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Confessions of a bad teacher

I took a job in the NYC public school system because I wanted to make a difference. I ended up living a nightmare

By John Owens

By the time we sang "The Star–Spangled Banner" in 9th grade English, it was too late to save me. So I didn't even try to keep the kids quiet, and joined the class as they burst into song.

Almon, an A-average boy whose parents had emigrated from the Dominican Republic by way of Milwaukee, was absolutely sure our national anthem includes the lyric "cheese bursting in air."

Daria, who came from Honduras just a few years ago and was struggling with English, was gamely singing, trying to guess what words would be appropriate for a song about her new country. "Nice!" "Nice! In air!"

Sarah, the daughter of Ghanese immigrants, got every word right and hit every note with church-choir perfection. And from Rikkie, the highly intelligent, perhaps brilliant, boy, whose father is serving six years in an upstate prison, to Cristofer, a skinny kid who fancies himself a Puerto Rican tough ("I didn't even cry when my father died"), to A'Don, whose mother doesn't speak English, to Michael, whose father doesn't speak English, to Macon, who only seems to care about basketball, we sang loud, we sang laughing, we sang whatever words we knew, and we sang for all we were worth.

Considering that there's no daily Pledge of Allegiance in New York City public schools, and that American flags are almost as scarce, the class did quite well.
"The dawn's early light" hadn't echoed off the linoleum floor before an administrator and a school aide were in the doorway ready to quell this "disruption," as they did with so many of my classes.

But it was this high-spirited, everybody-participates approach that made the 9th Grade Writing Workshop a joy for me. And, I believe, for my students.

Assign spelling words or read a short story in class, and it would take all of my wits to keep the texting, talking, sleeping and wrestling in check. But make it 80 words on "Would you give up your cellphone for one year for $500?" and every student -- even those who never did any schoolwork -- handed in a paper. When I read these essays to the class in dramatic, radio-announcer fashion, there was silence punctuated by hoots of laughter or roars of agreement or disagreement.

It was almost magic. It was really fun. And I often could squeeze in some spelling, even punctuation. But we weren't always quiet.

And, according to my personnel file at the New York City Department of Education, I was "unprofessional," "insubordinate" and "culturally insensitive."

In other words, I was a bad teacher.

From Michael Bloomberg to Bill Gates to hedge-fund-enriched charter school backers, the problem with our schools is bad teachers. With salaries sometimes surpassing $100,000, summers off and "job for life" tenure, it's easy to believe that our schools are facing a bed-bug-caliber infestation of bad teachers.

Amid all of this, I thought I could do some good. I am a middle-aged white guy from the suburbs, but I'm not lazy. I'm not crazy. I'm good with kids, and I love literature.

During a three-decade career as a writer, editor and corporate executive, I
traveled to more than 100 countries, met heads of state, and picked up wisdom that I thought was worth sharing. When I left publishing, I was senior vice president/group editorial director at Hachette Filipacchi Media (the bulk of which was recently sold to Hearst Magazines). Now, I was determined to make an impact directly with kids in the classroom, and I set out for the South Bronx.

Little did I know I was entering a system where all teachers are considered bad until proven otherwise. Also, from what I saw, each school's principal has so much leeway that it's easy for good management and honest evaluation to be crushed under the weight of Crazy Boss Syndrome. And, in my experience, the much-vaunted "data" and other measurements of student progress and teacher efficacy are far more arbitrary and manipulated than taxpayers and parents have been led to believe.

If Mayor Bloomberg's team is determined to get rid of "bad teachers," they've succeeded on at least one count: They’ve gotten rid of this bad teacher. Join me on my short and unhappy experience in the New York City public schools.

**The Job Hunter**

"You here interviewing for a teaching job?" a little guy in his late 40s with a thick Indian accent whispered.

"Yes," I said chirpily, sitting up straight on the vinyl seat in the waiting area. "I'm an English teacher."

"Run away!" he said, crouching next to me. "Really, run away! The principal will give you a U. She gives everybody a U! I've been in the System for 22 years, and I've never seen anything like it!"

Just days before, this science teacher had been punched in the face by a summer-school student. Nonetheless, his most important message was about the beating I'd get from the principal.
Despite what we read in the press about the "the powerful teachers' union," each school's principal has a great deal of power in the form of a U—unsatisfactory—rating. To a veteran, tenured teacher, a U means stalled raises. For a new teacher, a U is death. You're out of the System.

But as I sat waiting for my interview, my concern was getting hired. How bad could it be? As a veteran of major corporations, I've been through every manner of cruelty and weirdness known to desk jockeys. I smiled politely. I was staying for my interview at the place I'll call Latinate Institute (not its real name; no name here is real).

A fancy name for one of the small public high schools started by the Bloomberg administration in the past decade, the 350-student Latinate is housed in a former elementary school. Founded with the noble mission of helping kids who otherwise wouldn't go to college, Latinate boasts a "100% college-acceptance rate." But as with so much of the data and claims tossed around in education, this "institute" may not be all it's cracked up to be.

I had dropped off my résumé at dozens of middle schools and high schools in the Bronx. Although the Department of Education has a central database to match schools and teachers, the ultimate decision is made by each school's principal. The idea is to let the principal carefully build a staff that fits the culture, tone and mission of the school. But from what I could see, as the first day of school nears, teachers are hired much the same way as day laborers are picked up for landscaping work.

One sweltering August morning, I was cold-calling in the Bronx. The next day I was getting a short interview and giving a demonstration of my teaching.

"Imagine you have to run away and go into hiding. You don't know how long you'll be away. Food is taken care of. And you can bring only what will fit into a backpack. What do you bring?"

So began my sample lesson on Anne Frank's "The Diary of a Young Girl," a staple of eighth-grade English. My audience was a dozen 11th grade
summer-school students, a couple of teachers and an assistant principal.

"I'd take my cellphone," said one boy, tapping the pocket where his BlackBerry peeked out.

"Good," I told him. "But you're going into hiding. If you use your phone they'll track you."

"I'd bring a flashlight and a rope," said another.

"I'd bring Pringles."

"Food is taken care of," I reminded him.

"I'd still bring Pringles."

"I'd bring my eye makeup."

The students stuck with me as I brought forth Nazis, the Holocaust and WWII. Several had no idea what I was talking about. But they enjoyed evading direct answers and making fun of my bald spot. It was school as usual until I told them that the Frank family couldn't flush the toilet during the day.

And the lesson really hit home when I wouldn't let any of them leave the room to pee.

"But I've got to pee," said one.

"Me, too," said another.

"Well, hold it," I said sternly. "You can't leave. Just like Anne Frank couldn't leave."

The assistant principal's face told me I had the job.

"I assume you know your subject matter," said the assistant principal, a chubby man in his early 60s. "At our school, classroom management is
very, very important. And you did well with that."

If the students I had just met were any indication of what was ahead, I was eager for it. Latino, African-American and African immigrant kids, they didn’t seem hostile to learning, just bored. And I, like every new teacher, thought all I needed was energy, good ideas and lessons that showed how life and literature were related. I signed on for $46,545 for the 10-month school year.

**Class Is in Session**

"What the fuck, mister?" the young woman snarled. "What you doing scoping me down there?"

"Put the phone away, Natasha," I said coldly.

Natasha had stuffed her cellphone between the legs of her school-uniform pants. She maintained I was checking out her crotch.

"Put the phone away, Natasha. Now."

"You a pervert, Mister."

Big laugh from the class.

Tall and looking much older than any 10th grader I had ever seen, Natasha possessed a well-practiced look of anger and disgust. She was among a quartet of girls who were taking 10th grade English for the second, sometimes third, time. And it looked like there was a good chance they’d have another go-round.

I had given the girls detention and reported their activities to the dean. I called whatever parents I could find. But it was as though many parents were in the Witness Protection Program, at least when hearing from teachers. Other times, the parents cared a great deal, though they didn’t know what to do.
Mr. Rashid, a short, wiry African immigrant, visited me at school in work clothes covered in dust. His daughter was part of the four-girl wrecking crew. All he could say was, "I know. But I just don't know what to do." I didn't know what to do, either.

"You need to rearrange the seats," said my mentor, the English Department lead teacher. "You have to give them assigned seats."

The next day, I lined everyone up, and one by one pointed the students to their new seats. Within seconds, the class broke into a Moroccan souk of negotiation, refusal, counter-offers and vociferous outrage. All of which coincided with a visit from Ms. P, the founding principal. Not merely "principal," but "founding principal." And always "Ms. P."

A large, round woman in her late 30s, Ms. P kept her hair pulled back tightly. Her eyebrows were long, thin and very expressive, moving up and down like a caffeinated drawbridge. Ms. P's large mouth, set between grapefruit-size cheeks, was in a constant frown. At least, that's all I ever saw.

"What was that you were trying to do?" she asked the next day in her office, not waiting for my answer. "Assign the children seats?"

My effort at classroom management was dismissed for what it was -- a total failure. I told her about detention, dean's referrals and my conversation with Mr. Rashid. She waved her hand.

"You need to have lunch with the girls," she said. "You need to show them that you care about them."

I realized I was living a nightmare.

**Great Expectations**

My introduction to Ms. P, founding principal, had come at a three-day new-teacher orientation held at the school immediately after I was hired.
That half of the staff had turned over at this tiny school should have been introduction enough. The new-staff meetings segued into a weekend "retreat" at a hotel in a leafy New Jersey suburb. While New York City taxpayers picked up the tab for our Garden State rooms and restaurant meals, Ms. P made sure we earned every bite and thread count with a merciless parade of presentations, discussions and team-building exercises.

Discipline and classroom management would be taken care of by how we talked.

"Frame everything in a positive way," we were told. "Don't say 'don't.'"

If a student is running in the hall, don't say, "Don't run." Say, "Please walk."

Plus, individual teachers must handle all discipline problems in the classroom. Whether it required "conferencing with parents," or lunching with the perpetrators, it was up to the teacher to keep all of the students quiet and on-task at all times.

"I have worked in the South Bronx for 24 and half years," said a scholarly English teacher whose last months in the System were spent at Latinate. "I have never seen anyplace like this. There is nothing we can do with students who don't want to learn."

Clearly, Natasha and co. didn't want to learn. Soon, Ms. P transferred me from 10th grade to 8th grade English.

**Eight Misbehaving**

While smaller, the 8th graders were no more easily wrangled. One of the biggest, meanest and most outrageous of the permanent 8th graders was 16-year-old Africah. She was the Natasha Quartet in one kid. Early on, in the middle of my lesson, Africah got up and opened a locker.
"Please close the locker and sit down, Africah," I said.

She ignored me.

I repeated myself.

She continued to rummage through the locker. I could feel the eyes of the class going from her to me. Her to me.

"Please close the locker and sit down," I said walking toward her.

She turned and snarled. "Back it up, Mister. Back it up." She wanted a fight.

The eyes of the class were going back and forth like a tennis match. I couldn't back down. But I couldn't fight, either.

"Back it up?" I said. "Who did that song? 'You'se a big fine woman, when you back that thang up. Call me Big Daddy when you back that thang up.'"

Huge laugh.

Africah and the kids started rapping Juvenile's 1999 hit:

   Girl you workin with some ass yeah,
   you bad yeah
   Make a player spend his cash yeah ...

A minute later, Africah was in her seat, yelling at the other kids to "Shut up! He's trying to teach."

From then on, every time she said, "Shut up! He's trying to teach!" I told the class, "That's why I love this woman."

Our relationship, however, was cut short a few weeks later when Africah
left the school. It was never clear where she went.

With the remaining half-dozen hardcore kids, nothing made them put their phones down and do something resembling schoolwork. I assigned seats, reassigned seats and re-reassigned seats. But with these uncontrollable older kids in the class, it was tough to control the others. And sometimes, the parents were an even bigger problem.

"Please sign the original and keep the copy," the assistant principal said one afternoon, handing me a manila folder. Inside was a letter from Ms. P to me.

It concerned parent-teacher night. I had stressed to the parents who showed up how important it is for the students to behave, to be quiet and focus on their work. I told them how I had observed a class in a wealthy school district, and how the kids just came in, sat down and got to work.

"They don't waste time on discipline, so those students get much more instructional time," I told the parents. "Those kids aren't smarter. I think the kids here are smarter. But our kids waste teaching time. Please, stress to your children how important it is to behave in class."

Dear Mr. Owens:

We are giving you this letter to file for your failure to show cultural sensitivity ... One parent, in particular, complained about your insensitive remarks comparing students from our school with those of Chappaqua with what she perceived as a racial subtext, i.e. that our students -- predominantly African American and Hispanic -- do not do as well academically as the predominantly Caucasian students in the suburbs. The parent felt offended and disturbed by your remarks ....

It didn't matter that I never mentioned race or Chappaqua (a place I've never been); I was officially a bad teacher.

"Controlled chaos is not acceptable," the assistant principal told me. "You
have to control the class with the force of your personality."

Ah, yes! "The force of my personality."

The next day, I told my 8th graders that unless they quieted down, I would hold them after school. It didn't work. Tried again. And again. Finally, as the school day ended, I stood by the door.

"No one is leaving." I said. "You're all staying after school for 10 minutes."

But eight and a half minutes into this after-school faceoff, Ms. P pushed her way in.

"What is going on here?!" she shouted, her mouth agape and her long thin eyebrows arched so high that they resembled treacherous ski slopes.

The kids erupted again with a full dramatic account. I had overstepped "the force of my personality." And with Ms. P's forced entry into the room, I looked pretty damn foolish.

Ms. P concluded that I shouldn't be left alone with children, and reported the incident to the police and the Department of Education as "corporal punishment." Typically, that involves hitting or physically abusing a kid. But Ms. P said she couldn't think of another way to characterize me standing by the door for 10 minutes while the kids yelled at me. There was a disciplinary hearing, but as my representative from the United Federation of Teachers pointed out, "losing it" is not a clinical term. So Ms. P settled for putting a letter in my file full of words such as "dangerous," "unsafe," "alarmed," "barricaded" and "insubordinate."

**Special Ed**

What I didn't know at the time was that I had taken precisely the wrong tack with those 8th graders.

"Oh, you can't hold them all for detention," a special-education teacher told me later. "Teachers have been punishing those kids as a group for years,
and they hate it. It works with the other 8th grade class, but not them."

Another thing I didn't know about these 8th graders was that so many of them were special-education students. They might have attention-deficit disorder, dyslexia or other learning or behavior issues. At least seven of the kids in that class had special-needs classification. Several more should have had that classification, but they either had slipped through the cracks or their parents were afraid of the stigma.

In theory, this classification can be a blessing. The kid receives personalized attention from specially trained teachers and the help needed to catch up to -- perhaps even surpass -- his or her contemporaries. In New York City, a class with classified students must have a special-ed teacher present. Although nearly half the kids in one of my 8th grade classes had serious learning or behavior problems, it wasn't until December that a special-ed teacher was assigned to help me with them. And then, she couldn't make it to class two-thirds of the time.

Siah, a big, smiling, lovable bear of an 8th grader, desperately needed special attention. He talked, rapped and even wrestled in class.

"I don't know what to do," his mother moaned, every time I called. I didn't, either.

**Attack of the Killer Paperwork**

As the months passed, file folders were filled, documenting my failure to become a less-bad teacher.

In addition, I was overwhelmed by the paperwork and data. Not marking papers -- but completing endless reports, memos and spreadsheets. My corporate career had been data-intensive, but nothing like a school system based on covering your ass.

I wasn't meeting "expectations." I'd get a U, for sure; maybe even get arrested if Ms. P kept pushing my "corporal punishment." So when I got a
chance to return to publishing in mid-February, I went.

**Goodbye**

I hadn’t told the kids I was leaving. But on my last day they knew. In my first-period 9th grade writing class, Edgar, a Dominican kid who loves baseball, high-top fade haircuts and fancy sunglasses ("Edgar! You're out of uniform!"), brought in a bakery cake with "Thank you, Mr. Owens" inscribed in icing. There were construction-paper cards that made fun of my efforts to learn the kids' slang ("We O.D. dumb tight gonna miss you"), thanked me for helping them ("I learned a lot about writing with more feeling and emotions"), and asked me to stay ("Please, Mr. Owens, don't go! You gonna make me cry!"). The girls hugged me. The boys shook my hand. Cristofer, the tough guy whose father had died, thanked me for teaching him to tie his tie. But Rikkie, whose father was serving six years upstate, still hadn’t figured out how to do it, despite his obvious intelligence.

"Please, tie it for me just one more time," he said. As I knotted the fabric, my emotions knotted, too.

Good teacher? Bad teacher? I suppose it's how you measure it. As far as I know, there is only one scrap of positive data in my personnel file at the DOE, a memo from the assistant principal commending me for passing enough students to put Latinate's pass rate in the Department of Education's "safe harbor."

As far as I know, he and Ms. P return in September.

*John Owens is an editor and writer who survived his detour/U-turn into teaching, though he misses the kids.*
Bad admin/ good teacher

I teach in the non-corporate charter schools in Hilo, Hawaii. My first classroom was a tent, I now teach in a converted department store with only part walls between mine and the room next door. My student population has included the very poor, many special needs students, English language learners, children with parents in prison on the mainland, foster children, and a huge variety of ethnic backgrounds (Hilo is the most diverse city in the United States).

You were not the problem, the system you were in, and the administrators within it, were the problem. My classes can get rowdy sometimes, but real teaching and learning is rarely quiet or peaceful, and dutiful students filling in blanks on worksheets are probably not doing real learning. I am sorry you did not continue as a teacher, in a different system you would have been able to continue making a difference in the lives of your students, even if it was only teaching them how to tie a tie. Sometimes that is all we can do.

— BigIsland

Most American schools are a division of the criminal justice system.

They're juvie halls. I've known several professionals who left various fields for an adventure in teaching and were back in short order, their tails between their legs. One of my relatives, a high school English teacher, told me several years ago that her class was "reading" Beowulf, an exercise that consisted of watching The Thirteenth Warrior and then having the teacher read them sections of the saga.

Here's a simple fact that is true in every walk of life: you can't make chicken salad out of chicken shit. America has produced an unparented permanent underclass of know-nothings, a dead weight of non-achievers who are fit for nothing more challenging than mowing lawns, blowing leaves or moving furniture. The jobs these simpletons might once have done have been off-shored, there is no draft to soak up at least some of them, and there is no national will or funds to do anything with them except watch them fester.

But of course we will blame teachers.

— robwriter

I'm a teacher too

This is exactly what it's like working in urban schools. Discipline is never handled by
principals anymore. Because they don't know what to do either. Better to blame it on the teachers.

This is why mandatory education should end at 8th grade. And why it's silly to insist that all American children should learn literature and higher academics.

What's wrong with our system is in our desire for 'equality' we try to give everybody an education that will qualify them for college. After 8th grade, a whole bunch of these kids should be learning vocational and life skills, not pre-college academics. When America recognizes this and starts tracking kids again, education in this country will be more meaningful again. These kids don't behave because English literature isn't what they need. They need to be learning vocational skills instead.

—Scire

To read these letters...

The people who teach our kids and do the work that is described in this article represent some of the best America has to offer. What kind of response does this man get for his efforts? Mostly, he's despised for even attempting to care. I suppose we'd much rather celebrate corporate sociopaths... er, "the creators," who get paid for how much they can destroy.

It pains me to say this, but I would never, ever, ever encourage any bright, decent young person to go into public service these days. Americans don't deserve good public servants; their efforts are now utterly wasted on them. The only "value" American society is willing to place on a person's job these days is the value of that individual's spreadsheet. If you go into a low-paying, but noble profession like the author of this article did you will only be subjected to ridicule or derision, and maybe serve as a target for the demagogues that pass for our leaders.

In fact, I think it's time we began encouraging the best and brightest of our nation to seek a future on foreign shores. Surely, there must be a place in the world where people still place a value on education and public service. As America gradually succumbs to decay, the world needs a new model to follow that isn't authoritarian like China, or old and gray like Europe. As for the rest of us, all we deserve now are the dregs, from top to bottom.

—Taylor's Ghost