

High School Training Ground

Malcolm London

At 7:45 a.m., I open the doors to a building dedicated to building, yet only breaks me down. I march down hallways cleaned up after me every day by regular janitors, but I never have the decency to honor their names. Lockers left open like teenage boys' mouths when teenage girls wear clothes that covers their insecurities but exposes everything else. Masculinity mimicked by men who grew up with no fathers, camouflage worn by bullies who are dangerously armed but need hugs. Teachers paid less than what it costs them to be here. Oceans of adolescents come here to receive lessons but never learn to swim, part like the Red Sea when the bell rings.

This is a training ground. My high school is Chicago, diverse and segregated on purpose. Social lines are barbed wire. Labels like "Regulars" and "Honors" resonate. I am an Honors but go home with Regular students who are soldiers in territory that owns them. This is a training ground to sort out the Regulars from the Honors, a reoccurring cycle built to recycle the trash of this system.

Trained at a young age to capitalize, letters taught now that capitalism raises you but you have to step on someone else to get there. This is a training ground where one group is taught to lead and the other is made to follow. No wonder so many of my people spit bars, because the truth is hard to swallow. The need for degrees has left so many people frozen.

Homework is stressful, but when you go home every day and your home is work, you don't want to pick up any assignments. Reading textbooks is stressful, but reading does not matter when you feel your story is already written, either dead or getting booked. Taking tests is stressful, but bubbling in a Scantron does not stop bullets from bursting.

I hear education systems are failing, but I believe they're succeeding at what they're built to do -- to train you, to keep you on track, to track down an American dream that has failed so many of us all.

What Teachers Make

by Taylor Mali

He says the problem with teachers is
What's a kid going to learn
from someone who decided his best option in life
was to become a teacher?
He reminds the other dinner guests that it's true
what they say about teachers:
Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.
I decide to bite my tongue instead of his
and resist the temptation to remind the dinner guests
that it's also true what they say about lawyers.
Because we're eating, after all, and this is polite conversation.

I mean, you're a teacher, Taylor.
Be honest. What do you make?

And I wish he hadn't done that— asked me to be honest—
because, you see, I have this policy about honesty and ass--kicking:
if you ask for it, then I have to let you have it.

You want to know what I make?

I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could.
I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional Medal of Honor
and an A-- feel like a slap in the face.

How dare you waste my time
with anything less than your very best.

I make kids sit through 40 minutes of study hall
in absolute silence. No, you may not work in groups.

No, you may not ask a question.

Why won't I let you go to the bathroom?

Because you're bored.

And you don't really have to go to the bathroom, do you?

I make parents tremble in fear when I call home:

Hi. This is Mr. Mali. I hope I haven't called at a bad time,

I just wanted to talk to you about something your son said today.

To the biggest bully in the grade, he said,

"Leave the kid alone. I still cry sometimes, don't you?"

It's no big deal."

And that was noblest act of courage I have ever seen.

I make parents see their children for who they are
and what they can be.

You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder,

I make them question.

I make them criticize.

I make them apologize and mean it.

I make them write.

I make them read, read, read.

I make them spell definitely beautiful, definitely beautiful, definitely beautiful
over and over and over again until they will never misspell
either one of those words again.

I make them show all their work in math
and hide it on their final drafts in English.

I make them understand that if you've got this,
then you follow this,
and if someone ever tries to judge you
by what you make, you give them this.

Here, let me break it down for you, so you know what I say is true:

Teachers make a goddamn difference! Now what about you?

*Mali Taylor. "What Teachers Make." [What Learning Leaves](#). Newtown, CT: Hanover Press, 2002. Print.
(ISBN: 1--887012--17--6)*

Every Kid Needs a Champion

Rita Pierson

I have spent my entire life either at the schoolhouse, on the way to the schoolhouse, or talking about what happens in the schoolhouse. Both my parents were educators, my maternal grandparents were educators, and for the past 40 years I've done the same thing. And so, needless to say, over those years I've had a chance to look at education reform from a lot of perspectives. Some of those reforms have been good. Some of them have been not so good. And we know why kids drop out. We know why kids don't learn. It's either poverty, low attendance, negative peer influences. We know why. But one of the things that we never discuss or we rarely discuss is the value and importance of human connection, relationships.

James Comer says that no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship. George Washington Carver says all learning is understanding relationships. Everyone in this room has been affected by a teacher or an adult. For years, I have watched people teach. I have looked at the best and I've look at some of the worst.

A colleague said to me one time, "They don't pay me to like the kids. They pay me to teach a lesson. The kids should learn it. I should teach it. They should learn it. Case closed."

Well, I said to her, "You know, kids don't learn from people they don't like."

She said, "That's just a bunch of hooley."

And I said to her, "Well, your year is going to be long and arduous, dear."

Needless to say it was. Some people think that you can either have it in you to build a relationship or you don't. I think Stephen Covey had the right idea. He said you ought to just throw in a few simple things, like seeking first to understand as opposed to being understood, simple things like apologizing. You ever thought about that? Tell a kid you're sorry, they're in shock.

I taught a lesson once on ratios. I'm not real good with math, but I was working on it. And I got back and looked at that teacher edition. I'd taught the whole lesson wrong. (Laughter)

So I came back to class the next day, and I said, "Look, guys, I need to apologize. I taught the whole lesson wrong. I'm so sorry."

They said, "That's okay, Ms. Pierson. You were so excited, we just let you go." (Laughter) (Applause)

I have had classes that were so low, so academically deficient that I cried. I wondered, how am I going to take this group in nine months from where they are to where they need to be? And it was difficult. It was awfully hard. How do I raise the self-esteem of a child and his academic achievement at the same time?

One year I came up with a bright idea. I told all my students, "You were chosen to be in my class because I am the best teacher and you are the best students, they put us all together so we could show everybody else how to do it."

One of the students said, "Really?" (Laughter)

I said, "Really. We have to show the other classes how to do it, so when we walk down the hall, people will notice us, so you can't make noise. You just have to strut." And I gave them a saying to say: "I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful, and I am strong. I deserve the education that I get here. I have things to do, people to impress, and places to go."

And they said, "Yeah!"

You say it long enough, it starts to be a part of you.

And so — I gave a quiz, 20 questions. A student missed 18. I put a "+2" on his paper and a big smiley face.

He said, "Ms. Pierson, is this an F?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Then why'd you put a smiley face?"

I said, "Because you're on a roll. You got two right. You didn't miss them all." I said, "And when we review this, won't you do better?"

He said, "Yes, ma'am, I can do better."

You see, "-18" sucks all the life out of you. "+2" said, "I ain't all bad."

For years I watched my mother take the time at recess to review, go on home visits in the afternoon, buy combs and brushes and peanut butter and crackers to put in her desk drawer for kids that needed to eat, and a washcloth and some soap for the kids who didn't smell so good. See, it's hard to teach kids who stink. And kids can be cruel. And so she kept those things in her desk, and years later, after she retired, I watched some of those same kids come through and say to her, "You know, Ms. Walker, you made a difference in my life. You made it work for me. You made me feel like I was somebody, when I knew, at the bottom, I wasn't. And I want you to just see what I've become."

And when my mama died two years ago at 92, there were so many former students at her funeral, it brought tears to my eyes, not because she was gone, but because she left a legacy of relationships that could never disappear.

Can we stand to have more relationships? Absolutely. Will you like all your children? Of course not. And you know your toughest kids are never absent. Never. You won't like them all, and the tough ones show up for

a reason. It's the connection. It's the relationships. And while you won't like them all, the key is, they can never, ever know it. So teachers become great actors and great actresses, and we come to work when we don't feel like it, and we're listening to policy that doesn't make sense, and we teach anyway. We teach anyway, because that's what we do.

Teaching and learning should bring joy. How powerful would our world be if we had kids who were not afraid to take risks, who were not afraid to think, and who had a champion? Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.

Is this job tough? You betcha. Oh God, you betcha. But it is not impossible. We can do this. We're educators. We're born to make a difference.

Thank you so much.