

Please Hire Me So I Can Change the World

By Karen D. Ancillai

As you consider my application to join the English faculty of your high school, I would like to reveal a few things about myself that may not be obvious from my resume. Specifically, I would like to address my inspiration for becoming a teacher, my view of the challenges facing new teachers, and my plan for addressing those challenges through my teaching philosophy and classroom strategy. It is my hope that you and others at your school share my desire to create a classroom that encourages students to grow and learn in their own unique way, and after reading my statement, you will invite me to begin my journey at your school.

My Inspiration

I arrived at my decision to pursue teaching as a profession by way of a simple, easily achievable, and completely practical goal in life: to change the world. Please do not misunderstand me — my own world is a good one. I enjoy good health, loving family and friends, and optimism about the opportunities available to me. But I recognize that my position in life is not shared by everyone in the world, or even my immediate community. Too many people are hungry, unemployed or underemployed, and without health insurance. Too many families work too hard for too little money and

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therefore have too little time to spend together. War is not something read about in books or seen in the movies, but instead is a reality on the news every night. Rather than ignoring or despairing over these things, I feel compelled to use my good position in life to try to help others achieve some of their own. Teaching affords me this incredible opportunity. I believe that education is the best path to reducing poverty, challenging prejudices, and inspiring compromise to settle long-enduring conflicts.

I have not come to the teaching profession without trial. Chasing my goal has led me down several seemingly unconnected paths. In college, I majored in political communication and worked on Capitol Hill, hoping to change the world from inside the halls of government like presidents Lincoln and Kennedy. Unfortunately, politics left me feeling cynical and frustrated. It seemed that issues having little relevance to the lives of ordinary citizens dominated political debates and that money corrupted the system by permitting those with it to wield incredible influence over policy decisions. It was no mystery to me why only half of the people eligible to vote in this country elect to do so — they do not see how the people they vote for can improve their lives. I wonder if many of those who do vote only do so out of a sense of duty rather than because they expect any positive results.

I also studied journalism and wrote avidly, hoping like Woodward and Bernstein to change the world on the pages of a newspaper. However this path was also not for me. Journalism left me feeling isolated and inert. I was working to shed light on convoluted policies and uncovering hidden truths. But journalists are bound by the principle of objectivity, requiring them to be unbiased in their reporting. Journalists' own opinions should not permeate their work. In my quest to remain objective, I could not use my writing to advocate for causes important to me such as protecting the environment, reforming campaign finance, and making good quality health care available to all people.

After reaching these perceived dead ends on my paths in politics and journalism, I knew I had to find a new map to help me reach my goal to change the world. Seeking direction, I took a rest from my journey to remember my passions, take stock of my skills, and reflect upon my experiences. This opportunity allowed me time to think about the people who most affected me in life, the people who encouraged my interest in government and helped me develop my writing skills. All at once, I realized the people who had exerted the greatest positive influence over me were my teachers. Starting with my mother, a high school teacher, and extending all the way through college, this extraordinary group of people helped shape the person I am today, a person who believes it is actually possible for one individual to change the world for the better. I also saw how my previous career paths fit together to lead in an obvious direction: I was to become a teacher. In the classroom, I could use my passion for democracy and love of the written word to help my students develop their own goals, passions, and ideas. I would better the world by empowering thousands of students to become citizens who are activists and advocates for social justice.

My Challenge

Setting out to teach my students that they can change the world would be as weighty a task as trying to accomplish it on my own. I knew I would need much study and training to become a teacher capable of inspiring my students to reach such a lofty goal. At Northeastern University, I learned as much as I could about child development, the learning process, methods and materials, and assessment. Everything I learned fit neatly with what I had always experienced school to be: the imparting of knowledge from teacher to student.

It was not until I took an advanced teaching methods course towards the end of my Master's program that I came to discover that teaching could be something different than this. In this class, we read *The Passionate Teacher* (1995) and *The Passionate Learner* (2001) by Robert L. Fried. Fried espouses the belief that school is not a one-way street. He challenges teachers to form partnerships with their students, learning from them as much as they learn from us.

Intriguing as it was, the concept was certainly foreign. A partnership between teachers and students was not something I had experienced in school, despite the fact that I would call my own educational experience positive. My family lived in a small, middle-class city on the coast of Connecticut. My parents are both college graduates who placed much importance on their two daughters getting an excellent education. The public school system in our city consisted of twelve kindergarten through eighth grade schools feeding into two high schools. I landed in the highest reading group in the first grade and never looked back.

When it came time for high school, my elementary school teachers recommended me for all honors level classes and I happily enrolled. The small, insulated world of the honors program offered advanced work and the opportunity to study under some of the best teachers in the school, but surprisingly few intellectual challenges. As I look back now, the experience of being in the honors program was similar to being a cow, prodded from one classroom to another with the rest of the herd. We read books and solved problems, but the overall goal of school seemed to be to keep us penned up to prevent us from wandering too far from the metaphorical pasture. The perceived "honor" of being in the honors program kept us submissive, not asking too many questions or pondering our place in comparison to others in the school. I learned a great deal, but I would not say I thought much about those things I learned.

After reflecting on the fact that my own schooling lacked this element of a partnership between teachers and students, I became curious if my educational experience was typical. While pursuing my Master's degree, I was a volunteer tutor in English and Spanish at Boston Latin School, the most prestigious public high school in Boston. I began my volunteer work to fulfill a field requirement for a class early in my program, but I enjoyed being around the students so much that I

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continued tutoring after the requirement was complete. I asked the students I worked with every week to share their educational experiences with me, explaining to them that as a future teacher, I was curious about the current state of teacher/student relations.

Boston Latin School is the oldest public school in the United States, and students must pass an entrance exam for admission. The school is renowned for its rigor, and many of its students go on to attend excellent colleges. I knew the eighth and ninth grade students I tutored were intelligent and thoughtful. I expected to be regaled with tales of intellectual debates and active class discussions. Instead, they each told me that they felt bored, uninvolved, and uninspired by school. They said they did not see their learning as having any relevance to their current or future lives. Worst of all, they all said they recognized in their teachers the same despondence they felt about school.

Disheartening as these discussions were, it was also, in a way, inspiring. I knew I did not want to create for my own students the same kind of one-way education I and my students at Boston Latin School experienced. While the experience has not yet left any of us completely sour on school, I did feel that we had all missed out on an educational experience that could have been amazing. I asked the students for more help. Using their and my own concepts of the ideal teacher and classroom, I formed a plan for developing a partnership with my students. Now at the conclusion of my Master's program, the plan constitutes my philosophy for teaching. Alongside my philosophy, I have created strategies for making the plan a reality in the classroom.

My Philosophy and Strategy

My educational philosophy is centered around treating my students as adults, citizens, and lifelong learners. Since we are creating a partnership, I expect the same treatment from them. In fact, my philosophy hinges upon the concept that my students and I have high and reciprocal expectations of each other. In adopting this philosophy, I also developed methods for bringing it to life in the classroom. These methods represent my educational strategy, and impact everything from unit development to behavior management.

The first element of my philosophy is to treat my students as adults. I have no doubt that this concept will be strange to them, so much so that they might be unsure exactly how adults are supposed to act. Adolescents are so accustomed to hearing that they are either not old enough to do certain things or that they have no say in decisions regarding their best interest that they can feel utterly powerless affecting their own lives. Then as soon as they graduate, they are considered adults and expected to know how to handle things. Why not recognize them as adults when they still have the insulation and protection of school and family to support them in case they make a bad "adult" decision? I believe this way they will be much better prepared to live on their own when adulthood actually comes.

My strategy for treating my students as adults in the classroom is centered on high mutual expectations between myself and my students. At the beginning of the new school year or semester, students and I will work together to write a classroom constitution of sorts, framing our goals and our means for accomplishing them. We will agree upon reasonable deadlines for fulfilling our respective responsibilities to the class. They might say they will hand in an assignment on X date, and in turn I will promise to make comments on the assignment and return it by Y date. We will all try to be flexible and understanding in our dealings with each other, realizing that forces greater than ourselves and beyond our control may sometimes affect our ability to perform. In cases like this, we must adjust our expectations and work together to overcome difficulties. Finally, we must strive to recognize the individuals we are outside the school environment, and try to embrace our whole personalities. We will take an interest in each others' lives outside the classroom. Attending a student's basketball game or encouraging their outside interest in a hobby shows them that you care about them as a person rather than just as a student. This may be the best way to make a connection inside the classroom. In turn, I will share my life through the books I read, the movies and television shows I watch, the music I listen to, and the meals I cook. I will invite my friends working in various professions to speak to the students about their lives. These things constitute my life beyond being a teacher, but I hope by bringing them into school to share with my students, they will see me as a fellow adult rather than just their teacher.

In addition to helping prepare my students for their life beyond school, it is my hope that my philosophy to treat my students as adults may help in relieving the baggage some are already burdened with carrying. I recognize that school is not a pleasant place for many adolescents, and that their lives outside school can be even more unpleasant. They often have to contend with pressure to conform to their peer group, conflict in — or absence of — relations with parents, and teachers who are too burned out to care or too preoccupied to notice. Disparities in programs and resources available in the schools themselves have created vast discrepancies in academic achievement. As a result of these factors, many students adopt an attitude of indifference, resistance, and even hostility of people who feel like they have no voice in their world. Treating my students as adults may help them to feel more empowered to be able to assert themselves. I recognize that my philosophy may seem rather idealistic, and I realize that not everyone will respond to it immediately, especially older students who have endured this situation for years. It will take time to build trust, but I think the benefits will be immeasurable.

The second element of my educational philosophy is to treat my students as citizens. I believe we must show students how to function in their roles as citizens before the age of eighteen. I think people are born into this role of citizen, and I will demonstrate this through my words and actions in the classroom. The people of this country have an unbelievable opportunity afforded to them and too few of us take advantage of our citizenry. Perhaps it is because we have been conditioned to see

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the Declaration of Independence simply as a musty old document we once had to memorize for history class. But it is actually a legal contract, built on the concept that if you do not like the direction your government is taking, you have the right and obligation to stand up and do something about it. It is startling to consider that the United States came into existence simply because a small group of determined people did not like the way things were going in their own country. Realizing this can be incredibly empowering. To treat my students as citizens is to remind them of our nation's history and their obligation to continue to agitate for change in an effort to continue the process of creating a more perfect union. This cannot be done at the expense of others, however, and I will emphasize to my students the importance of respecting their fellow citizens and eschewing ignorance. The lesson of respect will begin in the classroom and hopefully extend to all aspects of the students' lives.

My strategy for making "students as citizens" into a reality in the classroom translates to seizing every opportunity to turn English lessons to civics lessons. I will use the newspaper as daily reading material in class, and encourage my students to interrupt our regularly scheduled lessons to talk about things they see or read on their own. Increasing our awareness of the world around us will hopefully inspire us to get active about the things we see as wrong. Above all, we will practice our skills in writing and speaking so that we will be effective communicators as we work to affect change and inspire others to join the causes we identify. We will write and speak for audiences as often as possible to increase our comfort level in front of groups and working with various constituencies.

The third element of my educational philosophy is to treat my students as lifelong learners capable of great things. All people begin life with great curiosity and a penchant for learning. Robert Fried in *The Passionate Learner* (2001) speaks of watching a group of preschool children in New Hampshire demonstrate their natural enthusiasm and exuberance for learning. The class had begun an impromptu unit on sunflowers, brought about by one student bringing a bunch of the cheerful flowers to school on the first day. The preschoolers asked questions, drew pictures, and happily dug into the flowers in search of the seeds. They were becoming experts on sunflowers, and having a great time doing it. Fried notes sadly that many of these same students will eventually become despondent or disengaged from learning as they progress through school. The compulsion to learn according to someone else's rules and the constant pressure of grades and competition tend to drain the joy from the process of discovery. I desire to teach in a manner that maintains and strengthens the natural curiosity we all possess, and to help my students carry it with them long after school ends.

This third element requires a precise strategy for making it a reality because its effects must be enduring. I will set my expectations high for achievement and help every student strive to reach their and my expectations in their own unique way. I will seek personal relevance in every lesson for both myself and my students,

challenging us to explore how the things we learn fit into the scheme of our past, present, and future lives. I will also acknowledge that I may not be the best judge of what students should be learning. To this end, I will encourage my students to ask questions and suggest their own ideas for topics of study within the framework of the curriculum. The curriculum itself will be a topic of study. We will seek ways to make the goals and objectives designed by school administrators align with those things we want to explore. It is my goal to encourage students to analyze, evaluate, and seek more information. I believe it is more important to know how to locate the answer to a problem than to instantly know the answer, and I will assess students as much according to their process as their final product in the classroom.

As I move to implement the various strategies to make my educational philosophy a reality, I acknowledge that significant hurdles exist to creating the kind of classroom I envision. One is the current state of education, with its dwindling resources and increased emphasis on one-size-fits-all standards, accountability, and high-stakes testing. As I have begun the process of looking for a teaching position, the immediacy of this situation has become evident. Some veteran teachers I have approached for advice and also a few of the people leading the interviews for the positions I am seeking have all demanded to know how I will maintain my idealism and energy as a new teacher in the face of these challenges. These people seem to be saying that my attitude is an anomaly and a possible roadblock to my success as a teacher. It is exhausting and even a little frightening to see that people who are in our schools every day feel so daunted by the standards, accountability, and testing movement that they have been reduced to this level of pessimism. I wonder if what they are telling me is also the message they are sending to students about their prospects for success in this world.

To those people I say that my solution to the standards, accountability, and testing movement is to not change my basic philosophy. The values and strategies I have developed for teaching are the result of years of learning, maturity, and awareness about how the world functions. My optimism is not a sign of naivety, but rather a symbol of courage that I am still forging ahead in the face of all I know and have seen. And I will succeed. I have been a novice in other professions, working my way to the top. The taste of success makes one hungry for more, and thus I am reluctant to wait for years to pass before I can feel true success as a teacher. I expect to emerge immediately as a valuable member of the school community.

Having not worked as a teacher prior to the inception of high-stakes testing, I have no nostalgia for the profession as it once was. One-size-fits-all standards, accountability, and high-stakes testing are the reality now, and whether we agree or disagree with them, my students and I will handle the situation as we will handle all situations, as adults, citizens, and lifelong learners. However, as much as I want to be a teacher, I only want to teach in a school that holds children's learning at least as high on its list of priorities as improving their test scores. My students and I will strive to meet someone else's benchmarks for success, but more importantly, we

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will strive to meet our own. I envision landing a teaching position in a school that relishes this attitude and approach, and hope your school is such a place. Thank you for your consideration.