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Writing Seminar I
Univ. of Pennsylvania
August 14, 2002

ROOM 302

I must admit that when I started teaching in Philadelphia last September I was shocked by how “corny” (as the kids would say) everyone appeared to me. The principal handed out toys and stated over the morning announcements how she loved those hugs and kisses and the teachers tried to heal dead plants while their charges threw broken crayons around the room. I found it odd how truly kind these teachers and their principal were on these “tough kids.” I thought they are wrong what these kids need is WORK. I thought I knew everything.

Somewhere after Halloween and before Thanksgiving I found myself permanently assigned to room 302 – oddly enough my birthday. I went to work. As soon as they walked in they had a NOW assignment on their desk to complete, I had separate science, social studies, geography, and writing centers set up. We had routine, we had a schedule, we had kids in for lunch for good and mis- behavior, we had phone numbers for all kinds of telephone conferences, we had daily reports, I was even beginning to think we had time management. We were off and running. Where exactly we were running, I didn’t quite know. We were something else. I think the kids thought a whirlwind hit the classroom. They thought I was crazy. I thought I’ll be whatever it takes; I thought wow I am doing this without any help with the toughest class in the school. I am great. Little did I know that this is the life of a teacher.

Well, we kept it up until the end of winter. Yes, I know school ends at the end of June, but somewhere in February I began to understand the phrase “flipping out” too well. I knew I would be of no use if I kept this behavior up. I began to realize that who I was counted and my best was all I could do, and in return that is all I could expect of the kids. I began to see children who were begging for something – something that allowed them to feel special *and* productive. To be able to do something that they could take pride in. After all, isn’t this what adults do? Doesn’t everyone want to be proud of something? It sounds strange, but I never thought about it like this. To keep my sanity (what was left of it) we set out to do just that. I tried my best to figure out what each child enjoyed and would work towards. I saw myself as a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher with full control. I began to see that it is impossible to control anyone or anything, and even if you could would you want to? I saw that all a teacher can do is guide, help out if you will, each student.

This is where the real work set in. To be able to think through situations, to form your own opinions, and to let go of biases and long-held notions while also being critical and honest to yourself as a person functioning in society is easier preached than practiced. That is a daily struggle, but I find a little pain keeps one hopping. Now, a person could not pay me all the money in the world to relive that school year, but I would like to think that we in room 302 achieved a working balance where everyone was able to formulate something positive to take with them. As Robert Frost states “I always entertain great hopes.”