San Jose Mercury News

MY YEAR AS A TEACHER Part 3

ASKING FOR A LITTLE RESPECT

By Larry Slonaker

San Jose Mercury News, August 27, 2002 Page 1A

Being a seventh-grader is never easy. But sometimes my students seemed to go out of their way to make it harder for one another. One day, I could have a class of 30 happy, eager teddy bears. The next day those same students would, if left to their own devices, rampage around the emotional landscape like the castaways of "Lord of the Flies," impaling some kid's pride and parading its lifeless form for all to see.

Every day was a new chapter in the soap opera that science teacher Liz Hiserman called "the drama and the trauma of seventh grade." The kids changed back and forth -- sometimes daily, sometimes even hourly -- from just-kids to almost-teenagers. With that came regular, alternating tidal waves of giddiness and angst.

Much of the time, all that agitation was vented in bursts of hostility or ridicule. Usually they directed it at one another, but sometimes toward me. A few weeks into the quarter, I decided my classroom would function better (or at least function) if I could raise the level of civility.

Clearly, that was going to require a certain broadening of the classroom rules.

Seventh-graders can be stubbornly literal, and if the rules did not expressly forbid a certain behavior, some of my kids thought they could make a case for doing it. (*You didn't say we couldn't!* was the refrain.)

For example: From the first day, one of my rules required that students raise their hand before speaking. Some students had difficulty with this concept, and it took all their self-restraint to keep from blurting out.

Others simply refused to raise their hand -- ever. Instead they just stubbornly sat there in silence. I don't think they would have moved if their pants were on fire.

Jose had been one of those students. So I was dumbfounded one day when he raised his hand.

We had been slogging through parts of speech, and were just moving from the relatively stable surface of verbs onto the wobbly ledge of adverbs. Up to this point, Jose had evinced not a modicum of interest in parts of speech.

Was this, finally, a breakthrough? Perhaps the merrily busy qualities of adverbs (remember, they modify not only verbs, but also adjectives -- and other adverbs!) had at last engaged him.

I stopped in the middle of passing out the assignment sheets. "Yes, Jose!" I said eagerly.

He indicated a nearby student. "Mr. Slonaker, today in first period she farted."

"Oh . . ." Sometimes, especially early in the year, it would take me a couple of seconds to collect my thoughts when confronted with these non sequiturs.

"I did not!" the accused quickly responded.

"Yes you did!" Jose insisted. "And . . ."

"Jose," I said. "That is not appropriate."

"But I raised my hand!"

At this point, after calming everybody down, I launched (as I often did after that) into the Lecture.

The Lecture suggested that all the students would be happier if they treated one another as they wanted to be treated. That meant no viciousness or ridicule. And it had to extend not just to their friends and family, but to everyone.

"Everyone," I added, included groups of people they didn't know. That was why, for example, it was wrong to refer to anything unpleasant as "gay," which was what an alarming number of students were doing.

To reinforce these notions, I wrote on the board, in large colored letters, "In this class, you must respect: the teacher; others; yourself." It wasn't erased until the last day of school.

If I had it to do over again, I would have changed the order. "Yourself" should have come first, I decided— because if the children learned to respect themselves, they would be more likely to give it to others, and demand it from them.

As self-centered as kids that age naturally are, it was troubling how little many of them did respect themselves. I'd hear kids say these things all the time: I'm dumb. I'm ugly. And (especially the girls): I'm fat.

If I ever taught again, I'd devote at least a week to lessons (tied to the state standards, of course) on self-respect.

A general atmosphere of respectfulness might have circumvented the "Kill Slonaker" incident.

The student was not a chronic disrupter in my class, but he was a victim of them. A small boy who rarely smiled (I privately dubbed him Glums), he was incessantly teased by some students.

I prohibited that inside the classroom, but on the outdoor pathways and blacktop at Brownell, certain 12-year-olds could be very quick and clever about dispensing their special cruelties.

In class or out, Glums never seemed very happy.

One day I saw him locking the door on his way into class. Once in a while the kids did this, and it created an annoyance, because those who were locked out invariably would pound loudly on the door.

I called him up to the front of the room. "Don't do that anymore," I said.

He responded with the typical student reaction sequence: first, claiming ignorance; second, denying he'd done it; and third, agreeing not to do it anymore.

The very next day, I watched him come in. He locked the door again. I called him up and issued him a detention slip.

He protested bitterly. "I didn't do it!" He was close to tears.

"I saw you. Just serve the detention and don't lock the door anymore. It's not the end of the world."

I didn't think anything more of it until a few days later. Suzanne Damm, the principal, showed me the note found crumpled up in another classroom by the janitor. *Kill Slonaker*, it said, over and over. *Kill Slonaker.*

She asked if I could think who might have written it. At first I listed my worst-behaving students, but after studying the writing, and comparing the paper to assignments I'd collected, I concluded it was Glums.

I never confronted him about it, though. He would only deny it, anyway. And I didn't think there was the slightest chance he'd try to harm me.

In fact, I concluded the note might actually be a positive thing.

Other kids didn't respect him, so of course he didn't respect himself. But maybe this note had helped vent some resentment. He didn't know how to deal with his anger, other than to write murderous messages to no one, or to try -- futilely -- to lock the other students out of his life.

I would like to say my efforts at cultivating respect ultimately flowered, and the class became a beautiful garden of civility. But our progress was usually in the form of tiny shoots just sprouting from the ground.

Some students did get much better. A few actually seemed to regress in their behavior -- toward each other, and me, too. One day after school a group of girls came in and asked to use the phone. Usually I said no to those requests, unless there was a compelling reason.

They didn't have one, so I sent them on their way. Just outside the door, one of them yelled, "He sucks!" That was one of the few times I actually lost my temper. (I still have the nice full-page, printed essay she wrote on "Why I Should Respect the Teacher.")

That same week I had to send Ryan to the office for continuously calling me a German word that one might translate as "feces-head."

He was one student who seemed to clash with me by instinct. His mother once asked for a conference and told me, "To be honest, he just doesn't care for you."

But Ryan -- like almost all my students -- was consistently inconsistent. Some days I even suspected he liked me.

In fact, it was he who invented the Super Slonaker dance.

Daniel, who was in my gifted-students class, had drawn a series of clever comic strips titled "Super Slonaker," and I put them on the wall. Ryan became almost obsessed with it. He'd do a chicken-like dance while singing, "Su-super Slonaker!"

I never could figure out if he was doing it to make fun of me. Even if he was, I didn't care. It was hilarious.

As the principal sometimes reminded us, "They're only 12 years old."

Even on the worst days, when I was exhausted and feeling beaten up before the last bell rang, I took some solace in that remark. It didn't make the day's events any less painful, but at least it helped them make sense.