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## Requiem of a Teacher

“What’cha doing?” the young voice asked.

“Playing school.” There were often 3-5 of us playing on the steps of the high school at the end of the street.

“Can I play?” No one was ever turned away. We would include everyone who wanted to play and we would take turns as teacher.

From the ages of 5- 10 this was one of my favorite games. It didn’t matter if I was the teacher or a student. We could play school all morning, stop for lunch, and play again in the afternoon. School had nothing to do with actually going to school or doing homework. It had nothing to do with my future dreams or what I wanted to be when I grew up. I didn’t know what I wanted to be and, at the time, the choices were to get married right out of high school, be a nurse or a teacher. But, for me, playing school was just fun!

Little did I know then that twenty years later I would be entering my teacher prep program at SUNY Geneseo. Now, after some 30 years, my career is nearing an end and I wonder what happened that turned that innocent game to the reality of our schools today and into the polarized opposite of my favorite game. What it portends for the future is still unknown. What began as a program for general knowledge now seems to have become a political scapegoat- a platform for political gain and public notoriety. Schools that used to be open and accessible environments are now closed and hidden behind layers of security looking more like a prison than the school of my youth which opened up my world. I wonder how we came to this.

I still remember the eagerness and excitement of teaching as I began my teaching career. Hours were spent on setting up and planning instruction. The classroom was “home.” Like most new teachers I spent long days at school and participated in after school activities- often spending 10- 12 hours a day at school. Most of my waking hours at home were spent on school related activities. Each day I faced students who wanted to learn. They demonstrated an eagerness and willingness to attempt the challenges they were given. We even had time for larger projects that tended to be more fun than instructional but taught so much. Students had fun with those challenges. When I taught elementary Special Education Resource classes we started our own tradition of a yearly play performed in the auditorium with the elementary school and families invited to attend. Students with learning disabilities and speech difficulties became actors.

We would have fire drills a couple of times a school year but there were no concerns about other dangers. I would unlock my classroom door in the morning when I arrived and lock it when I left at the end of the day. There was no need to lock it during the school day. Everyone was welcome at any time.

It was possible to have a relationship with students. Some of those relationships have resulted in lifelong friendships. It was quite common to drive students home after activities so that they could participate. Parents were thankful that we cared enough to include their child in the activities that interested them. Not only is that discouraged today, it is often considered unethical and cause for teacher discipline. We are now warned never to be alone with a student, never to touch a student, never to drive a student anywhere. To do so would open us up to

speculation of being a sexual predator. It's for our safety as teachers- or so they tell us. But I do miss the personal relationships I can no longer have with students.

I remember Crystal. She moved to the small town of Star Lake with her family to stay with her grandmother while her father was on a Navy deployment. She was in the first grade and a non-reader. Her mom had had a frustrating time with her school in Hawaii. Crystal was ready to read but she couldn't. In first grade, she taught herself to read. She was ready and was given the opportunity. She read the same book about cherry pie so many times I finally told her she had to read another book before she could read that one again. I still remember the day she picked a stack of books, sat at the round table in the classroom as I videotaped her reading book after book. The video was given to the family so they could share with her father. It was a way that he could share in Crystal's success at finally reading. The family still has the video and we still keep in touch. Several years ago I had the privilege of traveling to Anchorage, Alaska to be one of the few, outside of family, in attendance at Crystal's wedding.

Students in Star Lake wanted a Drama Club at school so we started one. If students wanted an activity and an adult was willing to supervise, the school generally approved it. Every student grade 7- 12 was welcome and if you wanted to be an actor, you were an actor. Students who did not have transportation were given rides. I found parents receptive to the opportunities for their children and glad to have me willing to bring them home. We even had a "sleep over" cast party at my house. No one slept but we all had a good time. The students enjoyed being at a teacher's house (although the town was so small everyone knew where everyone lived). One cast party was a 62 mile drive to the mall for a movie and dinner. These would not be allowed today.

I no longer teach in a small, rural school. I teach in a gang area of working class, urban poor where most parents of my students do not speak English and some are here illegally. Violence is such a concern that Parent Conferences and Back to School nights are in late afternoon- before dark because parents won't come out after dark onto the dangerous neighborhood streets. The environment may be different but what parents want for their children isn't.

I also remember Shirley. An 8<sup>th</sup> grader should not watch someone they care about as much as a family member brutally executed in front of them. But Shirley did and then she kept it hidden for months until the fear and sadness exploded from her. For two months I drove her to and from school because the family was too frightened to let anyone go anywhere alone. Much counseling was done to keep her coming to school and to encourage her and support her. Shirley struggled but she was determined and, despite the emotional damage done to her family and a learning disability, she survived and thrived. She fought challenges to graduate high school, work and start her own family. She continues to keep in touch periodically and she continues to dream.

I faced questioning and was warned that I should not be driving Shirley to school. But that is what she and her family needed at that time. I continued because I had written permission from Shirley's mother and a principal who understood the situation. Today we are constantly bombarded with warnings to watch what we do or say around students, not be alone with students, and not to associate with students after class. It becomes less and less common for students to return later to visit or keep in touch because they do not have the relationships.

Over the last several years teachers have fallen off their pedestal. Teachers used to be considered capable of teaching. Historically, that was not always the perception of society but that's what it seemed to be when I began teaching. We had the choice of how to teach content. Now instruction is planned out for us and a pace of instruction is determined for us that ignores

learning theory and the differences in abilities in the classroom. The assembly line model of production has been applied to our students. It is almost like society is attempting to “teacher proof” the classroom so that no matter who is in charge of the classroom they will have a script to follow. They don’t have to know about teaching or about the content. It is a struggle to teach so that our students learn the content at the pace mandated. We used to have budgets to supply our classrooms and support to work with our more difficult and weaker students. Year after year budgets have been cut and the demands of what to teach have increased. Instead of being invigorated with the challenge and excitement of teaching we are being stifled and exhausted.

While there are those who honor our efforts and the difficulties we face, the louder voices criticize our work. They demand more and more not only of teachers but of children. What used to be taught in one grade is now moved to a lower grade. High school credit courses have started to move into middle school. Students entering 6<sup>th</sup> grade are bombarded with college prep demands. We ask them to have their career plan before they enter high school so they can enter the correct preparatory program. We increase math, science and English while taking away their sports, arts and interest courses. We narrow the choices for students and seem to ignore their life experiences as they discover their talents.

As my career comes to a close the battle for education seems to be raging stronger than ever. We agree on the value. We agree on the need. Pushed to the sidelines while the battle rages are the students and the teachers waiting for politicians and others attempt to create a structure for their designated outcome.

Soon it will be time for others to carry on this battle in the classroom. It will be sad to leave this way of life for as frustrating as it can be, and has been in recent years, it is most rewarding.

Education is a treasure. I reflect back on my education and the opportunities I had in school. I remember my first years of teaching and the possibilities open to my students. Everyone is allowed to play school, though the parameters may have changed. I may be locking the door on my classroom soon but I will still play both teacher and student through the rest of my life.