



## Eighth Graders and Educators Lessons and Laughter

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Part of the challenge and fun of working with middle school students is the sometimes polar contradictions in their behavior--the euphoric highs, the miserable lows, the anger, elation, low self-esteem vs. the superman-immortal-know-it-all attitude, and the moments of mimicked responsibility and maturity.

One morning, I heard a commotion outside my office. I looked out and saw a group of nine 8th grade boys talking hushed and excitedly. My appearance prompted a quick request for an audience. I suggested one or two representatives enter calmly--they sent five. Those five began a chorus of complaints about how many PE classes they were missing due to rain, special events and other causes.

"It's not fair!" they chimed in concert. "At our age, we need physical activity."

Ah, I thought, this was the unrehearsed, impromptu and long awaited teachable moment. I jumped in excitedly and began to teach them the rudiments of adult life and how to fight against an unfair situation in a mature and effective way: Write a letter and get all the facts, dates, times and incidents. Present your case; be objective. Write an opening statement, closing request, negotiation, not confrontation, etc. Go for it like you see the lawyers on TV. These are the life skills we always refer to when writing curriculum. We all became enthusiastic.

Filled with the feeling of power, they

left my office in a rush to take charge of their destiny and see justice done. How wonderful I felt! This was teaching, counseling, advising, etc. par excellence.

Forty-five minutes later, this legal hit squad returned with a beautifully printed letter which would have been the pride of LA Law. I was all choked up. They understood my message, my explanation, my valuable lesson. I commended them, applauded them and almost kissed them. Yes, this was why I chose this profession.

Of course, in my own enthusiasm, I neglected to ask where or how they managed to write the letter in the last period. Off they went, my learned and powerful charges, to submit the copies to the appropriate audience and conquer the world.

Ten minutes later there came a knock on my door. It was their English teacher who came to ask why I had given students permission to miss her class. My heart sank as I apologized and explained. Well, so much for their responsibility and maturity. When I later confronted them, they answered sheepishly, "We were so excited, we forgot about class."

We all had a good laugh together about the incongruity of their behavior. But the beauty of the moment was the ability to see the humor in our mutually human conditions. We each learned numerous lessons and, P.S., the English teacher was impressed with the letter. She laughed too.

## Who You Gonna Call? Eighth Graders!

When you have a labor intensive task and you need help—who should you contact? Why, the eighth grade, of course! They'll come through for you. As the new Dean of Students, I felt the choking feeling of panic rising in my throat when I was faced with a pile of over 300 unanalyzed evaluations of last year's traditional "Family Day" extravaganza. These were left by my predecessor, and I would need to process all this information in order to plan for this year's repeat event.

"Where will I find the time in my already packed schedule?" I agonized. The solution came to me in a dream during the night—ask the eighth grade for help.

In the name of scientific research, the science teacher ceded her double block class time to me. I explained the problem. How can you process this information so that it will be helpful to us in planning for the upcoming special day? We discussed data, useful information, analysis and presen-

tation of findings, interpretation and recommendations. The students understood my need (and my panic) and were happy to oblige.

I organized the class into groups and distributed the pile of evaluations evenly. The students set to work, inspired with a mission to improve this year's fun-filled event. As I wove my way through the groups observing them at work, what I saw exceeded my expectations. The students immediately created charts, graphs, tallies and lists. Toward the end of the double period, they were ready to present their findings, which we discussed and analyzed. Recommendations were made.

The job was done; the information was interesting and relevant; the students had an opportunity to work on actual data processing, and the students felt that they had some input into the organization of the event. I knew I could count on them. And now I could sleep again.



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