"I Was So Mad at You":
Stories From the "Tough" Teacher

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The author draws on her own experience as a K-12 educator in a diverse school to explore how teachers think about successful students and their own success as teachers. This includes information about how the author became known as "tough" teacher with high expectations—balanced with caring and knowledge of what students needs to do to be successful in life after school. It explores deeper systemic problems that affect the academic achievement of marginalized and diverse students. The author includes examples of teaching strategies and assignments that challenge students, how to create scaffolding, and how to honor the prior knowledge of students. Messages received from former students are interspersed throughout the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

"What Teachers Make."

You want to know what I make?

I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could.

I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional Medal of Honor

and an A-- feel like a slap in the face.

How dare you waste my time

with anything less than your very best. (Mali, T.)

Beginnings are Tough

I know. I've had a lot of them. If my calculations are correct, I attended six different schools and lived in as many different states from elementary to high school. Throughout these transitions, I acquired habits of observation that would be useful to me later as a teacher. I learned how to adapt in each of these environments through careful study. By watching and by listening to the numerous teachers and other students, I honed in on the subtle and intricate interplay of rules and relationships that I would have to negotiate as a newcomer.

Due to these frequent relocations, I was not someone who fit easily into particular categories or boxes. Although I was a white, middle-class kid, I did not have a typical white, middle-class life. I always felt like an outsider, and the fact that several of these moves occurred mid school year did not instill a secure sense of belonging. The moves across states and schools meant that there were often "gaps" in my personal relationships and education. My grades were average and varied widely based on the subject matter of the course. I was considered "smart," took some advanced courses, and although I skipped a few classes when the mood struck me, I was not considered a disciplinary problem. During my senior year, I looked forward to attending college, despite being told by my high school counselor that I was not "college material."

Undaunted by these words, I graduated from an out of state school with a degree in sociology. A few years later, I discovered that the English and creative writing elective credits that I had accrued could be applied toward a degree in English and a Masters with Initial Teaching Certification. As soon I walked back into the classroom doors, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I did not just want to be an okay teacher; I wanted to be a great teacher.

These personal experiences had a profound impact on me and were influential in shaping my beliefs as a teacher and teacher educator. They support an important point that I make later—that the skills and attitudes students demonstrate during these years is not necessarily indicative of what they can achieve or who they will be. When we meet students in our classes, the end of the semester or the end of the school year is not the end point for our students' lives. We are always preparing them for the next step—never knowing what that might be. In this chapter, I share the voices of my students and their stories that contributed to my understanding of how teachers can be powerful influences in the lives of students both in and outside the classroom.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY

After completing my practicum and student teaching at Northside High School (school and names are pseudonyms), I continued to teach high school English there for five years. Northside High School is in Bluefield, a mid-sized Southeastern city. The school had an enrollment of between 1900-1950 students. About 42% of the students were white, 44% African American, 10% Hispanic; 11% of the students received special education services and 50% received free or reduced lunch. This was the most diverse high school in the town, and I was often asked why I wanted to teach at "that" school or teach "those" kids. As a staunch defender of my students, I would turn these inquiries into opportunities to regale listeners with the reasons that I chose to teach at this school; stories highlighting the brilliance and the humor of the students and how "those" students enriched my life. As a perpetual educator, I also considered these as teaching opportunities to explain how perceptions of Northside High is indicative of deficit thinking

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