

# Classroom Chronicles: So Now Do You Know the Real Story?

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Ask teachers what they remember about their first year of teaching, and the stories tumble forth. One teacher remembers being so controlling of his students that they were afraid to step out of line, while another remembers ignoring bad behavior to the extent that her students' animal noises drowned out her book discussions.

One teacher looking back recalls that he once threw his desk in a fit of anger over his students' lack of motivation. Forever after, he had earned himself the nickname Geyser. Another teacher calls to mind the day her desk was strewn with flowers. Her students — whom everyone else called "the retards" — were saying thanks for believing in them.

A good number of teachers reminiscing about their year as a neophyte remember, although not always by name, the fellow teacher, principal, or department chair who joked or counseled them through their rookie year. Not surprisingly, for many career teachers, the memory of their entire first year can be evoked by one student's name — the David, Leo, Adrianna, whose life touched their own in some lasting way.

In *The First Year of Teaching: Real World Stories from American Teachers*, Editor Pearl Rich Kane collects 25 of such stories. Chosen from more than 400 submitted in a

nationwide contest called "In The Beginning," the essays chronicle "the pivotal decisions, the lessons learned, the dramatic, poignant and funny incidents" that make up teachers' experiences. While each is specific and unique, collectively the stories reveal realities of classrooms that experienced teachers will recognize and beginning teachers will appreciate.

The book sheds light on some educational issues worthy of reflection: the difference between the way men and women approach teaching; the moral dilemmas teachers face in the classroom (from plagiarism to racism); and, most problematic, the effectiveness of teacher training. Interestingly, for all the teachers who lament that their preservice texts and training didn't adequately prepare them, an equal number pay tribute to the educational strategy, psychology, or philosophy that guided them through the early days.

Finally, the stories remind readers how different teaching is from other professions. As Kane writes in her introduction, "Indeed, few other jobs offer the immediate challenge, the magnitude of responsibility, or the potential for intrinsic satisfaction and learning that teaching in an elementary or secondary school affords from the first day of employment."

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## Five Teachers' Lives

*A Lifetime of Teaching: Portraits of Five Veteran High School Teachers* is another story collection — one organized with a question in mind. Author Rosetta Marantz Cohen wants to know: What does the life of a successful teacher look like?

Her narrations probe the chronology of five teachers' lives, their early influences, outside interests, family situations, and, most of all, the kind of teaching that built their reputations among students and colleagues as successful, even outstanding, teachers.

The teachers — seen inside and outside their classroom — aren't extraordinary, and their lives aren't what is remarkable about them. Cohen's conclusions about what these teachers have in common, however, provide insight into the elusive art of teaching.

First, they feel passion for their subject. From English literature to all things French, what they teach is a life enthusiasm, one they impart to their students with fervor.

As for teaching style, "though all these teachers from time to time nod in the direction of the most current research on effective teaching," Cohen writes, "their styles remain independent of policy and prescription."

Carl Brenner, who knows mathematics well enough to have written his own textbook series, embraces the questioning approach. "Could you do it another way?" and "Convince me," said in the most challenging tone he

can summon, are his favorite ways to rock his students out of complacent thinking.

On the other hand, science teacher Lily Chin collects teaching objects — models, manipulatives, a menagerie of classroom animals, and much hands-on junk — anything to hone her students' process skills of observing, classifying, measuring, controlling, communicating.

Bill Salerno is adept at story-telling. His power to command the attention of his listeners and manipulate emotions makes him a masterful teacher of literature.

That these teachers also have in common originality, a kind of idiosyncratic genius, and even "legendary weirdness" (in the words of their students) should come as no surprise to those of us familiar with "teacher literature" and "teacher television" featuring the likes of Miss Jean Brodie, Mr. Novak, and Jaime Escalante.

Two commonalities Cohen uncovers about the veterans, however, counter current educational theory. These teachers are *not* student-centered in their classrooms, and, furthermore, their stage of ego development looks to Cohen more like "the persistent novice perspective" than the mature stage of the selfless teacher.

These expert teachers aren't afraid to admit they that they teach for themselves as much as for their students. Indeed in every case, Cohen writes, "the subject's classroom functions as a kind of stage on which a variety of needs can be asserted and worked through — the need for applause, the need for control, the need for expressing personal talents or inter-

ests." Consciously or unconsciously, in their pursuit of self-actualization, "they all seem to believe that if the teacher's needs are satisfied, the students will ultimately benefit."

So what do these portraits of sometimes fiery, often skeptical and battle-wise teachers reveal to readers about effective teaching? Cohen concludes that the educational establishment ought to widen its definition of good teaching. Is it not ironic, she asks, that "contemporary education, which is so preoccupied with learning styles and individual differences among students, perceives the needs of teachers to be so uniform?"

As for the implications for teacher training and professional development, "the input and active involvement of veteran teachers are imperative. . . . Defining and articulating the classroom philosophies that have governed their careers would encourage them to examine those philosophies in ways they have not done before. What is more, their involvement in the teaching of new recruits would enhance their careers without making them leave the classroom."

These deductions might seem obvious except for the fact, as Cohen mentions at the end of the book, "not once in the course of their careers were these teachers ever asked what they do and why." It seems high time the stories were told. □

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always superior."

"Maybe not," Krista admitted, "maybe he just wants attention." Several weeks later, Krista shared with the class a different viewpoint about this child:

Yesterday, I was teaching a lesson on the concept of celebrations. At the end, I asked the children to draw a picture and tell a story about a

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## The world we know is the world we make in words, and all we have after years of work and struggle is the story.

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celebration they had experienced.

This little boy said, "No! There ain't no celebrations at my house since my baby sister died."

I found out that his sister had just died of leukemia. Next time, I won't be so quick to judge. I'll learn to focus more on the child and less on my own problems.

When I shared this story with a group of students, some were quick to judge Krista. Rose remarked, "I'll bet she felt ashamed." But when Rose had a personal experience with misinterpreting a child's behavior, she quickly recognized the similarities:

On the first day of my summer school class, Joey came into my classroom, slumped in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and mumbled obscenities. I took him aside and he stopped cursing.

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