

MY YEAR AS A TEACHER

Teachers Who Make the Grade Bright spots in a system that fosters mediocrity

Series: MY YEAR AS A TEACHER. **CHAPTER 4** / Teachers

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"THERE ARE three things you need to survive in this school system," an assistant principal told me one afternoon. "Not just at this school, but anywhere."

I expected him to say good teaching, good planning and a love of the kids.

"Clean bulletin boards, impeccable paperwork and a tidy classroom," he said. "Oh, and one more thing. Discipline. If you've got that, you've got it down."

"You mean when it gets right down to it, you don't really have to teach that well?" I asked.

The assistant principal shrugged.

This wasn't official policy at Walt Whitman, an intermediate school in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. It wasn't even this man's view of what makes a good teacher. But it was pragmatic reality. Among the 63,726 teachers in city schools, there are mediocre teachers who hold on to their jobs as long as they master the administrative details.

Teachers are rated once a year, on their punctuality, control of their classes, their preparation and housekeeping. Only two ratings are used - satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Unsatisfactory ratings are extremely rare, so there is virtually no differentiation between mediocre and superb teachers.

I got a satisfactory rating for my work last year. But even if I had been given an unsatisfactory rating, I could have continued teaching. I might not have been invited back to Whitman, but I could have applied to other schools.

If I had been a tenured teacher - a licensed teacher with at least three years' experience - it would have been more difficult to get rid of me. Last year, the Board of Education succeeded in firing about 20 tenured teachers.

For terrific teachers, there are few rewards from the board or the Whitman administration. Sometimes, a letter commending good work is put in a teacher's personnel file, but that's rare. Some teachers are asked to sit on advisory panels and are paid modest stipends, but these extracurricular tasks require extra work. A few teachers are rewarded by being pulled out of the classroom several periods a week to serve as mentors for other teachers. But the school system makes no monetary distinction between terrific teachers and mediocre ones. The best teachers say they work hard because they are proud of what they do. The rewards are personal.

For me, the rewards had not been worth the pain. The risks to my ego were too great. I know how to be a reporter. I wasn't sure I would ever learn to be a good teacher. And, while I was learning, there would be all those painful days feeling out of control and confused.

At lunchtime, I'd gather with Whitman's other teachers in the cafeteria and listen to their stories about how the day-to-day classroom job has changed drastically over

the years. I heard what it was like when girls came to school in dresses and boys in jackets and ties, and all students glorified teachers as much as parents. Now, one teacher said, the city is running "the most expensive baby-sitting service in the world."

Yet, as the months of summer vacation passed, I began to wonder how all the teachers and administrators I had come to admire so much at Whitman did it year after year. How did they motivate themselves for a job I had found so difficult and for which the rewards were so intangible?

A FEW DAYS before school was to resume this past fall, I called a teacher I had gotten to know near the end of the year.

"I can't talk, dear," he said right off. "I'm in the midst of a diarrhea spell," he went on. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"You know what's wrong," he said. "I've got to go back there in two days."

"You mean to Whitman? I thought you liked it."

"Like it? It's awful. I feel like a piece of dirt in that place." He told me that the diarrhea bouts hit him every year, about two weeks before he has to go back. He vomits and weeps, too, he said.

This was a veteran teacher with a solid reputation at my school, a man with whom I had joked many times last year. He had talked about retiring, about how every day of teaching was one less day he had to work, but I had always assumed it was part of the teacher banter.

He said his self-image had been destroyed by teaching, by the lack of respect from the kids and the lack of positive feedback from the administration.

"So, why don't you get out of teaching?" I asked.

"For what?" he replied. "This is what I do. I'm a teacher."

"You could go to another school?"

"What's the use?" he said. "It might be worse someplace else."

He was one of 45 teachers out of 130 at Whitman last year who were referred to as "the core" - those who come back year after year. Whitman has a hard time keeping some of its best teachers; the lure of high schools or easier junior high schools often pulls many away. About one-fifth of the faculty, 23 teachers, were new to the school when the fall 1988 term opened. And 26 teachers from last year did not return to the school this year, either because they found more desirable jobs elsewhere or because they were untenured teachers who were not hired back. My friend, Alison Haber, a 25-year-old rookie French teacher, tried teaching at Whitman for only three months before giving up. On several days, I had seen her in tears walking through the school halls. "This is what I wanted to do for my life," she whispered to me the day she left. "But this place is crazy. These kids don't know English, but I'm supposed to teach them French." Haber now works for a wine importer. THE SCHOOL'S core has been around a long time - some for more than 20 years. And in that group, I found many so good I'd want them teaching my kids. They were more than competent and knowledgeable; they were inspiring. And they were doing their thing in one of the toughest junior high schools in the city, a city that doesn't have many easy places to teach. I wanted to be like them.

One was Roman Foster, a 38-year-old social studies teacher who's been at Whitman five years. Foster, nicknamed "Bambi" by his students a few years back, is

so easygoing I often wondered whether he could control a class. But he does, with a winning combination of provocative teaching and charm.

"I can get the kids charged up," he told me recently. He said he had talked to his students about the shooting of a black youth in Bensonhurst, allegedly by a white teenager named Joseph Fama. "We all agreed that there was racism in that situation, but I took it a step further. I said to the kids, 'What is the difference between you and Fama? I hear some of you calling kids a Haitian, like it's a put-down. Isn't that just as racist?' We batted it around for a long time. I told them they have to look in a mirror sometimes. It's not always possible to link the past to the present, but I try."

Foster gives his home phone number to some kids and lets them eat breakfast with him before school. "I want them to think of me as a big brother," he says. "Kids feel comfortable with me. If you make yourself available to them, they see that." Still, he says, teaching junior high gets him down sometimes.

"Kids this age are very confused. Sometimes they don't make it very easy to teach them," he says. "Certain classes, you'll have kids who are lazy, in a way. They don't believe in working hard. They may be sloppy. Sometimes, every five minutes you have to tell them to shut up. But I look and say, 'Hey, this is reality. Either I can succumb or I can overcome the obstacles.'"

SHARON COHEN, a reading teacher who works with kids who are two and sometimes three years below grade level, also has overcome obstacles. As much paperwork as I had, she had more. For each child she teaches, she must complete reams of forms detailing eligibility for federal funding and her plan for boosting each kid's reading score.

The room in which she teaches is no larger than a typical walk-in closet; the desks are so close together students have to suck in their bellies to squeeze to the seats. During the typical 43-minute class, two other instructors also use the room, each running her own lesson.

Cohen, 38, has a no-nonsense attitude, and she enforces rules I was afraid to make - no food or drink in the classroom, for instance. She has a way of talking to kids that makes them come into her room silent, ready to learn, notebooks out, anxious to improve themselves. I never heard Cohen raise her voice.

"For a lot of these kids, the things they've heard in school have only been negative, what they can't do, what they don't know," she says. "When they sit down with me and get something positive, they're amazed."

One day last year, Cohen gave the students in her lowest class - some of whom read on a third-grade level - a story about troopers parachuting out of an airplane. "I just put the word 'parachute' on the board and asked: 'What do you know?' In five minutes, the board was filled with words about parachuting. They were absolutely amazed. When you see a kid who can say, 'Hey, I may be in the lowest class in the school, but I know plenty,' that's great. There's just nothing else you can hope for." Most of the good teachers hook the kids with their personality, and I spent a lot of time wondering why a personality that worked for me in the news business often didn't work in the classroom.

VIVIAN NOBILE had that part of teaching figured out. "You never let your guard down with these kids," she told me one day late in the year. "They'll walk all over

you. You never say that you don't know what to do or that you're confused and don't have the answer. If you're confused, they'll be confused."

Nobile, 36, is a gym teacher in her sixth year of teaching. She was one of the school's first female gym teachers, and old-timers at the school say she's the one who straightened out the girls' gym. She also was willing to reach out and try to make a new teacher feel like she was a part of a school and a new profession. In the gym, though, she was tough - full of orders and rules for the sports she made the kids love.

Nobile's paperwork responsibilities, like mine, were enormous. Although she didn't have many papers to grade, she still had the cumbersome paperwork duties of being a homeroom teacher. First, she had to take attendance. A teacher's homeroom attendance must be recorded in three places, and one of them, the red roll book, is so sacred it is collected every few months and audited by the Board of Education.

Nobile also had test paperwork. Because they might make mistakes, Whitman students taking standardized tests are not allowed to prepare the biographical portion of their answer sheets; their homeroom teachers must do it for them. This means that every time a standardized test is given - last year, there were four for the eighth-graders - teachers must blacken thousands of little circles on dozens of answer sheets. "It drives us crazy, but we've got to do it," Nobile said one afternoon after she'd filled in 1,028 little circles.

And then there was the paperwork for high school applications. Numerous documents listing biographical details and previous years' marks must be completed for each eighth-grader.

Nobile also had to contend with the frustrations of an aging school. One day last year, she was taking roll when the class was interrupted.

"Yup, there it goes, Nobile," the other gym teacher whispered.

"There goes what?" Nobile whispered back.

"The rat."

"What rat?" She turned around and saw a hairy gray animal with a foot-long tail running up the wall by the drinking fountain. She screamed and ran.

"A bunch of the kids stood up and ran, too," Nobile recalled. "The rest of the brave little souls just sat there."

"`Get up and get out of the gym,' I'm yelling. `That thing might bite you.' `Don't worry, Miss Nobile,' they said. `It's only a rat.' "

Like many teachers, Nobile's school day didn't end when the last bell rang. She took classes after school to work her way up the salary scale. In New York City, new teachers must earn one master's degree within five years to retain their jobs, and they must earn a second master's degree to get to the top of the salary scale. This year, with 20 years' teaching experience and two master's degrees, teachers can earn \$50,000 in the city school system. Nobile, who left a higher-paying job as a hospital administrator to take the gym-teaching job she had dreamed of, is making \$30,700. Never had I seen people paid so little for knowing so much.

The real test of Nobile's love for her job came several years ago, when she was working cafeteria duty, one of the dreaded patrols. Every three years, a teacher is assigned patrol duties - monitoring the hallways and the auditorium assemblies

five periods a week. Every six years, a teacher gets cafeteria duty. New teachers almost always get it.

"There was this girl in the cafeteria who wasn't supposed to be in there," Nobile recalled. "So I asked her to leave. `you!' she said. I asked her to leave again, and before you know it, it became a shouting match. I kept calling for help. Finally, another teacher came, and this girl said she still wouldn't leave. . . . The next thing I know, this kid's on top of me, hitting me hard. It took three big adult males to get her off me."

Nobile was out of work for three weeks, recovering, she says, from bruised bones and a bruised ego.

"You know, it was really an awful thing to have happen, but I wanted to come back. I knew if I didn't, I'd never teach again," she says. "And when I did come back, the kids were great. The worst kids in the school would come up and say, `I would never have wanted that to happen to you, Miss Nobile. The kids in this school really love you.' When you hear that, it makes all the nonsense worth it."

One of Nobile's goals each year is to teach the lesson of responsibility in her sex education and health classes. Last year, she used Project Egg, giving each kid a raw egg and telling him to care for it like it was a baby. Some students decorated and clothed their eggs; others dropped theirs. Project Egg became the talk of Whitman. "I had no idea how the kids would do with it," Nobile said. "But one kid came up to me and told me it had changed her views on getting pregnant. She said she never realized how much was involved. On days like that, you love your job, and you love the kids."

EVEN THE sternest teachers are often able to convey love to the kids and love for their work. One of them was Vikki Kowalski, the assistant principal I reported to. The kids called her "Killer," and she must have liked this reputation as a tough disciplinarian, because when I jokingly called her by that name, she smiled. In the early months, I saw Kowalski's tough side more than her tender one. Some days, she wouldn't even smile when I passed her in the hall.

In the auditorium one spring day, Kowalski, who was disgusted by the cackling of gum and the nonstop chitchat, admonished the students with the strongest words I had heard her use. "Okay, you kids are going to act like two-year-olds," she said into her microphone. "You're going to be treated like two-year-olds. We can cancel the prom. We can cancel the graduation. We can cancel the senior activities. Is that what you want?"

Yet, Kowalski, who won a coveted Teacher of the Year award from the New York Alliance for the Public Schools in 1985, used to reward the Whitman math team with trips to amusement parks. She says her tough demeanor is merely a show. "I'm mean, but I'm nice," she told me when the year was over. "The toughness is an example of self-discipline. I want to be the rock, not someone who's erratic."

One afternoon, when I had been particularly discouraged, I asked her if things would ever get better for me in teaching. Yes, she said tenderly, they would. Then, she told me a story about a student a few years ago who had stuck her hand through a pane of glass in school and had to be taken to the hospital. The girl wanted Kowalski at her side in the ambulance. "Why do you go into teaching?" Kowalski asked while recalling the incident. "For days like that."

Through the year, I was puzzled by the secrets of successful teaching. Kowalski, Cohen, Nobile and Foster all had different styles, and yet they got through to the same kids. I spent long afternoons wondering why.

ONE OF THE better regarded teachers in the school explained it to me after I left. "You have to say what you mean and mean what you say," said Barry Kantrowitz, who runs marathons and paces classroom floors. "It's almost like a relationship between lovers. If you send out mixed signals, you will get mixed messages."

I had met Kantrowitz five days before classes began, and was dazed by his explanation of what teaching is about. "What we have to do is subtle, mystical, magical," he told a group of new teachers. "We can be kind, gentle, soft, but not confused. If you're a shouter, shout! If you're a pacer, pace. Watch the best, but adapt your own style."

When the year was over, Kantrowitz, 42, told me he knew what I had gone through at Whitman. "It can be an agony, when your lesson is dying and the kids look at you - they're bored or, worse, they're hostile. That's a rotten, rotten feeling. I've been there."

I asked him how he figured it out. "It just happens, after five or six or twenty years. Now, I go in there with a pride that these kids, this period, are going to come out smarter than when they walk in. They're going to feel better about themselves and me and the whole world forty minutes later."

Many of the school's mentors, who were assigned in December to help me and the six other novice teachers, had stressed the same thing: consistency, caring, repetition and rules. But teaching doesn't come just from listening to the best. It's learned after anguished days and sleepless nights.

My days were spent trying to tame the most difficult kids. I did it by yelling or insulting one day, and being extra-sweet, almost apologetic, the next. I wished I had mastered the lesson of consistency.

One who had figured it out was Gloria Holloway, who, at 48, began working her way through college so she could teach math. Holloway's daughter and twin boys had attended Whitman when they were younger, and she first worked at the school as a paraprofessional, or teacher's assistant. For the past seven years, she has been a classroom teacher, and for most of that time, she's been known to the kids as "Grandma." Even the toughest boys in the school tip their hats when they see Holloway in the hall. And, even at 64, Holloway says she's got a "good eleven years left."

"My teaching is geared from the humanistic point of view," says Holloway, who doesn't believe in lecturing. "I teach things the kids are going to need every day." She also sees her job as enriching the lives of the children she teaches, and last week took 25 students to the ballet.

ELLEN YUDOW, a teacher in the language arts department, had a similar view of the importance of teaching kids about life. Her techniques were clever and her subject matter useful, and yet she sometimes didn't recognize what an innovative teacher she is.

One day, while I was relaxing in her office, Yudow came in from a class where she had intended to teach predicates, subjects and verbs. Several minutes into the class, she decided the lesson wasn't going to work. She turned to a game instead.

She had 32 situations written on cards, and she read them to the kids one at a time: You see a fire in a nearby building, what do you do? You are moving and have to order new phone service, what do you do? You are baby-sitting your infant brother and he has a forehead warm to the touch, what do you do?

"I had kids who said to call 911 for a fire but they forgot the most important facts, like the address or the fact there was a fire. Or I'd have kids telling me to give the sick baby two aspirin or put a thermometer in its mouth," Yudow said. "I teach communication arts, and learning to get to the point, stating what you want known and doing it as briefly and succinctly as possible, that's a big part of my subject. Which matters more, that kids can function in the world or that they master the definition of subject and object in a sentence?"

When I was a teacher at Whitman, I hoped that one of my students would turn to me in a difficult moment, the way so many turned to the teachers I admired. It didn't have to be pregnancy or child abuse, just a simple problem, like loneliness. None did.

But in August, two months after the school year, a cousin with the same last name as mine called my house. "I have a message on my machine that you've got to hear," she said.

My cousin played the tape into the phone. "If this is where Mrs. Sachar lives, Mrs. Sachar, this is for you. I just want to say thank you for being my math teacher. If this isn't where Mrs. Sachar lives, I'm sorry for bothering you." There was a pause. "Oh, I almost forgot. This is . . ." The name was cut off by the next message, and I didn't recognize the voice.

"Play it again," I said to my cousin, and she did.

By the fourth time she played the message, tears were rolling down my face. It was the thank you I had been hoping for all year. I finally understood why teachers teach, and why I would miss it.