1972, left this

year for JHS 49 on Staten Island. Because the Board of Education can't find a replacement, Whitman has decided to eliminate its pottery program. And last week, amid allegations of financial irregularities in District 17, where Whitman is located, four teachers were dismissed to save money. Their students were reassigned to other classes, bringing nearly all classes at Whitman to the legal maximum of 30 students, even the slowest ones.

Physically, the school looked better than I'd ever seen it. The walls in the hallways and in many classrooms had been freshly painted. The rooms in which I had taught were no longer swimming in graffiti. And the halls seemed less crowded. The mentor program for new teachers, which started more than three months late last year, started only two months late this year because the funding for it came through earlier.

But the layer of crayon that had covered some of my chalkboards still remained. There were still kids fighting and running recklessly through the halls, and classes that looked out of control. The day after my visit, a teacher who had been assaulted by intruders last year was assaulted again. And several teachers, including the assault victim, say their cars have been burglarized this year.

To contend with the overcrowding, the kids are still assigned to the auditorium once a week, where they often watch videos, such as "The Princess Bride" and "The Making of Michael Jackson's `Thriller' ". Absent a locker room, students still take gym classes in their street clothes. And eighth-graders still go through a 5 1/2-hour school day before lunch. The kids and the teachers say they like it that way.

But the school seemed to be running better than when I left. And the good teachers looked as polished as ever.

"Just remember teaching three in a row," one of my friends said when I stopped by his room, "and you won't miss it so much."

I AM BACK at New York Newsday. I am back to sleeping well and enjoying my Sunday nights, free of the fears of going back into the classroom Monday morning. Little things, like not having to wait for a bell to ring before I can go to the bathroom, seem particularly nice. So does the copying machine, which I'm free to use without a supervisor's permission. But most of all, I'm back to work at a job I know how to do better than teaching.

Still, there are days I wish I was back at Whitman. I often think about the June day at Brooklyn College, when I watched 476 eighth-grade students, clad in blue and white gowns, proudly move their mortarboard tassles on cue. Among those graduates were a few 16-year-olds who should have been finishing 10th grade, and students whose scores on the citywide math test placed them years behind their peers. Also in the group were students who had failed both language arts and math for the final marking period and others who had constantly misbehaved in my class. Their presence at the ceremony seemed a repudiation of everything a graduation should have symbolized.

But some of my students deserved to be standing there. They had worked, they had achieved and, when they hugged me, I could only wonder whether, a decade from now, they'd still remember their eighth-grade math teacher.

Ironically, my year at Whitman has left me unsure of what I'll do now. My editors told me when I left that they expected the experience to make me a better education

reporter should I return.

But I can't go back to my old beat, covering the city school system. I couldn't cover it the way I used to, or the way I think a newspaper should. I feel like a teacher, and I know I'd bring that bias with me to every story.

My view of what matters has changed. Before I started teaching, I thought the Board of Education, the chancellor, and beating the other papers on the results of citywide reading and math tests were the most important parts of my beat.

But that's not what's important to me now. The most important education stories I can imagine now are about teachers and kids in classrooms, and parents and kids at home. I only got to know those things first-hand because I was a city schoolteacher. It's a year I'll never forget, and it's a career I may return to someday. But now, it's time to be back on the outside, where reporters belong.