

In the People Business

Making a Career of Learning and Loving Kids

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Who is that idealistic young woman who vows to instill a love of language and great literature in all her students? I hardly recognize her as I look back across the years to my first teaching assignment. It is obvious that I had a lot to learn. Being recognized for 20 years of service to my school district has caused me to reflect on what I've learned about myself and teaching. And learn I have. Lesson after lesson, until I've trained myself to pause in even the most trying situations and ask myself, "What should I be learning here?" You see, the statement that anyone who dares to teach must never cease to learn is not just a truism to me; it serves as one of my life's guiding principles.

I've learned to smile at people outside of education who ask in amazement how I keep from being bored, doing the same thing year after year. Likewise I've learned to smile quietly in response to well-meaning friends who ask why I can't just leave my lesson plans alone and stop working so hard every year. How could I explain to someone who hasn't worked with kids that no two years are ever alike, and that what worked so well last year will probably need finessing this year?

I've learned that those hallowed textbooks are only resources, not the curriculum. And if one of our recurring central Texas floods were to wash away the textbooks, workbooks, yes, even my beloved unit notebooks, my students will still learn to write well if I will afford them opportunities to write on subjects that matter to them, and help them see how thoughts are made clearer and more powerful through reflection and revision, through becoming someone who reads with the watchful eye of a writer and learns to write with the listening ear of a reader.

I've learned that it's easy in public schools to put our faith in plans and programs instead of young people. That the most elaborately planned TAKS tutoring program will not make struggling readers and writers believe in themselves enough to attend the sessions. That the most impressive campus plan for increasing the school's attendance rate will not motivate the student who believes no one cares about him to get himself to school day after day after day. And as long as we look to programs as our salvation, students will resent coming to class, continue to write voiceless pieces of fluff and song lyrics like "We don't need no education..."

I've learned to remind myself frequently that the reason I teach is because I love kids, not because of lesson plans, department meetings, supply orders, or even a 100% passing rate on the EXIT level TAKS. I know from sad experience that when I allow myself to forget I'm in the people business, as my husband puts it, and not the education business, the treacherous, swirling waves of daily chores and negativism will wash over me and pull me under. It isn't what I teach but whom I teach. That's right. I teach students, not English, and if I do a really good job, then they may learn some English along the way.

You see, if I've learned anything at all, it is that effective teaching builds relationships between a teacher and her students. A lesson plan is just another document, no matter how carefully researched or creative the plan is. What brings it to life for students is the atmosphere created in the classroom by the excitement and value of learning they see shining in their teacher's eyes. They are also looking closely into those eyes for evidence of my belief in their ability. My students need me to believe that they really can write clear and persuasively before they will believe it themselves. I received a letter several weeks ago from a senior I'd had for both sophomore and junior English. She thanked me for "reaching outside the box" and being her friend. She marveled in her letter at all she had learned and how she had pushed herself to accomplish more than she thought was possible because, she said, she knew that I believed in her.

Lest you misunderstand and think that I'm one of those "touchy, feely" teachers who passes out A's with reckless abandon, let me assure you that I also have a reputation for being one of the hardest teachers in our department. "Don't take Mrs. Lindsey's class if you aren't willing to work hard, cause you'll never cut it," I've heard my students tell underclassmen. But the irony has been that the more I've reached out to kids, the harder it seems they are willing to work in my class.

Opening myself up to students did not come naturally to me, having been raised in the generation where the teacher wasn't supposed to smile before Christmas. It has been a gradual learning process. However, the results have been more than worth the effort. I will never forget my students' kindness to me several years ago when I tearfully explained that I would be out for several days because my mom had a total mental collapse. Tears sprang to my eyes again at the end of the year when one of my students wrote at the bottom of her paper, "I have prayed for your mom every day and I'm going to keep praying." The very next year these same kids and I cried together and grieved over the sudden death of one of their classmates.

The newspaper staff surprised me with this year's final issue by including a senior quote from one of their classmates saying her favorite teacher was "Mrs. Lindsey because she taught me the most out of my four years in high school by being someone that I could confide in as well as someone I could look up to." Discovering the quote as I was doing the final proofing of this issue before sending it to the printer, my eyes misted over. That one remark gave me more satisfaction than the brass sculpture I had received at the teacher recognition dinner will ever provide.

One of former students stopped to hug me at church last weekend and ask what I was doing this summer. When I explained that I was going to graduate school and living in the dorm, her eyes widened. "Wow. Really? But why?"

"Because," I replied, "I still have a lot to learn."