

A Day (Off) In the Life Of a Teacher

Why Do I Do This?

by Mark Kennedy



“Hey, Kennedy,” I heard from across the parking lot while returning a video rental one weekend morning. Looking up, I saw one of my former alternative education students in shirt and tie, big smile in place. Exchanging pleasantries, I asked if he was going to college. “No, to church!” Well, I didn’t mean right now, I almost blurted. But suddenly conscious of my own T-shirt and jeans, a dead giveaway I was missing religious services myself, instead I replied, “Oh, that’s great.”

As I waved to his mother in the car and wished him well, my thoughts returned to the reverie he had interrupted. I had been thinking of another student, a seventeen-year-old who’d been shot to death the previous week on his way to the neighborhood market. While at one time heavily involved in gangs and constantly in and out of juvenile hall, he had been getting his life together; I’d seen big changes in the last couple of years, and we’d become friends. He loved to laugh and joke, and had a perpetual Cheshire cat grin. When we’d go to the park for PE, some kids would play ball, but he’d want to wrestle and practice some martial arts twists and holds I was teaching him as part of a self-defense course, he joshing and grinning the whole time.

Climbing back into my car in the video parking lot, I thought of that grin: I knew it belied the tough exterior he’d spent so long perfecting. For so many gang kids, it seems a macho persona is the foundation upon which to build the facade they believe necessary to survive on the streets. But I knew that the real kid was the grinning one, the one underneath the street face, the one trying to outgrow his past, to emerge a healthy, caring adult. That emerging individual was the one I’d most often see. Like the time a few weeks before when he’d gotten me a card on my birthday — an action way outside the bounds of acceptable machismo. In fact he was so surprised at himself that he had to keep coming back to my desk all day to pick up that card — and grin.

As I pulled out of the parking lot and headed on to another errand (already busted, may as well make a day of it) I couldn’t help juxtaposing the fates of these two young men I had cared so much about, had put so much into, had wanted so much for. While I don’t want to

Mark Kennedy is currently an alternative education teacher with the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools. He has also served as an acting principal, lead teacher, mentor teacher, master teacher, chair and visiting team member of many self-study and strategic planning focus groups and action teams, and has been a frequent presenter at professional meetings.

make too much of surface differences, I would like to share the slide show that ran through my head: The college student was white, while the murdered boy was Hispanic; the former was better at traditional schoolwork, while the latter was gifted in emotional and affective areas, that is, with people; the former had no family in prison, or even in gangs, while the latter had many in each. What they had in common was that both had been incarcerated as juveniles, and then been placed in my class of court adjudicated students. That is, they were both kids who'd lost their way. As I try to do with all the kids who arrive in my class, I had hoped to help them regain it.

My next thought was a selfish one: Why do I continue to do this job, battling the ignorance — one might even say the darkness — that so threatens our children, especially those whom we call “at-risk,” those who have lost their way? Why stay and watch some be taken? (This murdered child was not the first — far from it.) With all the right degrees and certifications for school administration, with a résumé that includes much of the right experience, with a list of things in print, I could probably easily get promoted out of the classroom. Such a promotion would have the advantage of removing me one step from kids, and so act as a buffer against my sharing their pain. Paradoxically, the system would actually pay me more to take that step. Furthermore, this would stop the secret belief of friends and family that I'm underemployed as long as I'm “just a teacher” — and let's not be too quick or too loud in denying that that is exactly how the public sees it. Why then should I continue to teach? Why would anyone?

Why Continue to Teach?

For some reason, as I tried to marshal the reasons that I should continue to teach, the reasons not to continue leapt to mind. It's probably more than coincidental that these reasons are absolutely misunderstood by so many in the media and our legislative halls — what I call the Noisemakers — most of whom have probably not spent much time in a classroom since their own schooling. Their misperception that teachers are incompetent — having now become the general public perception — obviously has nothing to do with why I continue in this profession. But these negatives, it seems, first had to be eliminated before I could understand what motivates me to stay with this work.

First, it would be silly to continue for the money. As we noted, the further one is removed from kids, the better the money. For that matter, most teachers could probably make more selling computers or real estate — in fact, in the past I have done so. Second, the current environment of standards and stan-

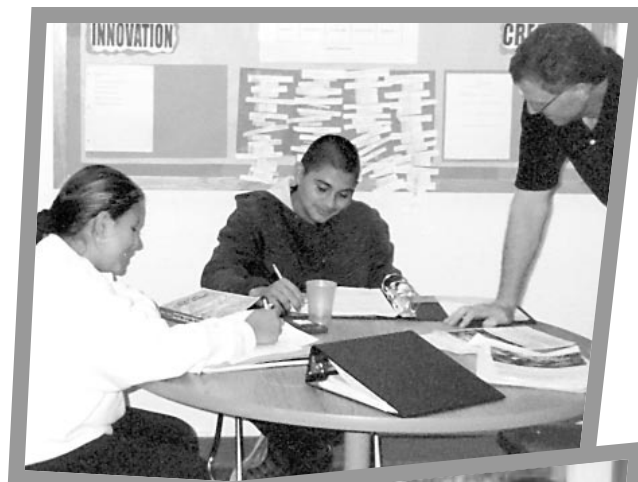
dardized assessment, which is advanced by the “failing schools” platform of the Noisemakers, is certainly not friendly or supportive. We obviously live in a time when to some, “teacher” has become a dirty word, someone associated with the national disgrace in which education is held. Third, one would not continue to teach because the work is easy, even though a favorite myth of teacher-bashers is that teaching's a part-time job. As I drove away from the post office after mailing some bills and headed for the bank, sub points for each of these reasons began to click into place.

Not for the Money

I don't know of even an average teacher who does this for the money. All of the schemes floated by the Noisemakers purporting to “improve” education (read raise test scores) by offering teachers more money — merit pay, or incentive money, it's sometimes called — are offensive and misinformed. They imply that teachers will care more, work harder, and generally just (finally) do their jobs if offered more money. This sort of “solution” is what we educators get when we allow someone else to do our thinking for us. While I'm sure some in the Noisemaker crowd can be motivated — even manipulated — by greed, I don't think many teachers are cut from that cloth. Of course I want to make a decent living and be paid what I'm worth. But offering me a monetary incentive to raise test scores is ridiculous — it implies that I don't care enough now to educate children, but that I could be made to care if the price were right.

A particularly noxious corollary to this line of reasoning is the teacher-signing bonus being offered in some places. The atmosphere has become so hostile for teachers that we can't get enough new ones or retain enough of the old ones, so some districts use the signing bonus as a recruiting tool. This makes me think of the Roman Empire. When the Germanic tribes began to pressure the frontiers of the Empire,

We don't need teachers who look like their students, we need teachers who look at their students—and truly see them.



**Teaching
is a job,
which is
difficult at
the best of
times.**

themselves being pressured by the Huns from the East, defending the borders became a huge expense. As the toll mounted, those Roman citizens who could afford to do so moved to the country (to their small *latifundia* or farms, which after the collapse of the Empire would become medieval manors) in order to avoid the increasing taxes required to protect the frontier.

With a sinking treasury, the army began to be paid only sporadically, and many career soldiers left the military. What to do? Hire German mercenaries who would settle for piecework instead of a career, who were not necessarily dedicated to the profession, who fought not for pride or out of a sense of duty, but for money. The result? The once mighty Roman army began to disintegrate, and the German tribes (bearing such names as Vandals and Berbers, or barbarians as they came to be called) began to flood the Empire. Eventually there were more Germans in the Roman army than Romans. These mercenaries just didn't have the dedication, training, or professionalism to keep their cousins out of the Empire. What would make us think a mercenary approach to education would produce significantly different results in the quest to recruit and retain a dedicated teaching force?

**Not Because
The Environment
Is Friendly and Supportive**

As education is discussed in the public arena, the call for "accountability" has become a cliché. When we hear someone use this term, we never hear an offer from the one doing the talking to be more accountable. Instead, we hear a demand for the accountability of someone else — namely, teachers and schools. This finger pointing makes clear the fact that the term "accountability" is used pejoratively to imply that teachers are turning in a sub-par performance, and thus that they deserve blame and shame. The public is meant to conclude that closer supervision — or, in Noisemaker parlance, "more accountability" — would make teachers do the jobs they are presumably now shirking.

California, for example, has responded to this perceived need for teacher accountability by imposing 32 (that's right, 32!) standards for "excellence" in teaching.¹ This is in addition to the hundreds of content standards adopted for students. At first angered by the naiveté of such a measure, I admit that now it makes me smile. It is impossible for me to take seriously. But that's not true for everyone. This need-for-more-accountability-to-force-teachers-to-do-their-jobs line is humorous only for those of us already secure in our capabilities and calling.

For those who are just considering becoming teachers, this professional-standards document implies a lack of teacher professionalism, and can only cast a serious shadow on any preservice teacher's decision.

How widespread this finger pointing, what some might even call scapegoating, has become was illustrated in crystal-clear fashion for me recently as I listened to a local radio disc jockey. He offered the opinion that "Teachers should just do their jobs like other professionals — doctors and lawyers — and stop whining about it." He evidently missed a few differences, however, between those other professions and teaching. For example, doctors and lawyers can decide whom they will take on a case-by-case basis, and can charge more for more difficult cases. Should teachers then charge more for more difficult children? (If so, somebody owes me some money.) On the other hand, doctors and lawyers can turn down any clients they wish. Oh, boy — wouldn't that cause some conversations in the teacher's lounge? And for those really challenging cases they do take, those other professionals





may make a seven-figure income — not in a lifetime, but in a year — or even, on some occasions, per case! Are we willing to pay teachers seven figures for successfully dealing with the child no one else wants? Don't get me wrong. I don't want all the money and glitz sometimes associated with those other professions — but neither do I want to be compared with those professionals who do. Obviously, professions may vary significantly. Let's not allow Noisemakers to mix and match them to support their blame and shame platform.

Another contributor to the hostile environment for teachers is a subtle form of racism. I've loved Carlos Santana's music since first hearing *Black Magic Woman* when I was a college student in 1971. I'm glad he's finally gotten some recognition, and I enjoy his take on music and life, but I disagree with his stance that we need teachers who look like the students they teach. He has even made commercials for the NEA to recruit minority teachers on this basis (Green 2000). While this line of reasoning is well intentioned, it is off the mark. We don't need teachers who look like their students; we need teachers who look at their students — and truly see them. Greg Boyle, the noted Jesuit who has worked in East L.A. for many years, looks nothing like the teen gang members he works with. But he certainly sees

them. Many cry when he tells them that while he doesn't have any children, he would be proud to call them his children (Freeman 1995). Seeing and listening to others is a form of validating them: "When someone listens, they communicate to us on a very deep level that we are valuable," (Ryan & Ryan 1992: 177). This validation has little to do with race. Would the murdered boy from my class have done better under a teacher with a Hispanic surname? I cringe to think that his tragedy could have been that easily averted.



Not Because The Work Is Easy

Besides the misunderstanding of some non-teachers about the place of money in our thinking; besides the hostile situation that has been created and is now the work environment for teachers; besides these things, the work itself is difficult. For example, I spend seven hours a day with adolescents whose lives are extremely chaotic and whose resources are extremely limited. It takes hours outside the school day for me to prepare and/or recover, both acade-

**Because
I can't
find
anything
more
rewarding
than
to work
with kids...**

mically and emotionally. And every teacher is in some way equally challenged.

This fact is intensified because the Noisemakers have also brought about legislation in the form of content standards that dictate a reductionistic body of material and skills to be taught. These are very traditional skills: Employment and life skills, such as punctuality, task-orientation, taking orders, and even penmanship; and very traditional knowledge, such as learning lists of abstracted facts (Miller 1992; Kennedy 2001). This traditional focus, however, represents only one aspect of being well-educated. Other signs of a well-educated person include an interest in and commitment to inquiry, a desire to explore, and, in general, an urge to engage in various open-ended pursuits that more authentically mirror the real world than do isolated skills and concepts (Kotulak 1996; Jones & Nimmo 1994). Further, none of the insistence that we teach traditional skills and knowledge takes into account the social, psychological, and physical needs kids often bring to class with them. Teaching is a job, which is difficult at the best of times. It is made more difficult in these very traditionally focused times.

Not Because "Children Are Our Future"

How many times have we heard that we need to invest in our children because they are our future? I think that this bit of sophistry objectifies kids. Their lives today are not about our future; children are human beings, too. "What I mean by this is that since students are usually not full-grown members of the human race, they are often treated as less than full-fledged members" (Kennedy 1994). That they are less empowered than adults does not mean that children are therefore less entitled. In fact, any advanced society would see it the other way around. Pearl Buck taught us that "the test of a civilization is in the way that it cares for its helpless members" (Princeton Language Institute 1993). Seeing children as our future means that we are failing the test. If today they are no more than our future, tomorrow will we merely become their past?

So, Why Teach?

As I pulled into the driveway after finishing the morning of errands and switched off the car, I realized that there are many reasons for me not to teach. Added together, these should provide enough of a disincentive to anyone who is seriously considering becoming a

teacher. Why then do I continue to teach when it would be easier for me to make a living doing something else, something that would pay more, and be far more prestigious and socially acceptable? The answer I keep getting back is, "Because I can't find anything more rewarding than to work with kids, to see them begin to carve out swaths of light."

Why teach? Because of the student I saw that morning who graduated from high school and went on to college, showing resiliency and courage in overcoming part of his past. Because of the student I saw just the week before who had given me a birthday card, showing resiliency and courage in overcoming much of his past. Because of those who still need me to help them discover their own inner resources, their own resiliency and courage. Because it's so gratifying to be a part of that discovery. In spite of the Noisemakers and their solutions. In spite of 32 separate ways I must be on guard while still managing to meet kids' needs. In spite of hundreds of pages of legislation having become the new curriculum. Indeed, in spite of many enemies of education in high places, I continue to teach because of the kids. For their future. For their today. And for mine.

Note

1. The party line is that there are "only" six; but these are sub-bulleted for a total of 32. See <http://www.cde.ca.gov>

References

- Freeman, C. 1995. *Father Greg and the Homeboys*. New York: Hyperion.
- Green, M. 2000. Interview: Carlos Santana on recruiting minority teachers. *NEA Today*, May, 2000.
- Jones, E. & J. Nimmo. 1994. *Emergent curriculum*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Kennedy, M. 1994. The ownership project: An experiment in student equity. *Social Studies Review*, 33 (2), 24-30.
- Kennedy, M. 2001. *Lessons from the Hawk*. Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press.
- Kotulak, R. 1996. *Inside the Brain: Revolutionary discoveries of how the mind works*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel.
- Miller, R. 1992. *What are schools for? Holistic education in American culture* (2nd Rev. ed.). Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press.
- Ryan, D. & J. Ryan. 1992. *Rooted in God's Love*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP.
- The Princeton Language Institute (Ed.). 1993. *21st century dictionary of quotations*. New York: Laurel.