



Class Project

As school starts up again, so will the difficulties (and the small victories) of teachers in the most challenging classrooms. By Noah Mackert

I teach a group of South Bronx sixth graders with reading and emotional disabilities. One day last year, I was having them write essays. Most everyone selects a topic — bring the troops home, stop pollution, don't demolish Yankee Stadium — and most everyone gets to work. Katherine, on the other hand, pulls a Mickey Mouse bandanna over her hair, which violates the school's dress code, and slumps in her chair.

I sit down next to her. What does she care about? Cats. What is she angry about? She doesn't know. Then I have an idea. It's my job to know what she's been through; I ask her to tell me about when she was in foster care.

"They shouldn't take kids away from their parents," she says.

"Can you remember much about it?"

"Yeah," she says. "It wasn't that bad. I still wanted to be with my mother. Ms. H. let me wear a skirt. So I always wore a skirt. But her real daughter, Debbie, never got to wear a skirt."

"Was Debbie jealous?" I ask.

"Yeah!" Katherine says. "Once she told her mom I stole a dollar from her purse. Well, I did steal a dollar. I told her I had found it on the porch. She made me stand facing the wall for an hour. But she never beat us. Debbie got hit sometimes. She beat her, but not us."

Eric's hand is up. "When I was 3 or 4," he says, "this lady took care of me and my older brother. She used to beat us if we were bad. But she took care of us."

I turn back to Katherine, hoping to keep her interest: "Do you ever talk to Debbie?"

"No. Debbie and me was friends at first, but then she started saying stuff about my mother. So I punched her."

I ask Katherine what she would say to her foster mother if she saw her. I suggest that she write a letter to her, not really thinking she'll be interested. But to my surprise she opens her notebook and starts writing:

"Dear Ms. H. Thank you for the clothes and the food. I had an O.K. time with you. But I hate your daughter. And your boyfriend is lazy. Sincerely, Katherine."

I'm reading the letter when one of my chronically truant students walks in the door and sits down on a desk. Christian,

a tall 13-year-old with a sharp grin and a translucent mustache, dreams of becoming a mechanic like his older brother. He has a new tongue piercing to show off. "And I'm getting my tattoo soon," he announces.

It's my job to say something mature. "Oh, Christian," I say. "Everyone with a tongue piercing gets rid of it in a year or two. The novelty wears off."

Christian has ruined the mood, but I try to include him in our conversation. Unfortunately, he can't listen; his mind wanders. I ask him where he has been all week, though I already know.

"Racing," he says. "Yo, you know in Mexico, if you drive a hot car, they'll shoot you for it. So you gotta just take a regular car like a Civic and soup it up. But if you paint it a different color — like see here, this my brother's car. You can tell it's tricked out by the color." He shows me a picture on his phone.

"Hey, Mr. Mackert," he says. "Why are there so many black Dominicans? Dominicans are supposed to be as white as Puerto Ricans. But they mad black. . . . I wish I was black. If you're black, you get more respect. Like if I was walking around here with Eric, he'd get more respect than me."

"What about on Park Avenue?" I ask.

"Over there, if they see a black man, they be scared," he answers.

This new discussion seems promising, but Christian's interest has already shifted to testicles. Ah, well, I think, it was nice while it lasted. But maybe I've built some trust with him, and maybe he'll decide to come to school tomorrow.

It's time to end the lesson. I order people back to their seats; they stagger around as if waking from a trance. We perform the dismissal ritual: "Pat yourself on the back, kiss your beautiful brain and stand behind your desks — I'll call you up."

Their coats on and homework packed away, I send them off. Eric waits for a kid called Enrry to push him on the swings. Dominick gets into a fistfight while walking to his bus. Christian will not come back the rest of the week. Katherine, who's back with her mother now, goes home and watches Spanish soaps with her mom for an hour. Then she helps clean and cook for her three brothers and sisters, feeds the baby and then watches her while her mother goes out for the evening. She goes to sleep around 1 a.m., and she hasn't done her homework. It's my job to know these things. ■