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Advising New Teachers: Beware of the Stairs

Liz deBeer

Point Pleasant Beach High School, Rutgers, and Middlesex County

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Liz deBeer

Advising New Teachers: Beware of the Stairs

When I meet student teachers or other pre-service English teachers, I feel like that cartoon with the angel and the devil each on one shoulder. One side is saying: “NOOOO – don’t do it.” The other side is saying: “Thank you so much – we need you and admire your commitment to the field.”

It’s probably sacrilege to compare anything to the iconic poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, but the maternal voice in the poem seems fitting, especially the line that “[teaching] for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” This worried voice is from teachers even like me, who were successful in education.

Generally, I liked and respected my colleagues and supervisors, as well as many parents and students. Some years, our budget passed at my high school, and a foundation of alumni and parents provided money for a book club I created and advised. Most of our students passed the state tests, although we spent countless hours preparing. I even have memories of laughter, both in my classroom and the teacher lounge.

Further, I have a drawer with cards and notes from students telling me I made a difference. Most of us teachers do, and we treasure them, years after the students have graduated. Sometimes a former student will re-enter my life, and we will reminisce about the good times.

But, as Hughes says, sometimes there seems “no light” and “it’s kinder hard.” I’ve seen darkness in all schools, including mine. There are times when I couldn’t see around the corner. I could see little more than tests, evaluations, complaints and piles and piles of papers. I could hear darkness too, when government officials suggested that we teachers were spoiled, stupid, and slothful - that our schools were “failure factories” due to our collective incompetence – despite quantifiable successes.

I’ve known teachers who have had over 200 students: how can they grade papers by that many students? Some resort to multiple choice

tests and ungraded journals. I’ve known teachers who have had parents or students demand an “A” and balk at homework; then they are shocked when the youth fails an AP test or later fails out of college. I’ve known teachers who have begged for students to get evaluated or get counseled and parents refused.

Teaching English is a lot more than planning, teaching, and grading. School today includes mollies, blues, heroin, and others that I don’t know. There’s vodka in water bottles. There are students (males and females) fasting to make the wrestling or gymnastics team. And, meanwhile, we hear the wzzz, wzzz, wzzz of the helicopter parents demanding more time for their kid while other parents are silent – not caring or not knowing what to do for theirs. One parent at my school literally called the child study team every single day, demanding more and more. This meant that other students were not getting their fair share of attention from that consultant, who was barraged by that one unreasonably demanding parent.

Then there are the new teacher evaluations. Got new students? Got depressed students? Got anxious students? Got English Language Learners? Tough. Your evaluations are tied to their test scores. Got fun assignments? Great, but you have to make time for all the test prep – especially since the tests change every few years. Students complain it’s boring, and we agree: teaching to the test is boring for us too. Want us to ignore the tests? Our evaluations and our livelihood are based on students’ performance on those standardized tests.

Maybe the pendulum will swing back. Maybe schools will be reformed by educators – not politicians. Maybe new teachers – young and hopeful – will lead the way. Maybe these teachers can see past the corner, beyond the darkness. I can see it too because I believe in public education, which I believe is key to democracy in general and America’s success in specific. We teachers need to remember that the woman in

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Hughes's poem didn't give up. She guided the next generation to climb higher, past the darkness.

Truthfully, I did "set down on the steps"; I retired Spring 2013. I sat down, but I didn't give up. I may not be in the classroom, but I still serve this mission. Our society needs bright, optimistic new teachers to be strong and to have faith in the concept of educating the populace. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

I also cannot "see the whole staircase" and I cannot predict what will happen to American education, but I know we need you and your enthusiasm. Whether the future will continue to be a test culture or a shift to creativity and individuality, some basic strategies help make this job bearable and even enjoyable. The following has helped me teach and cope for over 20 years:

1. **Laugh:** Despite the dark times, I have laughed deeply and often in this crazy job. I may be a bit immature but many things crack me up, whether it's reading *The Catcher in the Rye* aloud when Holden comments, "Morrow was about as sensitive as a g-d-damn toilet seat" or when a student thinks the girdle in "Sir Gawain" is a griddle.

2. **Lean on each other:** Colleagues both in and out of the department can provide humor, perspective, and lesson ideas. Even though I am retired, I still chat with teacher friends about lessons and provide support on tough days. I volunteer with a few teacher friends, who offer many ideas and inspiration, as well as some great stories. We all stumble; we need each other to push on. Organizations like NJCTE or NCTE provide support. Attending conferences and reading journals and web sites can offer fresh ideas and insight. Even more, we need you, your voice, your inspiration. Share your ideas with us so we, as a profession, can turn the corner.

3. **Try new things:** Break up the routine with a quote collage or an i-movie assignment. It's refreshing to challenge the kids to entertain us, the teacher. I've had students perform reports with ukuleles, rap songs and sock puppets. Those stairs drag a lot less when the students take some responsibility to enliven the class.

4. **Listen up:** Students love to discuss, especially things that have no "right" answer. Offering scenarios or questionnaires that elicit discussion provide rich opportunities to experience students' thinking and reflecting and always leave me rekindled. I modified some from *Explorations: Introductory Activities for Literature and Composition, 7-12*, which is now available in PDF form (Smagorinsky, et al.)

5. **Open your eyes:** Many yogis and Hindus say that the light is within each of us. In darkness, seek the light within the students themselves. If we see them beyond our classroom, beyond their papers, beyond their academics, we see more of their inner light. This may be found attending their plays or their basketball games or their art shows. Acknowledging and honoring their individuality help build the community that we teachers want, regardless of politics outside of our control.

6. **Remember: We Matter!** As veteran teacher Babs Nichols explains, she keeps teaching because, "It's the one [job] that leads to other jobs, that helps to create good thinkers who go on to be productive in our society, and that supports our community as it grows and times change. [Her teaching] job is one of the ones that matters most."

In closing, it's a tough job, but each step leads us upward. Clearly, Langston Hughes's poem is meant to inspire, for the narrator is "climbin' on" and "reachin' landin's" and "turnin' corners." The mother's voice closes the poem with this advice: "I'se still climbin',/ And life for me ain't been no crystal stair." Education is moving on and up too, and we need smart and strong teachers like you to help us climb toward tomorrow.

Liz deBeer

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Liz deBeer, MA., Ed.D., has taught college courses at both Rutgers and Middlesex County and most recently has taught high school English at Point Pleasant Beach High School. She was a 2011 winner of the NJCTE Outstanding English Language Arts Educator. She currently works as a freelance editor and writer.



Photo by Jiyoung Yoo