

Confessions of an At-Risk Teacher: I Can't Imagine a Job Any Harder Than This?

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Poverty has always been a problem in the United States and no doubt poverty unfortunately will always prevail. Title One schools will always have children enrolled who come from the lower socioeconomic class. This article is a testimonial of my experiences as a first and second grade teacher teaching in a southwest Missouri school in the very early 2000's.

I taught in an old, smelly, moldy, run down old building with radiator heat and no air conditioning. Although I grew up relatively poor, I would say that my parents chose to be frugal with their finances rather than acting 'poor.' When I began teaching at this at-risk school where all students were on free lunches, there was still a gap in my socio-economic status and most of my students came from a background of utter poverty. In my second year of teaching at this elementary school, I received an email from a College of Education student from a local college. She was writing a paper on at-risk schools and wanted me to share my views of my own teaching experiences. She asked me to share what was comfortable telling her. The following is an email I sent to her giving my perceptions of the school, students, and parents at that given point of time. Below is the email I sent to this student.

I will be as accurate as possible with evidence of what I see in our school and my classroom. I do realize that I come from a different socio-economic class of my students. Also realize that I have had no professional development on children who come from poverty. I hope that in the future, our school district will provide this type of professional development which is desperately needed for all of our teachers in our school and also the entire school district.

My first year teaching at an at-risk "target" school was a real shocker. Before signing my teaching contract, I never imagined having a hard job than this one! I knew the children would be economically poor, yet I never realized how terribly poor they would be. Many students came to

class not bathed and wearing worn out and torn clothes. Only one or two per class would have better clothes. As I talk to you in this email, you will notice that at times I will be speaking in the present tense and other times in the past tense.

I noticed in the first year that all of the students at the first of the year did not finish the year. Many were highly mobile students. We also called them “transient students”. They would enter the school after the school year began and all throughout the school year, even just weeks before the school year ended. With most of the children, we had little prior information on the last school attended. A lot of children had a different name than the mother’s last names. Some students would stay all year long; these were the ones to see some progress. Some would remain in the class a week to a month and then move out of town again. It was frustrating with all of the upfront tasks I had to do with new transient students. Every other week, we had a never ending stream of new students. We had to ascertain a reading score. Some students we had to do other testing for intervention strategies. Some we had to find out if an IEP was warranted. All of this was time-consuming in addition to the teacher introducing the student to the class and attempting to develop a rapport with that student. And then, in just a few weeks, the student would flee town and move somewhere else for this very same process to begin again. Also, some students months later would actually return to the school during the last month or two of the school term. For those students, we tested the level of their reading and did nothing else (special services, etc.) in that there was very little time at the end of the year to do more than merely place that student in the classroom for regular instruction (regardless of the student’s needs). On the flip side of the coin, we had many students who were not transient; they began at our school in kindergarten and stayed through fifth grade. These were the students we could make adequate to excellent progress with in that they did not move to another location.

Part of the problem with students being high mobile students (moving from one school to another) had to do with the thinking patterns of their parents. Moms and Dad's would receive their welfare check at the first of the month. At that point, they were fairly happy as a family unit. Yet, quickly they spent their check. They paid all of their bills and then spent the money on other frivolous items (non-essentials). When the money ran out, they became angry and out of control. This was the time of month mothers would come to my classroom door to take their child home after school. Many mothers would show up with a black eye. The black eye came from domestic violence, due to the parents fighting and the tension of being basically broke. Then another check would come in at the first of the second month. Some parents reconciled but the cycle continued. I have noticed this pattern at our school monthly. And of course, their children felt the effects of their parent's violent behaviors; these negatively impacting events definitely affected their self-esteem, feeling of safety and security and poorly affected learner outcomes in the classroom. Children always mirrored behaviors of mistrust due to their erratic and unstable home environments.

Assessing prior knowledge is an important skill in teaching all students; however, even more vital in the teaching of at-risk students. The students often enter schools with little quality learning experiences behind them. They are not prepared for kindergarten. We had assessed for prior knowledge, not only in reading and literacy, in all subjects. This was and is a time-consuming process. A lot of the students in the neighborhood where I teach live in slummy white apartment buildings. One day we read a book about a neighborhood car wash on a street with a row of townhouses. In the story, all of the neighbors on that inner city street had water hoses hooked up with buckets of soapy water washing their cars. One morning we read this book in class. The students did not know what a water hose was and could not identify with

anyone hand washing their car. I then assumed that they had never seen a hose; if the apartment where they lived did have a hose, it might have been stolen. The students told me that the only car wash they knew of was the ones where you put money in a machine and drive the car through to get washed. I was amazed at their lack of prior knowledge. I then had to go back and tell them of the old-fashioned way people washed cars. Thus, prior knowledge was an essential part of understanding the context of this story.

Last winter was an icy winter and very cold for many days in a row. One sweet little boy one winter came two to three weeks in the late fall with no socks wearing swimmer shoes. When the ice and snow hit the ground he came to class always freezing with his thin coat with feet stinging because of the frigid cold. He was walking barefoot in his swimmer shoes. I told him that he needed some thick, winter socks to wear. He replied that he asked his mother every day to get him some socks, but she wouldn't leave the house to buy some. I then went home and brought him two white pair of socks from my fifth grade daughter's supply in her bedroom. My daughter was pleased to part with them, knowing that her socks could make his feet warmer. Eventually his mother finally bought some shoes for him (only after I had mentioned several times to him that he desperately needed some winter shoes, not just swimming shoes).

Later one day after school, I ran into this little boy's mother in the hall. She was rough, dirty, crude and spoke to me in a very loud voice. She was negative in her remarks about her little boy. When I would respond to her by giving her son a compliment in front of him, she would immediately in a yelling voice demean him. After those comments, this boy's face would lower with a sad look. He had a kind and gentle disposition; he was desperate for approval, respectful feedback, and loving affection. In addition, the mother later told me on the phone to disregard anything I was told about the "law" getting involved with them. She said that they

had been turned in to family services several times for neglect and abuse. She then said, “Of course none of this is true!”

This is one case of many cases with parents who send their child to school daily; however, they do as little as possible to be a warm and caring parent meeting all of physical, social, and emotional needs of their children. They are not interested in the child’s self-esteem or even their child receiving a quality education. They just do the bare minimum to feed and clothe their children. Getting them to school is not a priority; some students have to wake their parents up in the mornings to just get them to school.

Most parents/families are on government assistance (disability and welfare) and many spend their checks just about as soon as they get them. Then, when a child needs crayons, class supplies, shoes, socks, or coats, they have no money at that point to provide for these needs. Thankfully people and organizations in the community have come to our aid and given us coats, mittens, gloves, socks, and shoes, yet very few have donated classroom supplies. This is what we desperately need. And when students get free pencils, many students either destructively break the pencils or chew off the erasers. Then students whine that they cannot erase their mistakes. I then have to tell them this message over and over: “You’re the ones who bit off the erasers. I have no more pencils with erasers on them.” Some students then reply, “How are we going to erase our mistakes?” Then I would tell them, “You’ll just have to mark an X over your mistake.” Then the same students would whine again. What they don’t understand is that someone has to have the money to pay for supplies such as pencils. They have the tendency to destroy any or all of their supplies. These students have no understanding of ownership and that people have to pay for goods! This comes from some of their parents who destroy the property in which they rent to live.

The mentality passed on to children is: Ask your teacher for something. He or she will give it to you. The students will “milk the teacher” for just about everything (even a snack for breakfast when they don’t show up in time for a “free breakfast” compliments of the government). However, it is often the parent’s fault for not getting out of bed (especially in cold weather) to get their child to school, thus the student misses a nutritious breakfast. About the much-needed supplies, few students will get new supplies, even after I write several letters to parents asking for them. It is very difficult to not give these disadvantaged students what they need out of my own money. However, at times I feel I have to give in and purchase these students the supplies they need. Yet doing so shows them my kindness and generosity, yet in reality, many of these students given supplies by me will most likely learn from their families at home that they won’t have to work for a living after all. The government will supply all of their needs! This mentality, modeled by their parents, goes on for generations. It becomes a generational curse. These students rarely break this curse and will never know the joys of working hard in life to get something worthwhile!

Of course *all* children and families in schools of poverty do not fit this category. Some parents work hard for their money to raise their families and attempt to instill these types of values in their children. However, most of the children come to school with little previous learning experiences that prepare them learning in public schools. Many are affected by poor prenatal care and also an alarming number of children are diagnosed with learning disabilities as well as other learning problems as well (i.e. ADD and ADHD).

A third to half of my students does not have fathers that they either know personally or have seen at all in their lifetimes. Last year, more than one-half of my students in first grade did not even know where their father lived. Some of the rest of the students had never met their

fathers in person, and many had not seen or come in contact with their fathers for months or years.

One day, one of the sweetest and most cooperative boys enrolled in my class came up to my desk and cried as he spoke the words, “Dr. Costley, my Daddy has gone to prison. I’m never going to see him again.” He wept and wept sitting on the chair by my desk; I immediately threw my arms around him and kissed him on his cheek while his tears ran into my tears on my face. I lifted him and put him on my lap and told him, “Cody, I think you will finally see your Daddy again. I know how sad you must be. I know I’m not your Daddy, but while you are at school, I’ll try to be your Daddy and teacher too. When you need a hug, just come up and get one.” I then realized how torn up children can be by parents who make wrong choices and then cannot step up to the plate and be responsible fathers and mothers. After that occurrence, Cody went to his seat and all seemed well after that and the following days. He was always a resilient child. This story goes to say that some of my children’s fathers are serving time in prisons; Some of the children were at one time close to their step-fathers and those ‘fathers’ have gone to prison too. Such abandonment!

One father last year stalked the playground trying to kidnap his child after being on parole. And of course, there are fathers that have abandoned the mother of their children never to be seen again, pursuing a lifestyle of their very own, not the responsibility of raising their own children. Because of having no father image, boys and girls in my classroom always feel a big hole in their hearts!

Illegal drugs (predominately heroin and meth) is a big problem and major contributing factor to parents not being the parents they should be. In addition, we have several foster

children enrolled in our school where children have been moved from their previous homes to more physically/psychologically safe and secure homes. These children are insecure even though they know that their foster environment is a much better environment to live in.

One of my students last year ran to me sobbing and weeping exclaiming, “Dr. Costley, I miss my Mommy. She is sick and dying in bed. I want her to get well.” When seeing and hearing the terrible plight of some of my children in class, I would often tear up, go to the corner of the classroom and shed some tears. I then would have to get back to the business of teaching and attempting to meet the many needs of some of my very desperate students, who carried the pain and sorrow of unstable home environments.

Yet, when each teaching day is done and I walk out the door to go home, I often realize that my teaching position is not just teaching subjects and concepts. My teaching is all about nurturing, building self-esteem, loving, and giving children security and a sense of belonging. My job has to do with showing children that good choices pay off! My job is to impart the knowledge that children can have a good, satisfying, and worthwhile life. They can make good and healthy choices now and every day in their lives. Sometimes, my playing the role as ‘Daddy’ was more important than any content or skills I could impart. The everyday task is tiring and difficult. The positive impact from me that my children desperately need is sometimes overwhelming.

Teaching at an at-risk school is more than a teaching job; it is a God-given missionary ministry at any public school. I never realized how many poor people are in the small city whether the parents/guardians be poor by choice (self-induced poverty) or by chance (ignorance or bad times resulting from poor choices).

The greatest problem in the classroom with at-risk children is their lack of feeling a *community spirit*. Many of the students are territorial with their own personal classroom supplies and often are sneaky and steal other students' supplies out of their desks. Many don't take self-responsibility for their actions and will lie to get out of trouble about anything and everything. When I tell them I expect you to tell me the entire truth, they often reply, "If I tell you the truth, will my punishment be less?" Not just at-risk children use this strategy, yet it is a very common one used when students are confronted about lying. I then reply using their terminology. "No, your punishment will not be less, but you will feel better about yourself as a person when you know you have told me the whole truth! Also, when you tell the truth and don't lie, we'll both like each other better!" It is amazing then that most children will admit the truth, yet some still are stubborn and stand defiant, refusing to cave in and tell the truth.

One of the next greatest problems in the classroom is fighting. Generally, at-risk children will fight about any issue where there is a possible conflict. Including the settings of, the playground and classroom, the behaviors are to slug, slap, punch in the belly, go for a strangle hold on the throat, stab with a pencil, slap, pinch, etc. This population of students exhibits all of these violent behaviors and even thinks of quite a lot of vicious things to get *even and get revenge!*

This year I had a first grade girl who came to school every day in basically rags (old and torn clothing). She is very insecure and I am constantly trying to boost her self-confidence and self-esteem. Yet, she doesn't relate well to other students and has no real friends to play with on the playground. She desperately wants to dress better and blend in with two other girls (their mothers are PTO sponsors) who dress better and are more affluent. From time to time, she

shows her jealousy saying that, “Marcy and Maggie” don’t want to play with me. I’m not so sure this is true; however, this is her perception of these two girls.

One day she got even with them in a very creative way. I noticed this when Marcy suddenly screamed in class. As the teacher, I knew something had to be wrong, because this was not her typical behavior. I ran over to her and said, “What’s wrong?” Marcy then opened her color box and pulled out a tissue with loads of nasal mucus (snot that while holding it up it became a long stream that was nauseating to see). I gasped and the entire class gasped too! I told the student to go throw her entire box away. She did so. The class became a rumble of discussion about this issue. Who could have done this? All students wanted to know. I then looked to the other side of the class at the suspect culprit. Once my eyes connected with Samantha’s eyes, she suddenly sunk down low in your seat at their desk with the look of guilt. At that point, right or wrong, I didn’t ask Samantha if she was guilty of doing this very nasty deed. Yet, her guilty face confirmed this behavior. Through the year, I kept trying to say nice compliments to Samantha to help build her self-esteem. Nothing really ever helped.

Later in the year, Samantha and another classmate were on the playground viciously pinching each other. I took them to the Principal’s office. The Principal did not coddle them and state a positive message such as, “I know you two girls can do better.” He got into their faces and pointed at them firmly stating, “This is never to happen again!” His method was effective. This occurrence never happened again in my class.

Another continuing problem in the classroom is the constant lack of listening skills of students. Most never listen to brief instructions the first time; therefore, the teacher can get

caught in the trap of repeating directions several times. I'm working to improve my teaching in this area.

The next problem is students refusing to follow procedures that were introduced at the beginning of the year. No matter how much we rehearsed the taught procedures during the first two to three weeks of the school term as Harry Wong the popular Japanese educational theorist advocates, these students continually will break them. Even when they rarely follow them well for a week or more, they begin little by little to return to breaking once procedure after another.

In my classroom this year when it comes to behaviors, we tend to go in about three to four week cycles. For about four weeks, everything goes pretty well. Then, students gradually begin to ignore procedures. This slow downward slide in behavior occurs. When I become less firm because of most students are following the procedures/rules, students see me as weak when I become a nicer person to them. Rather than see this as respect, some students see it has a place to take advantage of me and class members! As a teacher, this is frustrating and discouraging. I feel like I have to start all over with the procedures and we have to spend more time focusing on procedures than academic skills. When this occurs, any amount of having community meetings (giving students some sense of ownership over procedures in the classroom) just does not work. I'm still working toward a community of learners who realizes that rules and procedures are good for all involved!

After even kind and gentle reminders of procedures, my group of children will nod their heads, saying all of the right things on the correct way to behave in the classroom and why good behavior is good for all students, those very same students then return to their seats and begin to act up again. I realize that students at this age are in the egocentric stage. They are self-centered

determined to do what they want to do when they want to! As a teacher, that attitude gets so very tiring! I often wonder when they are going to *get it* and realize that a harmonious classroom is a wonderful place to be.

After many lengthy discussions with other teachers who teach the same kind of students, I've come to realize that most of these bad behaviors are a part of students' home environments. I can't control those environments! I see evidence daily that many of the students are not *raised* at home; many are *drug up*. These students used to screaming and yelling at home and getting spankings/whippings. I've seen this screaming when students are going with their parents to their car going home at night! At our school, we are not allowed to paddle any student. Because of non-healthy, harsh discipline and a lack of 'caring' at home, the students in my classroom just aren't used to positive discipline (classroom management). Thus, when I deal with them positively, they don't respond like other students in higher socioeconomic homes would respond. Our main long-term goal is to *recondition these students* and show them they can learn in a cooperative environment where the teacher does not yell or scream at them! I tell my children quite often, "I will be here until the last day of the year. We will do everything in an orderly, peaceful, and cooperative manner."

Overall, noise is a big problem in the classroom. These children grow up in very noisy environments. They think it is an inalienable right to talk all day. Even when I allow *whisper talking* or draw a chart on the board about the noise level showing the appropriate level), the majority of students still get loud with their conversations with students next to them. Many times, they won't respond with rewards; they only respond with a ring of a bell and some very loud students getting a red stop light on the pocket chart. When a student receives three red stop

lights in the morning (for example), the student has a consequence. However, even after this consequence, it seldom changes behavior in a permanent way.

Perhaps the worst problem in my classroom is a lack of manners. Children interrupt me continually. I work every day on manners and reinforcing not only appropriate manners but also established procedures. When the day goes well, the children are the happiest and learn the most. When I point this out to them with some type of reward at the end of the day, the sad thing is, this learning does not carry over until the next day. The students then return to their chaotic homes and the next morning, I have to start all over talking about the procedures and reinforcing them. This process on my part becomes very tiring, day after day. Some days I come home from school exhausted and drop into my recliner. At that point, I realize that my school is the place I'm supposed to be in life.

I am here in my first grade classroom trying to make a positive impact on students' lives, been a shining light in the darkness! They desperately need structure; they need love. They need belongingness. They need security! They need consistency. They need even more than these qualities! They are a needy population of children. These children need what my own children get every day in their lives. When I come home every day so exhausted physically and mentally, I have very little left in me to give my own children. I often feel guilty as this teaching job has made me a worse parent, not a better one. Something has got to give soon.

However, not is all bad a as it sounds. I do have some fairly good days and actually look forward to going back to school the next day hoping for another good day! The most rewarding things working at an at-risk school is knowing that many teachers *could not and would not*

accept a teaching position as I have. Two to three of our teachers have been at the school for twenty to twenty five years. Isn't that phenomenal?

It is sometimes embarrassing when a university College of Education observer visits my classroom for focused observations. They often come in the afternoons (after their morning classes). This is absolutely the worst time to come visit my classroom. It's pretty predictable that behaviors in the classroom will be worse. The college education majors don't see my students in the mornings when students are often acting appropriately and on task getting along with their other classmates. However, when visiting and observing in the afternoon, college majors have the opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of working in an at-risk school. They see the *bad and ugly*; that's not always a bad sight for them to see.

The rewards teaching at a poverty school are great if you believe you are there to try to change at least a few lives permanently. I've often prayed, "Can I be a shining light, Lord just for even one student today?" This is always my morning daily prayer. "Please Lord; just help me make a positive difference with one troubled student."

My principal at the school this first year of teaching at-risk children has been extremely supportive of my teaching these troubled children. He told me how we cannot change these children in just one year. It takes years to make positive gains with them. For some reason, the good moments usually outweigh the bad ones and I wake up every day bursting to get out of bed and get to my first grade class. When I greet them we have a morning ritual we do every day. I say a sentence and they repeat after me. The script is, "Good morning, children." They repeat in unison, "Good morning, Dr. Costley." I then say, "I love you, children." They then say, "I love you, Dr. Costley." I then end with saying, "You're precious, children." They all give me big

smiles and say, “You’re precious, Dr. Costley!” Then, we all laugh together. The days I forget to do this with them, before noon students will say, “Dr. Costley, you forgot to do “Good morning”. We can’t go to lunch until we all do, “Good morning children.”

This must be where I’m supposed to be right now, serving children who need me the most. In reality, I most likely need these children the most, maybe more than they need me! They still enrich my life and make me a better person and teacher.

Note: As of this writing, the author of this article has since taught twelve years in a state university in Arkansas training prospective teachers. His prior years of teaching in an at-risk school have positively impacted his evolving educational theories into real life classroom practices and examples for the pre-service teachers he instructs.