



OPINION

# Confessions of a 'Bad' Teacher



Elisabeth Real for The New York Times

The writer, in one of his school's classrooms.

By WILLIAM JOHNSON  
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I AM a special education teacher. My students have learning disabilities ranging from autism and attention-deficit disorder to cerebral palsy and emotional disturbances. I love these kids, but they can be a handful. Almost without exception, they struggle on standardized tests, frustrate their teachers and find it hard to connect with their peers. What's more, these are high school students, so their disabilities are compounded by raging hormones and social pressure.

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As you might imagine, my job can be extremely difficult. Beyond the challenges posed by my students, budget cuts and changes to special-

education policy have increased my workload drastically even over just the past 18 months. While my class sizes have grown, support staff members have been laid off. Students with increasingly severe disabilities are being pushed into more mainstream classrooms like mine, where they receive less individual attention and struggle to adapt to a curriculum driven by state-designed high-stakes tests.

On top of all that, I'm a bad teacher. That's not my opinion; it's how I'm labeled by the city's Education Department. Last June, my principal at the time rated my teaching "unsatisfactory," checking off a few boxes on an evaluation sheet that placed my career in limbo. That same year, my school received an "A" rating. I was a bad teacher at a good school. It was pretty humiliating.

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Like most teachers, I'm good some days, bad others. The same goes for my students. Last May, my assistant principal at the time observed me teaching in our school's "self-contained" classroom. A self-contained room is a separate classroom for students with extremely severe learning disabilities. In that room, I taught a writing class for students ages 14 to 17, whose reading levels ranged from third through seventh grades.

When the assistant principal walked in, one of these students, a freshman girl classified with an emotional disturbance, began cursing. When the assistant principal ignored her, she started cursing at me. Then she began lobbing pencils across the room. Was this because I was a bad teacher? I don't know.

I know that after she began throwing things, I sent her to the dean's office. I know that a few days later, I received notice that my lesson had been rated unsatisfactory because, among other things, I had sent this student to the dean instead of following our school's "guided discipline" procedure.

I was confused. Earlier last year, this same assistant principal observed me and instructed me to prioritize improving my "assertive voice" in the classroom. But about a month later, my principal observed me and told me to focus entirely on lesson planning, since she had no concerns about my classroom management. A few weeks earlier, she had written on my behalf for a citywide award for "classroom excellence." Was I really a bad teacher?

In my three years with the city schools, I've seen a teacher with 10 years of experience become convinced, after just a few observations, that he was a terrible teacher. A few months later, he quit teaching altogether. I collaborated with another teacher who sought psychiatric care for insomnia after a particularly intense round of observations. I myself transferred to a new school after being rated "unsatisfactory."

Behind all of this is the reality that teachers care a great deal about our work. At the school where I work today, my "bad" teaching has mostly been very successful. Even so, I leave work most days replaying lessons in my mind, wishing I'd done something differently. This isn't because my lessons are bad, but because I want to get better at my job.

In fact, I don't just want to get better; like most teachers I know, I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I have to be. Dozens and dozens of teenagers scrutinize my language, clothing and posture all day long, all week long. If I'm off my game, the students tell me. They comment on my taste in neckties, my facial hair, the quality of my lessons. All of us teachers are evaluated all day long, already. It's one of the most exhausting aspects of our job.

Teaching was a high-pressure job long before No Child Left Behind and the current debates about teacher evaluation. These debates seem to rest on the assumption that, left to our own devices, we teachers would be happy to coast through the school year, let our skills atrophy and collect our pensions.

The truth is, teachers don't need elected officials to motivate us. If our students are not learning, they let us know. They put their heads down or they pass notes. They raise their hands and ask for clarification. Sometimes, they just stare at us like zombies. Few things are more excruciating for a teacher than leading a class that's not learning. Good administrators use the evaluation processes to support teachers and help them avoid those painful classroom moments — not to weed out the teachers who don't produce good test scores or adhere to their pedagogical beliefs.

Worst of all, the more intense the pressure gets, the worse we teach. When I had administrators breathing down my neck, the students became a secondary concern. I simply did whatever my assistant principal asked me to do, even when I thought his ideas were crazy. In all honesty, my teaching probably became close to incoherent. One week, my assistant principal wanted me to focus on arranging the students' desks to fit with class activities, so I moved the desks around every day, just to show that I was a good soldier. I was scared of losing my job, and my students suffered for it.

That said, given all the support in the world, even the best teacher can't force his students

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to learn. Students aren't simply passive vessels, waiting to absorb information from their teachers and regurgitate it through high-stakes assessments. They make choices about what they will and won't learn. I know I did. When I was a teenager, I often stayed up way too late, talking with friends, listening to music or playing video games. Did this affect my performance on tests? Undoubtedly. Were my teachers responsible for these choices? No.

My best teachers, the ones I still think about today, exposed me to new and exciting ideas. They created classroom environments that welcomed discussion and intellectual risk-taking. Sometimes, these teachers' lessons didn't sink in until years after I'd left their classrooms. I'm thinking about Ms. Leonard, the English teacher who repeatedly instructed me to "write what you know," a lesson I've only recently begun to understand. She wasn't just teaching me about writing, by the way, but about being attentive to the details of my daily existence.

It wasn't Ms. Leonard's fault that 15-year-old me couldn't process this lesson completely. She was planting seeds that wouldn't bear fruit in the short term. That's an important part of what we teachers do, and it's the sort of thing that doesn't show up on high-stakes tests.

How, then, should we measure students and teachers? In ninth grade, my students learn about the scientific method. They learn that in order to collect good data, scientists control for specific variables and test their impact on otherwise identical environments. If you give some students green fields, glossy textbooks and lots of attention, you can't measure them against another group of students who lack all of these things. It's bad science.

Until we provide equal educational resources to all students and teachers, no matter where they come from, we can't say — with any scientific accuracy — how well or poorly they're performing. Perhaps if we start the conversation there, things will start making a bit more sense.

*William Johnson is a teacher at a public high school in Brooklyn who writes on education for the Web site Gotham Schools.*

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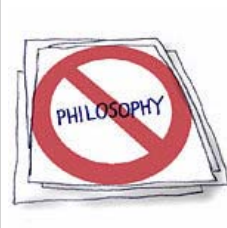
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