

T-CARE

Teachers Connecting to Advance Retention and Empowerment



Volume 3

Fall 2009

The Spark that Makes a Teacher

by Dr. Debbie Leidner

About 58 years ago, in a neighborhood not too far from the CSUN campus, a five year old walked the two blocks from home, hand-in-hand with her mother, to the Kindergarten gate. It was the first day of school and she was holding a wooden hanger, with her name and little red daisies hand drawn by her mother, so she could hang her sweater in the cloakroom. She also carried with her a burning desire to read like her big brother, and she knew "you learned how to read when you went to school." At the end of the day, she tearfully found her mother at the gate. The heartbroken little girl had gone to school, but still could not read. Almost six decades later, I can still remember the feeling, and that little girl, and that feeling remained with me and directed my actions as a teacher, principal and superintendent.

What an incredible responsibility I put on those educators. I did not drop out that first day. I went back and stayed with it, easily learning to read, and retired from the same system 53 years later. Today, I prepare future administrators for our public schools.

Teachers often ask, "What does the principal expect of me?" I know you probably expect me to motivate you, as we begin the school year, by reminding you of the importance of a Standards-Based Instructional program, or raising API scores. These things are important, but they are only a part of our charge. What did I want from you, as a principal? I

want the same thing that the five year old wanted.

What do you bring to your profession and what do each of us owe the young people in our classrooms?

- ♦ We owe them our passion
- ♦ We owe them a mission
- ♦ We owe them the skills to face a changing world.

Think back a moment to when you were in school – 5 years ago or 25 years ago. Think about how our lives have changed and how the world has changed, how technology and this information society has changed the world for our children. The world that our children will walk into when they graduate from high school bares little resemblance to the one you left and no resemblance to the one I knew. The little ones entering school today may well be able to echo the words "beam me up Scotty." How are we preparing them for that world...a world we cannot even begin to imagine? How are we preparing them and what is our responsibility?

The moral and ethical questions our children are going to face boggle the mind and implore us to prepare the kids. We need a population prepared to think critically, solve problems, and bring together a fractured world. Our very survival will depend upon it.

When you walk into your classroom, you need to know that the kindergartener, the sixth grader or that high school senior is coming

to you, each on their own journey, and they need you to care about them, to think outside of the box, and to believe that we all can.

We can teach people to deliver a standards-based instructional program. We can explain about Response to Intervention, and how to use the latest technology. Can we teach every educator to execute their re-



sponsibilities with passion, to believe in the mission, and that we must create a generation capable of making the decisions that will have to be made in the decades to come? Do you see your role as an educator as a job or a calling? Do you have the passion; is there a mission in you? Do you see yourself as passing on to generation after generation your humanity, and your civility?

Each day you need to ask yourself, "What do I believe about kids and teaching and learning?" "Do I like kids?" "Is this mission a calling for me?" It is easy to become wrapped up in the negative when there is not enough money, when the decisions are top down, when the kids can't read, and parents don't have time to get involved. We can't let the negative get the

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best of us. As a principal and superintendent, that is what I wanted from you as a teacher. I wanted you to stay positive, believe in your calling, and to hold me responsible for helping you, and making sure I removed

the barriers that got in your way.

You are headed back into your classroom because you have that spark within you that makes you a teacher; not just your skill, but also your attitude, and your beliefs. When you walk into the classroom again, think

about that five-year-old who believed that just walking into a school would make you a reader. Yes, I still remember the day and the feeling six decades later, and at home, in a closet there is an old wooden hanger, with my name in red, surrounded by little red daisies.

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

an essay by Jeff Lantos

**“I’d never
met a kid
like
Noah”**

One year ago, a tall, dark, tousle-haired boy named Noah walked into my fifth-grade classroom. He was accompanied by his mother and by a burly, Hispanic man with a shaved head. This was Leo, age 29, and he would be at Noah’s side for the next 10 months.

Noah needed a “shadow,” because he was operating with a handicap. Three weeks into his life, he had suffered a traumatic brain injury that had, in effect, rerouted some of his cerebral wiring.

After twenty years of teaching, I’ve had my share of students with special needs. I was familiar with autism, Asperger syndrome and attention deficit disorder. But I’d never met a kid like Noah.

He could recite most of his multiplication facts. With Leo’s help, he would learn to make his way through long division and triple digit multiplication. He loved to listen to the stories that I read aloud, and he spent hours trying to learn some challenging vocabulary words.

Writing did not come easily, and reading out loud was a struggle. During class discussions, Noah could be attentive enough to ask questions (“What do you mean by ‘cheap labor?’”) or he’d tune out and draw intricate pictures of naval battles. There were days when Noah would get so agitated, he’d stand and say, “I can’t take this anymore. I’m leaving!” After those outbursts, Leo would walk him outside or take him to visit my col-

league, Ms. Conn, who would ask Noah if she could see his latest drawings.

By November, Noah felt comfortable enough to get up and go hang with Ms. Conn. He didn’t ask for permission, and I didn’t stop him. Soon Ms. Conn had a gallery of Noah’s pirate ships on her wall. Noah had a detailed narrative for every picture.

One day, after teaching a math lesson on the order of operations, I said to Noah, “Would you like to do a problem on the board?”

He nodded.

I wrote $5 \times 4 + 3$. Noah looked at it, said, “Simple,” and wrote the correct answer. His classmates cheered. Noah smiled. “Very good,” I said, and I reached out for the marker he was holding.

“How about another one?” he said. I wrote another problem and he nailed it again. More cheering. Noah had no intention of sitting down. Then I said, “Do you think you can hit my fast ball?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m speaking metaphorically. My ‘fast ball’ means a really tough problem.”

“Bring it on,” said Noah.

So I wrote this problem on the board: $3 + 9 \times 7 + 2$. Noah did some thinking, then some computing and then he wrote, 86. The class was silent. Noah quickly turned back to the board and said, “I know that $3 + 9$ is 12, but in this problem the first thing you have to do is multiply 9×7 .” He looked at me for confirmation. I nodded. “And so the REAL answer is 68.” That’s how it would go with Noah. He’d ask for

fast balls and then take us all through his thinking process. One day, a classmate tried to correct him, and Noah said, “Be quiet or I’ll kill you.”

I said, “Noah, you don’t really mean that, do you?”

“I was speaking metaphorically,” he said.

In early December I had a conference with Noah’s mom, and I told her that he was making good progress and even doing grade level work in math. “And when he can’t sit still, he either walks next door or he wanders around the room and gives neck and shoulder massages to his classmates.”

“He does?”

“Yes, to boys and girls.”

“What do they do?”

“They thank him.”

“Do you think he’s completely aware of what’s going on around him?” asked his mom. “Do you see him picking up visual cues?”

“He’s pretty much in his own orbit, but it’s not even Christmas. That might change,” I said.

And change it did shortly after Angela walked into the class. A mid-year transfer student, Angela was a brown-eyed, British beauty with a peaches and cream complexion and a lilting accent that turned butter into “buttah.” She took the empty desk next to Noah. For several weeks, they said nothing to each other, but then we had a class discussion about immigration, and Noah suddenly looked up from his doodling and said, “We’re talking about you, Angela.” He gestured toward her without really looking

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Dear Docs: I am working at a school where the faculty is pretty 'seasoned' and I really feel all eyes are on me. I am having a hard time because they are a tight knit group, especially in the lunch room. I want to be friendly and part of the team. How should I approach this?

Dear Approachable: Cliques are utilized for many purposes beyond the need for social contact -- for some members they can also soothe deeper feelings of shyness or social anxiety. Even individuals who are not usually shy may initially feel ambivalence about a new co-worker, particularly if their presence intrudes on the work environment in which a degree of comfort has already been achieved. It is helpful, therefore, for you to remain patient and minimize your own personalization of their behavior (in other words, it may understandably feel like they are rejecting YOU but in truth their behavior may be more

a reflection of their own needs and fears). Remember that although you are the newcomer, you are not the only person that may be feeling some anxiety. For most people, familiarity tends to be more comfortable than change and unfamiliarity, so over time you will be seen a less of a source of discomfort.

If you can connect with one or more clique members (e.g. find them alone and ask for their assistance; offer to work on a task or project with them if it appears your assistance may be helpful). This can frequently serve as a bridge to the group as a whole. In addition, monitor your own presentation; don't fall into the trap of responding to their behavior (or your own shyness) with judgmental aloofness. Give them time to get to know you because warmth and familiarity promote acceptance.

Finally, remember that although it feels that all eyes are on you, each of the faculty members once began as a newcomer also.

Dear Docs: My principal has "matched" me with a mentor teacher assigned to support and assist me, but I get the sense she is just going along with the assignment and doesn't have time for me. I need the help, but don't know where or how to get it without offending. Help!"

Dear Help: An important career tool is the development of skills to work with a variety of colleagues. When interacting with your assigned mentor, consider what might be the source of her resistance and attend to those issues as best you can. For example, if minimal time is the problem, perhaps tactfully ask when time pressures are most severe for her, and allow her to provide a schedule and format that create the least stress. Would she prefer to meet over a brown bag lunch? Could you help her with some other tasks to create fewer time obligations? Would she prefer that you provide her with a weekly outline of questions or topics that address your needs, but give her some understanding beforehand of what you are needing? Even if you cannot provide some specific solutions to the time pressures or her disinterest, subtly addressing her conflict or source of ambivalence may alleviate some of the tension.

If you continue to be met with cold resistance, observe the department structure or informal organization (e.g. social hierarchy, appropriate paths of communication, work etiquette) and utilize this to proceed with seeking unofficial assistance from more willing resources.

Dr. Corinne Barker and Dr. Alan Goodwin are Licensed Clinical Psychologists and CTL Fellows.

Please submit your questions for

"The Doctors Are In" to:

t-care@csun.edu

T-CARE Recommends...

Julie Danneberg's fresh approach to the annual dreaded first day of school along with Judy Love's wonderful illustrations make "First Day Jitters" the perfect book to read to children on their first day of the school year or when moving to a new school. Additional gems by



Danneberg and Love are "Last Day Blues" and "First Year Letters"



Oscar nominated and winner of the Palm d'Or at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival.

The Class is a small film with a documentary feel that thankfully avoids the "teacher as hero" clichés typical of most Hollywood films in the school genre (think *Stand by Me*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, etc.); instead, it delivers a number of nuanced and ambiguous lessons on how difficult school life can be for all players involved: teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

FIRST DAY (Continued from page 2)

at her. But what a giant leap that was. He'd made the connection – with the topic and with her.

After that I often saw them talking to each other. Instead of taking his drawings to Ms. Conn, Noah would explain them to Angela. He never gave her a neck massage though. On some level he must have sensed that such intimacy would cross a line he wasn't yet ready to cross.

When spring rolled around, Noah not only recited a Whitman poem in front of the class, but he played a small part in a musical we performed. I asked him if he'd like to speak at our graduation. He talked about it with his parents and then told me that he would accept that challenge. In the first draft of his speech, which he read to the class, Noah said

that what he'd always remember about fifth grade (among other things) was hitting my fastballs and meeting Angela, "because I like meeting people from other countries." I thought that was perfect. It was heartfelt, but general enough not to leave him vulnerable. I was wrong.

Noah's classmates tittered and looked at Angela whose complexion was now more peaches and less cream. Noah picked up the visual cues, all of which must have left him feeling awkward. The night before graduation, his mom told me that he was sick, but that she was determined to bring him for the ceremony.

Noah arrived just as Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" filled the air. We put him on first so he wouldn't have time to lose his mojo. He walked up on stage, unfolded his speech and spoke in front of 400 people. I stood next to him, and his

mom was in the second row mouthing the words. His reference to Angela had been deleted and so instead of tittering there were only cheers and tears. Noah basked in the applause. This caterpillar had turned into a butterfly.

Today I will meet the 30 new students in front of whom I will stand and pitch fastballs for the next 10 months. There may not be a Noah among them, but there will no doubt be kids on the fringes of the academic grid. When working with these kids, I'll remember the lessons Noah taught me. Look beyond the obvious limitations. Every student has a passion or a talent for something. If I can identify and nurture that talent, then I will have created a space in which every student can succeed.

Oh, one more thing. We just got the 2008 test scores. Noah scored at grade level in math, language arts and science.

Previously printed in LA Times

From the trenches...

- Reflections of two first year teachers



Lee Razo wrote:

After getting my credential in December 2008, I found that landing a teaching job was going to be a challenge. Our current economic situation has forced many school districts to lay teachers off and freeze hiring. With this in mind, it was hard for me to feel motivated to seek out a teaching position. However, I knew that I needed to try because my future depended on it. Throughout the course of about two months, I attended four career fairs, sent resumes and applications to 33 school districts, 32 charter schools, and 10 private schools, and I spent over \$55.00 on postage. Every time a school responded to my resume, it was only to tell me that they had no available positions. Many times I wanted to give up, but finally after two months had passed, an opportunity came up at a charter school. This ultimately led to an offer for a kindergarten position for the upcoming school year! I'm sure many teacher candidates are feeling discouraged because of the current teacher layoffs, but you never know when an opportunity will come knocking on your door, so keep trying and don't lose hope.

"you never know when an opportunity will come knocking on your door, so keep trying and don't lose hope"

Stephanie Del Barco wrote:

I started my first semester in the credential program with the high hopes and constant fantasizing of having my own 4th grade classroom a few blocks away from my house when I finished. Boy was I wrong. In my first semester I realized how difficult it was going to be to even attain a teaching job, much less one that was even 15 miles away. As the semester progressed, the economy soured, and the state began massive layoffs. I convinced myself that there was not going to be a job for me in the near future so I decided to apply for a Master's degree. While I waited for my acceptance letter I decided to test the job hunting jungle and see what I could find. I applied to about 30 different schools and received responses from only five (the rest of the schools gave no response or told me that I did not have enough teaching experience). These schools were private or charter schools and three of them were for an associate teacher position. Their responses made me realize that there are positions out there even in this budget crisis and that there is hope.

I decided to interview with a local private school as an assistant teacher where I would teach a third/fourth grade classroom alongside a more experienced lead teacher. This position seemed ideal because it gave me the flexibility I would need to take on less of a workload (which means less stress) while attending grad school, and I was gaining teaching experience at the same time. Lo and behold I got the job and was admitted into the Master's program!

Job hunting in the education field right now can be extremely frustrating and it may look like a big beast that will knock you down if you come just a few steps closer. As long as you try walking towards it without an idealized expectation you may come to find yourself with a job that you are really excited about although it may be far from what you had pictured. So my advice is go ahead and walk towards the job hunting beast, however long the walk may take, and you may find that it has completely transformed itself into the perfect job. Just keep on trucking!



PRINCIPAL'S CORNER

This is an exciting time to be in education. The application of science to our profession, has increased our understanding of the individual developmental characteristics of each child. Therefore, we are actually now able to bring every child to a level of mastery in the most essential standards. That means that we can have the satisfaction of being successful with every child, period.

One of the first critical books that I read when I first started teaching was, The First Days of School by Harry Wong. I was so encouraged to be entering a great profession, working with kids. I could hardly wait to meet my students. Harry Wong taught me to be highly prepared, and to meet with and work with other like-minded aspiring teachers. He wrote, "Nothing will make you happier than achieving results with a classroom of students." Twenty years later, I found that statement to be fundamentally true.



After my first days, then months, and years of teaching, I faced new and complex challenges. I then took class after class, and read book after book on each individual issue that came my way. As challenges mounted, I met with and read from individuals who had found answers. In retrospect, part of the fun has been the quest. I became fascinated by the process of working things out, applying

fresh instructional strategies and accommodations to unlock each child's heart and mind.

During the time that I worked predominantly with the Special Education program, I learned the importance of creating an individualized instructional plan for each student. There are many ways for teachers to gather critical information on children in order to develop an understanding of each student's learning profile. My suggestion is to develop a file for each of the students before school starts: Gather information from the Cumulative folder, testing data, and Progress Reports. Look for the

strengths and weaknesses in each child. Build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. Also, another way to get an important perspective, is to provide the parents with a student interests' survey.

Recently, I have worked with several students with disabling conditions. As I studied, applied the research, and saw how slowly the growth occurred, I often became very impatient. Several years later, the parent of one of the students that I worked with stated that her son would possibly win a unique award for unprecedented growth. She wanted a letter showing how difficult he was, and she asked me to, "Tell it all". He did receive the award. Children go

through peaks and valleys. The point is, with certain individual students, during the valley, growth can be almost imperceptible. However, continue to search out answers, apply workable instructional strategies, and don't be discouraged because growth may come later.

The beginning of the school year fills every teacher's heart with excitement. The first day of school is the happiest day for all of us. However, being prepared does take work. T-CARE is about networking to get answers to the challenges in our profession. Insights into learning and instruction are available from many individuals. Reading well researched books and articles, seeking advice from experienced professionals, and becoming a part of your school local learning community will lead you on the road to a successful start of school. Great preparation will enable you to carry the excitement and joy of the beginning of school through the entire year.

Lance Moore
is Principal at
Vanalden
Avenue
Elementary
School



Resources:

- A Mind At A Time*, Mel Levine
- Improving Schools From Within*, Roland Barth
- The First Days of School*, Harry Wong



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Look for our Winter 2009 Issue
focusing on the needs of diverse learners



Links to Visit:

www.csun.edu/education/ctl/tcare
www.callutheran.edu/counseling_services/
Visit the "CTL at Cal State Northridge" group on Facebook!

T-CARE is dedicated to help teaching professionals, at all experience levels, to explore the developmental stages in their career. Through this process, T-CARE will endeavor to establish and maintain a close, mutually-supportive network of teaching professionals who will work together to:

- gain a deep appreciation for the challenges all helping professionals confront,
- sensitize teaching professional to the value of cognitive and behavioral self-affirming practices, and
- help them to develop higher levels of resiliency and job satisfaction.

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