

MY YEAR AS A TEACHER A Postscript: Teacher Passes Final Exam; Five former students grade a novice instructor

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In an eight-part series for New York Newsday, reporter Emily Sachar detailed her experiences as an eighth-grade math teacher at Walt Whitman Intermediate School in Flatbush, Brooklyn. During that year, she found some students working years below grade level, others advanced far beyond their classwork, teachers who are overworked but dedicated, administrators who are burdened with chores that have nothing to do with teaching, and families who sometimes bring a wealth of social problems to the schoolhouse door.

Five of Sachar's eighth-grade math students met last week with a New York Newsday editor to talk about their experiences in her classroom. The students, one from each of the five classes Sachar taught, were: Ilka Bent, Sabura Alexander, Karim Licorish, Fredeline Amedee and Natalie Rodgers. They were not students profiled by Sachar in the series.

POSTSCRIPT Newsday: What was Ms. Sachar's class like? What kind of teacher was she?

Sabura: In the beginning it was rough because I didn't understand the way she was teaching. She didn't explain herself. She just rushed through the lesson. And it was hard. When the tests came, I was failing. I didn't understand, and I tried to tell her but it was like she didn't have time. She had to help the whole class. But later on in the year, I got to understand because she took time out to help me.

Fredeline: I had fun in my class. I think I did pretty well. The class behaved. I learned a lot. I'm not that great at math, but when I got to her class, I started to understand better. She made it fun to learn.

Karim: They [students] used to treat her bad in the beginning. But then, she started teaching weird [using games and other devices!], and then they started treating her nice. We tried to listen to her, and we learned stuff. When we got something right, she'd be like [saying! "yes, yes, yes." She'd be jumping around. All the other teachers were like, "That's right," quiet like. But she'd be jumping around. Newsday: Was her class harder or easier than most? How did it compare to other math classes?

Fredeline: She was easier on us. She was fun. Other math teachers, like if they were really rough, I wouldn't catch anything they were saying. Mrs. Sachar was fun. I enjoyed that year.

Karim: She was easier. The lessons were easier. The tests were easier. And she wasn't too demanding.

Ilka: It's not that it was harder or easier. It was harder in other classes because they weren't as fun. Her class, she taught us things we'd need when we became adults. She'd give us stuff we needed. She'd come up with these flash cards and these games, and she'd jump around in these thin high-heeled shoes.

Karim: The work was easier because of the way she taught it. She taught it in a humorous way.

Newsday: Could you tell she was a new teacher?

Sabura: I knew she was a new teacher. Everyone took advantage of her. They didn't really listen to her. Everybody ignored her, as if she wasn't there. And then later on, they got to know her because she stood up for herself. Not like other teachers, they would run and get the dean or something. She stood up for herself.

Fredeline: I didn't know she was new.

Ilka: She told us on the first day. [I could tell because! she was more lenient on our side.

Newsday: What did you like least about the class?

Ilka: The tests. The homework. Ugh. The lessons were short. In the beginning, it was boring. She'd give us multiplication and fractions. We thought, "Where does this teacher come from? We know all this stuff already." Then, when we got into the algebra and the areas and stuff, it got harder. And then she came up with these games. I didn't get as high a grade as I wanted. And I said, "I hate her. I hate her. She won't give me a higher grade." But then I realized it was my fault.

Sabura: And she was too short.

Ilka: Even the girls, she was shorter than them. We thought, "We have a little teacher we could take advantage of."

Fredeline: There was too much homework.

Sabura: And too many tests.

Newsday: What did you like most about the class?

Sabura: She was easy to understand. She explained herself good. Like some teachers, they tell you, but they don't go over it like Mrs. Sachar. They explain it to you once and then they give you a paper and expect you to know it.

Ilka: She drives herself crazy, making sure we get it.

Natalie: First, when she came in the class, she was soft. The kids, they make noise and throw things at her. Most teachers would get real mad back, but she still tried to help them. Even these boys in the back, they always making noise and throwing things. She still tried to help them anyway.

Sabura: You know what I like about her? She would come over and give you a little help, encourage you to do better. Encourage you to try.

Fredeline: I found Mrs. Sachar more fun. She'd take time to get through to you.

Natalie: If you didn't understand something, she'd spend all day.

Sabura: She wants you to pass.

Natalie: When she show you something, if you get it, she jumps up and says, "Yes, you got it."

Karim: Some teachers give up.

Fredeline: If I liked the teacher, I would ask her to do it over. But some teachers, I just don't want to ask them. But Mrs. Sachar, I do. Some teachers don't want to be bothered, but she did. She'd take the time.

Sabura: She cared.

Ilka: And she'd give you extra credit so you could bring up your grade.

Fredeline: If you want to learn math the quicker way, you go to Mrs. Sachar. She give you games and puzzles.

Ilka: She tricked us. She'd say, "We're going to have fun." And then, she'd teach you something.

Newsday: What advice would you give a new teacher like Ms. Sachar?

Natalie: She always try to tell the boys to stop, and they won't stop. She should have given up on them, but she didn't. If they don't want to learn, she should forget it.

Sabura: You don't want to learn, that's your problem. Teachers shouldn't try to get the kids to learn.

Natalie: Don't yell a lot.

Ilka: She needs to be more stern. She needs to separate herself. Sometimes, she acted like she was a student. She has to be more different, more stern. She was good just the way she was. Sometimes, she was too nice, and some kids just got sick of it.