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From the Los Angeles Times

Novice English teacher learns his lessons quickly

A Southeast Middle School, one instructor shows that inspiration starts with 'I.'

Sandy Banks

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I had the teacher pegged the minute I heard his voice on my answering machine. Tim Schlosser sounded so forthright, so earnest and so impossibly young, he had "Teach for America" written all over him.

He was responding to a message I'd left about Southeast Middle School students, who had e-mailed me with questions as part of an assignment in his journalism class.

"I'm sorry if they clogged up your inbox," his message said. He assumed I'd called to complain -- which speaks volumes about the way teachers get dumped on these days. I called back and offered to visit his class.

So on Tuesday I drove across the railroad tracks that separate Watts from South Gate and rolled up to a collection of bright, yellow, box-shaped buildings that resemble -- in Schlosser's description -- a giant poundcake baking in the sun.

At Southeast, which opened four years ago, all but nine of the 1,367 students are Latino, and more than one-third are still learning English.

In Schlosser's classroom, I was greeted by two dozen students in uniforms and a slight, blond teacher who looked so young that he could swap the tie for a uniform and pass for a student.

Conventional thinking has it that schools like Southeast need experienced teachers to help students weighed down by history and poverty. But veteran teachers often opt for more suburban settings, leaving inner-city campuses to newbies like Schlosser.

He graduated two years ago, at 21, from Seattle University, a Jesuit college. He hadn't planned on a teaching career, but a degree in creative writing doesn't make for a lot of options. So he signed up for a two-year stint with Teach for America, which recruits top college graduates to teach on struggling campuses.

He spent the summer at a "boot camp" learning teaching techniques, taught a session at Samuel Gompers Middle School in South Los Angeles and was hired at a job fair by Southeast Principal Walter Flores.

"I wish I could clone him," Flores told me.

It didn't take long, Schlosser said, to understand why the first question in every teacher interview was some version of "How will you keep order in your class?"

One unruly student can be like "a drop of red food coloring in a clean glass of water," he explained.

His first year, he felt like an impostor in front of the 200 students he taught. In a blog he kept to stay in touch with his family, he recalled "standing in front of the class pretending to know exactly what I'm doing, while desperately trying to generate some way of filling the next 35 minutes."

He began this school year armed with lesson plans and a six-page list of rules. It's been easier, he said, but he can't shake off last year's failings. "My students deserved more than I was able to deliver. That's a year lost they can't recoup. I still feel bad that I wasn't better."

His admission makes it clear to me that he's the kind of teacher I'd like my daughters to have.

One who's willing to risk looking foolish in class -- juggling fruit, doing magic tricks or throwing a raw egg against a wall -- to teach teenagers who barely speak English about paragraph structure and metaphors.

One who blames himself when a fight breaks out in the back of his class or half his fourth-period students can't keep up. And who celebrates an overheard comment by "one of my punk/rocker girls," who told a friend she had fun presenting a project in class.

Schlosser is young enough to cut a belligerent student slack -- "She's just a kid, desperate to be as cool as possible," he wrote on his blog -- and to apologize when his public scolding makes a shy, quiet girl cry in class.

Understand why half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years. Done well, teaching can be an emotionally draining job.

But five enthusiastic years from a teacher like Schlosser might be better than 30 years from a teacher just marching toward retirement.

The keys to making that work are better mentoring for new teachers, loosening union assignment-by-seniority rules and getting enough good prospects in the pipeline so that we can show not-so-good teachers the door.

"Teaching is the kind of job nothing prepares you for, no matter how many courses you take or videos you watch or classes you observe," said Southeast Principal Flores. "I would say, 'Give me the young teacher with a good heart, someone who genuinely cares about the students.' "

And what you might get in return are students who genuinely care about their teacher -- at least enough to ask good questions so as not to embarrass him when a professional journalist comes to class.

Although most of the questions came from three or four students, none of the others were texting, braiding their hair or sleeping on their desks -- all of which I've seen before.

I was grateful, and so was Schlosser. And though his Teach for America commitment is done, he'll be back at Southeast next year. As chairman of the English Department.

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