

Reflection Theme: *Supporting Students*

How did I ever end up being single and twenty-six years old in a profession in which I'm handed 120 twelve- and thirteen-year-olds in August and told, "Not only do you need to teach these students how to read and write, but you'll also need to be their mom for the next nine months"?

The first year that I began teaching, at the fragile age of twenty-three, I focused on being a professional. My teacher preparation classes had prepared me well for this. I knew to start my language arts classes with a warm-up grammar activity so that these puberty-stricken boys and girls could settle down and I could take attendance. I knew to have strict rules and guidelines. I remember college professors stating, "Middle school students need rules and regulations; they need to learn about strict guidelines so they'll perform properly as adults in society."

Then, Eric walked into my classroom, and his body odor forced me to wince. I didn't know what to do, so I kept doing what I'd been taught. Each day he (or any other student) came in without a notebook or pencil, I took five points off his grade, even when he told me he didn't have a notebook or a pencil. I got stern when he neglected to turn in his essay on Monday, and I wouldn't accept it for points when he handed me his crumpled paper on Wednesday. *Students need rules, regulations, and strict guidelines.*

I got through all the required language arts standards, the entire vocabulary book, and all the required reading that year. Veteran teachers were astonished. I felt proud. I had implemented rules and regulations and given my students those strict guidelines and passed them along to eighth grade. The next year I had six "Eric's" in front of me—no pencils, no notebooks, and no showers. I called conferences with their parents and learned that Tommy's mom didn't have time to look at her son's homework, because, after all, she'd already "done" seventh grade and wasn't about to do it again. Besides, she was busy dating and "getting back out there" after her recent divorce. I met Sara's dad, who sat with Sara in class every day in

order to embarrass her into improving her study habits. Then, Steve came into my room wearing the same outfit for two weeks straight.

I went home, and I cried.

Suddenly, rules, regulations, and strict guidelines seemed ridiculous when I was standing in front of students who didn't shower, didn't own any school supplies, and had no one waiting for them when they got home from school. I found myself pulling Steve aside and explaining to him that he could shower in the locker room before school in the morning and that we could ask the life management teacher to let us wash his clothes in the school's washer and dryer. I tutored Sara after school so she could pass her classes, her dad would go back to work, and she could be a normal seventh grader. I hugged Tommy and allowed him to write about his sorrow over his parents' divorce and his mom's new boyfriends, and I introduced him to our school counselor so he could get some help. I was extending deadlines for students who were up all night babysitting their younger siblings because their mother didn't come home. I bought notebooks and pencils by the ton and passed them out to empty-handed students. I gave hugs to students who didn't get hugs from home.

I became a single mother of 120 kids. I learned that *teacher* is the blanket title for a job that requires you to be a mother, too.

I still provide rules and regulations because kids certainly need those things. But I now provide so much more than that. I now know that in order for students to perform properly as adults in society, they must first be loved. And that's part of my job. I'm still concerned about the language arts standards and the vocabulary books, but my pride at the end of the year doesn't stem from my ability to get through the required curriculum—it comes from the students who move on to eighth grade with a little more confidence and a few more life skills that will help them learn, live, and love.

Source: Humphrey, T. (2003). In the first few years: Reflections of a beginning teacher. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. © 2003 by Tina H. Boogren.