"Seventh Grade Heaven"

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During my senior year in high school, I frequently passed a classroom filled with rowdy seventh graders, cutting up newspapers and then gluing them onto paper to create a story. The teacher is sitting at her desk and then periodically makes her rounds to make sure the students stay on task. There are scraps of paper on the floor, and one student has brilliantly thought to glue his fingers together. The teacher laughs and tells the student to pull his fingers apart and get back to work.

The job of teaching seventh graders requires much humor and ability to pay attention to the students. If the teacher decides to take one moment away from watching their group of students, chaos will result. Mrs. Michelle Beron is able to balance this humor, wit, and patience for her students in this chaotic environment, and these qualities in return, help her young students learn and have fun at the same time.

I first met this witty, humorous teacher when I moved here to Valparaiso two years ago. She was my English Academic team advisor and my brother's English teacher. At the time I attended school there, it was K-12 in one building, so it was not surprising to have a middle school teacher doing things for high school as well. After meeting her
and watching my brother do English report after English report, I could see there was something different about this teacher. She was actually enjoying teaching middle school students, and her students didn’t mind doing the work she poured on them because they enjoyed her and respected her.

Many people consider Mrs. Beron to be out of her mind to teach middle school, especially seventh graders. This is because we have all heard at one time or another the stories that if one is going to be a teacher, do elementary or be a college professor. Elementary students are so sweet, and college students have matured (somewhat). To teach middle school, one must be crazy. The reaction is that these students are not as sweet and not quite as mature. Tanin Longway, a Middle School teacher in Portsmouth Middle School, fondly remembers her student teaching days. She found herself saying frequently, “That was not appropriate,” or “Will you please stop talking? You are being rude,” or “Where am I writing this pass to?” (23). I am sure these thoughts are perhaps running through Mrs. Beron’s head as she starts class each day, but that to her, is part of the attraction of teaching seventh graders. The chaotic atmosphere created by these rowdy bunches of students is the enjoyment and challenge of teaching. “Whenever people ask me what I do for a living, I say I teach seventh graders. They then go to say, I’m sorry. I reply don’t worry, I do it by choice.”

Another thing that draws Mrs. Beron to teaching middle school students is the delicate age they are at in their lives. They are not
quite adults, but yet not children either. They are looking for acceptance and respect. By the time one is in high school, most are worried about maintaining grades because the student knows they need to get into college. This isn’t in the minds of middle school students. They are just trying to fit in. It is also a time of exploration and adventure for them. She wants her students to draw their own conclusions in life and expand their creativity. Her students need to start thinking on their own.

Mrs. Beron is also a mother and wife, and teaching seems the ideal career when having a family. “With having children, teaching is the best job a mother can have. I am able to have my summers off, get all holidays and breaks off with my kids, and get to know their teachers better because I am in the same profession as they are, and the same school district.”

When Mrs. Beron first decided to go to college, becoming a teacher was not in her plan. Instead, she was majoring in Physical Therapy, a big leap from teaching English to seventh graders. She then switched her major to Medical Technology, deciding therapy wasn’t for her. She was never very sure what she wanted to do, but knew she wanted to help people.

As she was attending Purdue Calumet, she was working three part-time jobs. They were at K-mart, Dominoes, and Family Express. Due to the many jobs she was working, her grades weren’t up to satisfaction to her professors, and they called her in one day to discuss what might be done. Mrs. Beron explained to me that Purdue has tests
they run on students who are not doing satisfactory in their classes. They test the student on personality, their weaknesses, strengths, I.Q., and so on. These are to help the student see if the profession they chose was really for them. One of these tests was the standard English and Math component. She did extremely well in the English part, but not too well in the Math section. If she was going to be in Medical Technology, she must be strong in math. The professors then gave her three suggestions of alternative majors: Social worker, minister, or humanities teacher.

She ended up choosing the teacher. "I have always wanted to be a teacher, but my parents always discouraged me. If they were going to send me off to school, they wanted it to be worth the expenses. If I was just going to go and get a minimal paying job being a teacher, they weren't paying for it." Although after only one semester of school, she decided to take a break and think about what she should do.

Although the tests Purdue Calumet ran on Mrs. Beron helped her choose her profession, she does not believe on just using standardize tests to test the knowledge of her students. "I personally feel it would be a disservice to my students if I 'taught to a test'. My job, as I see it, is to take a student where they are and then help them to improve." In the *English Journal*, G. Lynn Nelson says, "...if only life and language were so simple, so capable of being boxed and measured and evaluated. But life and language aren't..." "...our students need and deserve more than to just past a test" (58). Patricia
J. Crist in the same issue says, "...why does one test determine if a student receives a high school diploma?" (27). Nelson, to help his students, prepares lessons and activities to give them a "...place to tell their stores and turn their fear and anger and confusion into art..." (58). The students feel they have a voice in the class. Mrs. Beron tries to create this atmosphere through continuing writing and giving her students comments of how she feels and what might help them to create a stronger claim.

After Mrs. Beron took time off, which ended up lasting six years, she decided to go back to school and start her degree in teaching. To get everything done in four years, for she had already taken a previous semester and only had seven left to go, she took overloads, summer courses, and correspondence courses. If she had any night classes, her mother watched her daughter, for during the break she took to decide what she should do with her life, Mrs. Beron got married.

Mrs. Beron's mother was very supportive of her doing the years she went back to school, and is now very proud of her daughter. Mrs. Beron's father has now accepted that his daughter is a teacher and loves her very much. Miraculously, Mrs. Beron finished in four years, but it wasn't easy. She ended up graduating from Purdue University Calumet, but she also attended various institutions such as Purdue University North Central, University of Evansville, Indiana University Wesleyn, and Valparaiso University.
When Mrs. Beron began teaching, she thought she wanted to teach advanced juniors and seniors in English. At the time, Washington Township, the school she has taught at for the past six years, had a shortage of middle school teachers, and she was asked to teach one English course to seventh grade students. She couldn’t very well turn it down since she just got the job, so she said she would. “That class ended up being my saving grace. My first year teaching high school was the worst year.” The next year she was asked to teach another seventh grade English class. She said yes because she wanted to see if that first seventh grade class was just a fluke or mistake. Both seventh grade classes ended up having the same results. “I found I really enjoyed teaching seventh grade.”

When Mrs. Beron herself was in high school, she had a science teacher by the name of Ken Kehe that had an impact on her career life. She always knew she wanted to teach, but he strengthened her resolve. “He was wonderful with the students. He was always at school early to set up labs and stayed late taking them down. He was always willing to stay after school and help students who were having problems. Mr. Kehe always gave, gave, gave.” She could see that many students had little respect for him, (as she noticed when she tried teaching high school), but he never gave up teaching them or let it get in his way. I personally had Mr. Kehe as my Science teacher as well, and I found the same results as she did. He worked so hard preparing lessons and labs, and was one of the most helpful teachers I have had. I could see many
students didn’t respect his dedication, but I did, and so did Mrs. Beron, and for that I’d like to dedicate a “thank you” to him.

Mrs. Beron, like many other teachers I’ve had in the past, is very strict when following instructions correctly, which is probably why she has had so much success with her students. She feels this is very important and tries implementing these characteristics in her class and the way she teaches. “If one cannot follow instructions thoroughly, then one will have problems out in the world.” She feels it is part of her responsibility to educate and bring up her students to become responsible, young adults. “If you take any activity, any art, any discipline, any skill, take it and push it as far as it will go, push it beyond where it has never been before, push it to the wildest edge of edges, then force it into the realm of MAGIC” (Brown 5).

She also likes looking at teaching in a different perspective. She says there are different learners. You have your visual, audio, calisthenics, and so on. Through the sources she gave me to read and others I read on my own, I find she has come up with her own ideas about teaching and has copied from some of the books she gave me to read. One book she gets many of her ideas from is M.A.G.I.C., “Meaning Activities to Generate Interesting Classrooms.” In this book are many different activities and games for the students to do to spark interest and learning. One game I am sure you as the reader is familiar with, is the Base-Hit Baseball game. This is where you have a board representing a baseball diamond. To move from base to base, you divide your class into two teams, and each team sends up a batter to the
"plate." The teacher asks them a question, and who ever writes it on the board first, gets to go to the next base. The other teammates who are in the "dugout", also answer on a piece of paper they have. To keep them into the game and making sure they are paying attention, the teacher will ask one teammate from each dugout if they got the answer right. If either player did, that person’s team gets to move one more base. This game can be both fun and educational if played properly, and Mrs. Beron’s students love playing games such as these.

In addition, the first page of M.A.G.I.C. tells how magicians realize the importance of each aspect of a presentation. Such as the planning, acting, performing, and telling stories. This is how it should go with teachers. They to need to also prepare for every detail, and become a "magician" themselves. Mrs. Beron goes on to say, based on this theory of "magicianship", that there are different ways of satisfying a student’s need, which goes back to what kind of learner the student is. A teacher, when teaching to a classroom of twenty or more students, must try as much as they can then to satisfy each student’s need. Teachers are there to help the students become the best they can be, and in some sense, the person they are to turn out to be one day.

"...in order to prepare students for future, it [educational community] has to provide experiences in school that closely resemble real-life situation" (Brown 85). This quote and sentence before it, reminded me of the Army’s slogan of "Be all you can be." In a way, this is exactly what teachers are to do: provide adequate circumstances and knowledge to prepare a student to take on any obstacle.
Mrs. Beron also teaches different forms of writing such as editorial, descriptive, compare and contrast, and so forth. The trick to doing all of these assignments is “to leave the assignment broad enough that each student can find his/her niche.” She tries making English fun for her students because many hate reading and writing. Out of two hundred students surveyed for the book M.A.G.I.C, “Only eight percent identified writing as a memorable activity…” (Brown 18). “I [Mrs. Beron] try to change their minds by showing them my enthusiasm. It is very difficult to be ‘negative’ or ‘depressed’ about writing or reading if the teacher is excited. At least they can laugh at their ‘crazy’ teacher!”

She also finds the students who use creativity in their writing easier to incorporate grammar and writing with life values. Nelson, as mentioned previously, believes using the word “…as an instrument of creation.” (57). It will help them to personal discovery. In “Writing beyond Testing: The Work as an Instrument of Creation,” he relates a story he has read in the New York Times discussing teenage suicide. A note found from a fifteen-year-old boy who killed himself said, “I’m not in English class, so my spelling doesn’t have to be perfect” (57). Teachers and educators put so much emphasis on correct spelling and punctuation, they forget what is important: allowing the student to try new things and find who they are. This instance really hit home for him. Writing should be used as an instrument for creation, not a measure of how smart a person is.
In M.A.G.I.C., Robert Epstein writes “our creative potential is virtually shut down by early schooling” (232). A kindergarten teacher told him, “I can’t believe I get paid to have so much fun every day – before the kids get ruined. By the time students reach first grade; there is no more time for fun, because there is so much they have to learn. They’re not even allowed to daydream anymore. It’s a wonder that any of them ever grow up to be artists or inventors” (232). Without using the Word as an instrument for creation, there would be no need for artists, writers of fiction, or inventors; it wouldn’t matter. However, because we can create, we can have wonderful things. Mrs. Beren feels both creativity and correct grammar use are important, but without one or the other, a student has a hard time reaching the writer they can become, or for that matter, the person they can become.

Through my two years of knowing Mrs. Beren and having a chance to sit down and interview her, I find there are still many things I have yet to learn. I myself want to become a teacher, although elementary rather than middle school. I never realized how much work one has to put in, especially at the secondary level. She says choosing the profession of being a teacher reflects a person’s values. A person has to like helping others and teaching becomes more than one’s career, it is one’s life. That is what makes teaching so rewarding for her; it is her vocation, her place in society. Because we all need learning, it is a never-ending profession, and what draws me personally to teaching is the idea that teaching is never-ending process and that it reflects my character to others.
Sources


