

Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56 (Esquith, Rafe)

It is my hope that some parents and teachers out there will agree with me that our culture is a disaster. In a world that considers athletes and pop stars more important than research scientists and firefighters, it has become practically impossible to develop kind and brilliant individuals.

And yet we've created a different world in Room 56. It's a world where character matters, hard work is respected, humility is valued, and support for one another is unconditional.

From that moment, I resolved to always teach like my hair was on fire.

There are so many charlatans in the world of education. They teach for a couple of years, come up with a few clever slogans, build their Web sites, and hit the lecture circuit.

In this fast-food society, simple solutions to complex problems are embraced far too often.

We can do better. I hope that people who read this book realize that true excellence takes sacrifice, mistakes, and enormous amounts of effort. After all, there are no shortcuts.

This is the issue that overshadows all others in the world of education. It is the matter of classroom management.

If your class is not in order, nothing good will follow. There will be no learning. The kids will not read, write, or calculate better. Children will not improve their critical thinking. Character cannot be built. Good citizenship will not be fostered.

And from that day forward, the teacher carried the unsigned baseball with him everywhere he went. It reminded him that, when teaching or parenting, you must always try to see things from the child's point of view and never use fear as a shortcut for education.

I've recognized that by improving the culture of my classroom, the ordinary challenges are navigated far more easily.

Replace Fear with Trust

On the first day of school, within the first two minutes, I discuss this issue with the children. While most classrooms are based on fear, our classroom is based on trust.

But break my trust and the rules change. Our relationship will be okay, but it will never, ever be what it once was. Of course kids do break trust, and they should be given an opportunity to earn it back. But it takes a long time. The kids are proud of the trust I give them, and they do not want to lose it. They rarely do, and I make sure on a daily basis that I deserve the trust I ask of them.

Yet we should never become frustrated when a student doesn't understand something. Our positive and patient response to questions builds an immediate and lasting trust that transcends fear.

Children Depend on Us, So Be Dependable

Being constantly dependable is the best way to build up trust. We do not need to lecture the children about how we came through on a promise; let them figure out that they can trust us. It's a cliché, but our actions truly do speak louder than our words.

Discipline Must Be Logical

Children do not mind a tough teacher, but they despise an unfair one. Punishments must fit the crimes, and too often they do not. Once the kids see you as unfair, you've lost them.

You Are a Role Model

Never forget that the kids watch you constantly. They model themselves after you, and you have to be the person you want them to be.

This is a teacher who has forgotten that we may lead the class, but the students determine if a class is outstanding or mediocre.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Six Levels of Moral Development. I just loved it. The Six Levels were simple, easy to understand, and, most important, perfectly applicable to teaching young people exactly what I wanted them to learn. I quickly incorporated the Six Levels into my class, and today they are the glue that holds it together.

Trust is always the foundation, but the Six Levels are the building blocks that help my kids grow as both students and people. I even used the Six Levels in raising my own children, and I am extremely proud of how they turned out.

But is this good teaching? Level I thinking is based on fear. Eventually we want our children to behave well not because they fear punishment but because they believe it is right.

Level I. I Don't Want to Get in Trouble

Level II. I Want a Reward

We need to show our children that proper behavior is expected, not rewarded.

Level III. I Want to Please Somebody

As they grow up, kids also learn to do things to please people: "Look, Mommy, is this good?" They do the same things with teachers, chiefly with the charismatic or popular ones. They sit up straight and behave the way we hope they'll behave. But they do it for all the wrong reasons.

This is a point on which I simultaneously tease and challenge my own students. Do you brush your teeth for me? Do you tie your shoes for me? Do you see how silly that sounds? And yet many children still spend their days trying to please their teachers.

Level IV. I Follow the Rules

But if we want our children to receive a meaningful education, do we really want Robert to do things because Rule 27 says he should?

I teach my students that while rules are necessary, many of our greatest heroes became heroes by not following the rules. We have a national holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., and this heroic American would have accomplished nothing had he been only a Level IV thinker.

Gandhi didn't follow the rules, and neither did Rosa Parks. Courageous labor leaders broke rules to help their workers. Thank goodness that people like Thoreau, Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez had the temerity to think beyond Level IV.

Level V. I Am Considerate of Other People

Level V is rarefied air for both children and adults. If we can help kids achieve a state of empathy for the people around them, we've accomplished a lot.

After many years of trying to get this idea across to my students, I finally found success by introducing them to Atticus Finch and To Kill a Mockingbird. At one point in the novel, Atticus gives his daughter, Scout, a piece of advice that perfectly illustrates Level V thinking: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it." Many of my students took this advice to heart and before long the idea began to snowball. Soon almost all of my kids were becoming extremely considerate of others. With Atticus Finch leading the way, I learned that the old cliché is true. Kindness really is contagious.

Level VI. I Have a Personal Code of Behavior and I Follow It (the Atticus Finch Level)

Level VI behavior is the most difficult to attain and just as difficult to teach. This is because a personal code of behavior resides within the soul of an individual.

It also includes a healthy dose of humility. This combination makes it almost impossible to model; by definition, Level VI behavior cannot be taught by saying, "Look at what I'm doing. This is how you should behave." In a way, it is like a catch-22.

Through these examples I try my best to battle ESPN and MTV, where posturing, trash talk, and "I'm king of the world" is the norm. I try to quietly show children a different way.

But in one glorious scene, after spending most of his life in prison, Red finds his voice. He tells the parole board he doesn't even know what rehabilitated means, at least in their terms. When he is asked if he feels regret for what he has done, he says he does. But he says this not because it's what they want to hear or because he is in prison, but because he sincerely feels regret. He has grown into a man who knows himself and has reached Level VI. He does not base his actions on fear, or a desire to please someone, or even on rules. He has his own rules. And he is released from prison.

Teaching our children to read well and helping them develop a love of reading should be our top priorities.

Powerful forces of mediocrity have combined to prevent perfectly competent children from learning to love reading. These forces include television, video games, poor teaching, poverty, the breakup of the family, and a general lack of adult guidance.

The objectives always focus on fluency, comprehension, and other necessary but deadly dull goals. I have never seen district reading objectives in which the words joy, passion, or excitement top the list. I think they should.

These are the reasons why readers read, and we've lost sight of this fact.

I'm no genius, but I'm a reasonably good reader, and never as a child was I put through thousands of hours of reading testing to assess my progress. I spent those hours reading great books. Those books made me hungry for more books. My appetite for literature and trips to the library were a better assessment of my progress than any standardized test.

I want my students to love to read. Reading is not a subject. Reading is a foundation of life, an activity that people who are engaged with the world do all the time. It is often exceedingly difficult to convince young people of this fact, given the world in which they are growing up.

If a child is going to grow into a truly special adult—someone who thinks, considers other points of view, has an open mind, and possesses the ability to discuss great ideas with other people—a love of reading is an essential foundation.

The best way to combat the indifference that surrounds our children is to take them to places where intelligence, enthusiasm, and a joy for reading are standard operating procedure. The library is the best place to begin.

Rather than waste energy on a fight that cannot be won, play the game and follow the school plan. But all is not lost. The challenge is to find other times in the day to read fantastic books. Start a book club during your lunch hour or after school. Of course this is difficult and time-consuming, and it is absurd that a good young teacher should need to work extra hours and battle bureaucrats to allow her students to read great literature. But when one considers the stakes, no price is too high.

Young people who read for pleasure are able to make connections with the world around them and eventually grow to understand themselves on levels they never thought possible. They make associations between characters and situations that can shape their own decisions.

As Shakespeare wrote in *Measure for Measure*: Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing to attempt.

He is a reader. He makes connections. He understands. He is able to investigate great ideas and see their relevance to his own experience.

This I believe: If young people develop a love of reading, they will have better lives. That objective is not listed in our state curriculum standards. Our assessment of reading may begin with standardized test scores, but in the end we must measure a child's reading ability by the amount of laughter exhaled and tears shed as the written word is devoured.

I do take a moment to wish them good morning and tell them we have an exciting day planned, but by 8:01 we are hard at work while other students saunter by our door. We do not waste time in Room 56. Even a few squandered minutes at the start of the day can add up to twenty or thirty hours over the course of a year. Our children cannot afford such waste.

The Dreaded Rewrite makes kids understand that Room 56 is a serious place and they might as well listen, try hard, ask questions, and get things right the first time.

One of my many mistakes was not helping the children understand the importance of time management.

We take testing very seriously—part of our philosophy is that anything worth doing is worth doing well.

The same is true with studying. I teach my students that how they study is far more important than how much they study. They learn that in order to study effectively they need to “create the conditions of the test.”

Edgar: I do, but there won't be music playing during the test tomorrow. I am going to do the work in the same environment as the test.

First, I laugh with them at the whole testing situation and ask to hear horror stories about teachers who have gone ballistic on them after poor performances. This loosens them up. Then I explain an important concept: A test is like a thermometer. It's a measuring device, pure and simple.

Young people need to understand that a poor test grade is not the end of the world. Their parents will still love them, and so will I.

I practice what I preach. The kids learn by my consistent actions that I will not give up on them or be upset over a test score. We adults must work hard to help the kids navigate the ridiculous hoops through which they are asked to jump.

Parents and teachers must also remember to never compare one student's test score to another's. Always measure a child's progress against her past performance. There will always be a better reader, mathematician, or baseball player. Our goal is to help each student become as special as she can be as an individual—not to be more special than the kid sitting next to her.

It becomes part of who they are, and the test-taking skills they develop will be useful to them for the rest of their lives. They consistently outdo other students who are just as smart as they are.

Hamlet said it best: "The readiness is all."

I always remind my students that life's most important questions are never asked on standardized tests.

No one asks them questions regarding character, honesty, morality, or generosity of spirit. In Room 56 these are the issues of true importance. Why have we lost sight of this? It's probably because raising scores a little higher is easy. Teaching honor and ethics is not nearly as simple a task. But if we want to create extraordinary students, we must be the ones to keep this in perspective.

No one asks about test scores or grade point averages. They stop the children because the kids possess superior deportment. People notice their manners, listening skills, and a quiet respect for others that young people so often lack. It's wonderful that these students are good at taking tests, but even better is their sense of values—they know there are more important things than how they score on the SAT.

In an era when “You are your test score” has become accepted in too many school hallways, we adults must work hard to make sure kids know that their test scores are actually a very small part of who they are.

It’s important to remember that we teachers individually define the word failure. In Room 56, a rocket that doesn’t fly is not a failure. Failure happens only when students stop trying to solve a problem.

The biggest challenge to high school science teachers often springs from our embarrassingly shallow national values. In a society that celebrates people whose only claim to fame is plastic surgery or obnoxious behavior, it is a constant battle to show our students the beauty, glory, and deep satisfaction that can come from working in a laboratory.

Today, most high school students are more concerned with what ring tone is on their cell phone than with working toward an AIDS vaccine or curing cancer.

I point out an irony of the all-too-common scenario in which teammates scream at the kid who dropped the ball: They are usually yelling because they desperately want to win, but humiliating a teammate only makes the “offender” more likely to make future mistakes—

One of my primary goals in Room 56 is to teach my students to be kind in a world that is often anything but. Nowhere today is bad behavior more prevalent, or accepted, than in the sports arena. A trip to the old ball game offers a perfect object lesson in behavior that is boorish, obnoxious, and downright disgusting. At basketball games, for instance, fans scream obscenities at the opposing team and its fans.

Today’s fans believe they are part of the game. This mentality is now accepted even by people who are normally intelligent and reasonable. But it is not correct, and kids need to learn that fans are no more in a game than theatergoers are in a play.

They know what it is to both win and lose. They know that to participate in the detestable behavior exhibited by so many fans—to go along with the crowd—would be to make themselves the worst thing they could be: ordinary. They want to be special.

For every headline-starved punk doing a touchdown dance on ESPN, there is an Arthur Ashe, Rafer Johnson, Chris Evert, or Sandy Koufax. These are special people, and our children need to be exposed to their greatness if they are to become special as well.

Smarter people than I have observed that a person's room is representative of his state of mind. A child who knows how to organize and balance his time is more likely to find happiness by doing things he enjoys—and he's more likely to do them well. Learning to save money, balance a checkbook, and plan for future expenses takes organization. It's essential for young people to see the importance of orderliness and how to get there.

If you ever take a tour of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home, the docent will describe our third president as the Master of Time and Space. He did not waste either of them. Yet two hundred years later we've become a wasteful society.

They have fun, but it's balanced with an understanding that by working hard today they are opening a door to a much better tomorrow. They delay their gratification. They may not be the most popular kids in class, and they certainly aren't the most visible—that is, until senior year. It's amazing how people tend to notice the kids who get the scholarships to the top colleges.

But I beg to differ. To help young people become remarkable, we need to challenge them with lessons they will use for the rest of their lives.

As I am not a particularly creative teacher, I decided to give the kids the most valuable thing I have to offer: my time. I spend an enormous amount of time with my students. I work with them practically every day of vacation. We work on Saturdays.

The kids learn to listen to one another. They also, to quote Dr. King, learn to disagree without becoming disagreeable.

No matter where the problems come from, the process remains the same: Understand the problem, choose an appropriate strategy, solve, and analyze. These fundamental steps will help children solve problems throughout their lives.

What will you do when things go wrong? Notice the question does not say if things go wrong. Things will go wrong. That's a part of life. A person's ability to answer that simple question can mean the difference between success and failure, fulfillment and discontent. The problem-solving steps learned over and over in Room 56 provide the answer to Barbara's question.

It reminded me that excellence had to be pursued every moment of the day. Watching great films was another opportunity to build on the foundation of merit that I had been constructing in the classroom.

Kids learn quickly that taking home films is a privilege and not a right. They earn that privilege by being organized and dependable. Club members learn all sorts of things that have nothing to do with watching movies.

Ours are held on Tuesday afternoons. Each week we are told about an exciting new technique for teaching language or math—which invariably contradicts the twelve most recent “new techniques” we've been forced to swallow over the past few months. The only thought-provoking element of staff meetings is guessing if the Powers That Be can possibly top the idiocy of the previous week's session. Inevitably, they do.

Truth is, many kids simply haven't learned enough about life to survive the college experience. Handling money, relationships, loneliness, difficult people, and disappointment can all be factors that defeat kids who are on their own for the first time.

They are not here to impress anyone. The actual performances at the end of the year are fun—it's always nice to be on the receiving end of a standing ovation—but the real reward is in the work itself. No amount of applause can compare to the journey of discovery the kids undertake, the thousands of hours of work that go into making each production extraordinary. The process is all.

Tales from Shakespeare by Charles and Mary Lamb.

I have found my favorite summaries in Marchette Chute's Stories from Shakespeare.

All of Shakespeare's plays are available on CD through a company called Arkangel.

After all, these productions aren't about the amount of applause or the length of standing ovations—they're about language, music, teamwork, risk, discipline, hard work, and self-discovery.

But the key players to be recognized are the children. Every child in Room 56 has displayed courage, perseverance, and a passion that many of their peers lack. These are children who bravely walk roads less traveled. They are kind when their world is mean and work incredibly hard when others give up. These kids do not make excuses. They seize opportunities and give all who meet them hope for the future.