

I AM A TEACHER

I am a teacher. I love the way it sounds, *teacher*, however in light of the more recent trend towards teacher bullying, I find that the word teacher creates a bitter feeling of disillusionment, an unknown and uncomfortable feeling that I chillingly want to erase, even at the cost of dropping teacher from my name. It is a conflict that I fear many of my peers also experience, distancing ourselves from our profession and letting go of the idealism that once drove us to pursue our vocation.

Teaching is just that, a vocation, your dharma, something that one is meant to do. Yet, today, one wonders how much longer we can tolerate the empty, dark feelings of disappointment and confusion as to what has become of us.

To simply say that teachers are devalued in today's culture detracts from the serious consequence of a devalued workforce. We experience moments of anger, injustice and mystification as to how we arrived in the lowest caste in the order of education. To understand this dichotomy, to love and despise your calling, forces one to dig deep into the politics of education. The true meaning of teacher has become lost in the rhetoric of a struggling bureaucracy. The "system" is failing our children and the teacher often carries the burden of blame

The structure inherent in the educational system forces the teacher to examine their rank and cling to what once was an honorable profession. The rhetoric of education calls for accountability, however in many schools today, only the teacher is held accountable. As educators, all must be held to a standard of accountability. Tools of evaluation are often used to repress individuals who question methods and decisions that are counterproductive to "focusing on children". Instead of using the evaluation tool to help improve the practice of teaching, it has become a vehicle to punish and dismiss individuals whose *politics and methodology* do not align with current teaching trends or the decisions of insecure and dictatorial managers. An English Language Arts teacher brings a grammar book from home to her students and is chastised because "grammar is not part of the

canned curriculum.” The teacher fervently believes that her students need grammar, however current teaching trends to abandon formal grammar lessons imposes restrictions on teachers who deviate from the current pedagogy.

A major flaw in the organizational structure of many schools is the top down management styles of insecure and inexperienced administrators. There are countless stories from teachers whose careers have been demeaned and destroyed because they question methodology and decisions of their superiors. Teachers operate daily under a veil of fear and thus retreat into their classrooms, isolated and removed from the community of their peers.

Punitive methods of control and manipulation do not inspire excellence. Instead, legions of teachers are disengaged from the very nature of their profession. They retreat and become more disenchanting daily. Eventually, they are silenced and become robotic because it is safe. Our educational leadership does not inspire, but creates an environment that breeds mediocrity and mistrust. It is time to expand the tentacles of accountability to all of the players on the chessboard. It is time to level the playing field.

As a just and fair society, all citizens are expected to obey the norms of community and culture. In the culture of education, only teachers are expected to follow the norms set by individuals who do not understand the true nature of teaching. As to the administrators who have lived in a classroom, shame on you for forgetting the fundamental rules of education.

In hundreds of classrooms, rules or expectations of acceptable behavior are pasted to walls. **Respect** is generally found at the top of the list. We understand that a culture of mutual respect is critical for engagement and creativity. We ask our students to embrace this value because we know that is a necessary ingredient in a classroom culture that is caring and motivational. How do we teach the most fundamental of values to our students when those same students are fully cognizant of the lack of respect that their teachers are shown, both in the school community and by society at large?

Respect is critical for inspiring excellence. More often than not, teachers do not experience this essential nutrient. Consequently, we become unhealthy and unhappy. Our spirit and our bodies become weak. We question our allegiance to a system that robs us of our daily nourishment.

In many urban school districts we face the agonizing questions and despair of a generation of children who have lost faith in the system of education. Everyday, we also face the same moments of despair and lack of faith in a bureaucracy that devalues our profession. We must ask ourselves difficult and painful questions. *How does one TEACH, how does one honor the act of TEACHING when the honor of our profession has been denigrated and devalued?*

Every day we enter our building and zip up our armor, asking our higher power for guidance, patience and compassion. I want to teach. I want to strengthen and challenge the minds of our youth, however I fear that heart has disappeared. We feel powerless because our opinions and ideas are dismissed and silenced. We feel powerless because the threat of eviction from our classrooms or cowardly acts to punish, are certain to occur. Sometimes we step up to the plate, fully aware that there will be a price to pay, yet passionate enough to take that chance. Despite the rhetoric of educational jargon, such as shared decision making and school based management, we are not included in the politics of education. We are held to standards that are reserved only for those who TEACH. We are teachers, devalued, often belittled, underpaid, ignored and devoid of the dignity and honor that our calling demands.

We can no longer ask for respect from our leaders. **We must demand respect!!!** We must stand proud and insist that a foundation of mutual respect be built into every school culture, at all levels. Until we reclaim dignity and respect, we will continue to be the scapegoat for the failure of education. We will continue to be the victims of insecure and inexperienced leadership or political agendas that are far removed from the reality of our environment and from the lives of our students.

There is power through unity; yet, often we are forced to abandon our colleagues because we are afraid that we will be the next casualty. So we go into our classroom, close the door and retreat into the confines of our established islands of safety, avoiding opportunities to connect with our colleagues, our students and our leaders.

We are teachers. I am a teacher...and the words become more and more distant.

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