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MY LIFE AS A NYC TEACHING FELLOW

allen ellenzweig

Early in 2005, I applied for a place in the New York City Teaching Fellows program (NYCTF). I had recently been unceremoniously downsized after working as an administrator at New York University for seventeen years.

I had always wanted to teach. In 1999–2000, while still at NYU, I was an adjunct at Rutgers University teaching expository writing to entering freshmen. Now, having difficulty finding full-time work, with no immediate prospects, and the suspicion that I was at a disadvantage on the job market because of my advanced age (I was 54 at the time), I decided to pursue teaching in the New York public school system.

I did not take this step out of great idealism for advancing social justice or educational reform. A native New Yorker, I attended the city's public schools when tracking was common practice. After high school, I spent a year at Hunter College in the city-sponsored CUNY system, followed by four years at Cooper Union, the only private college in the United States to offer a tuition-free undergraduate degree.

In short, I owed my entire education to the City of New York and to a remarkable visionary, the nineteenth-century industrialist and inventor, Peter Cooper. As a Teaching Fellow, I had to make a two-year commitment to teaching in the public schools while studying for certification, and I saw that as a fair trade for the free education I'd received. Teaching at a "high-needs school" was the price I would pay to get another master's degree (I already had an MFA in dramatic writing from NYU) at essentially no other cost.

Later, when I began jumping through hoops to complete all the paperwork needed to enter the NYCTF, I did not imagine that I would stay in the city's schools much beyond the first two years. I planned to move on to a private school setting, or to a public school system outside of New York City.

I made those first tentative steps toward enrollment in the NYCTF program with few illusions. I might be accepted. I might not. If I became a Teaching

Fellow, I would do my best to get a placement in a conveniently located school whose atmosphere was not wildly oppressive. I did not want to be reduced to policing teenagers. And while I would not announce that I was gay, I wouldn't hide it, either. That was just another issue to deal with as I navigated through a system I'd always heard to be incredibly bureaucratic.

I lived with the memory of the Board of Education's ugly decentralization battles of the mid-1960s, when charges of racism and anti-Semitism tainted an increasingly polarized system, one where parents, teachers, and administrators often stood at opposing sides of the barricades instead of making common cause. I was determined not to let my status as a gay man or a Jew interfere with my desire to stand up in front of a high school class, presumably composed largely of students of color, and impart to them something as simple, and perhaps as naïve, as this: the English language is yours for the taking. Master it and it can give you opportunities that you never knew existed. Let me help you.

To ensure my candidacy, I had to pass qualifying exams, the LAST (Liberal Arts and Sciences Test) and the English CST (Content Specialty Test). I hadn't taken such tests since my SATs. Suddenly, I was a teenager again, reviewing basics of cross-disciplinary knowledge as well as the rules of English grammar and the nomenclature of English poetic forms from couplets to quatrains. I had always disdained multiple-choice tests as superficial gauges of aptitude, yet there I was, practicing conceptual logic problems, relearning the uses of the Venn Diagram, and gearing myself up for multiplication or long division with decimals.

While I awaited the official results, along with the others who hoped to become Teaching Fellows—most of them younger than me, including people of color, and first-generation immigrants from the former Soviet bloc—the process moved forward. There was a spring school visit with a current Teaching Fellow. An attractive young Latina in a crowded and shabby modern high school on the Upper West Side, she seemed relatively composed in front of her young charges, despite what appeared the apparently barely organized chaos of her classroom and the mixed indifference of her students. She assured my companion NYCTF applicant, Adrienne¹, an astute woman in her thirties with a background in law enforcement who later became my dearest colleague in the program, that she

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper, both for individuals and for the school where I worked as a Teaching Fellow.

could count on male students making passes at her. Oh. Charming.

By May 2005, I found myself in full placement mode: Fellows are charged with finding their own school within an assigned region of the system. The several visits I paid to schools in Washington Heights, Inwood, and central Harlem provoked a certain low-level dread. As I walked their echoing corridors and heard the booming voices of students bouncing off the walls, my impression of the vast institutional impersonality of the massive NYC education system was reinforced. I had a sense that everyone—students, teachers, and administrators alike—was working under siege and the scrutiny of imposed standards, locked in the chilling embrace of organizations with limited resources and crowded, outdated physical plants.

At my first appointment, I was kept waiting at least an hour. When I finally had my interview, after sitting near a small group of frazzled-looking teachers eating their bag lunches over lively chatter in a cluttered teachers' lounge, I became irrationally dispirited. It looked like a professional world of small joys and chronic fatigue.

So I felt lucky to be called, without having even applied for it, to interview for a position at Harlem High (HH), a middle and high school in central Harlem known for its successful graduation rate. The principal held a group meeting with candidates around a table. This created camaraderie among competitors as well as a desire to stand out in the crowd. The principal seemed as interested in the extracurricular skills we might bring to his school as with our subject areas and proven expertise. My friend Adrienne, who had also been invited to interview, played lacrosse, which the principal saw as a good new sport for his young female students; he instantly proposed that she coach a women's lacrosse team. I am fluent in French, and I was immediately enlisted as a prospective French teacher—although, in fact, officially my content area was English.

Compared with other schools, Harlem High looked impressive. There was a selective admissions process and a student dress code. Personal comportment in classrooms and corridors was scrutinized; HH had a non-negotiable series of behavioral rules. The lively hallways evidenced student achievement: pictures of class trips abroad, lists of college placements, samplings of student art work, and

postings of exemplary student writing assignments.

The principal tentatively offered me a position teaching English and French, but first, as was standard procedure, he required that I give a sample class in both subjects. My demos went well enough, despite one observer's criticism of the English class (for which I had students read a short story in advance): I hadn't written a full lesson plan on the board. Ah, yes: the Lesson Plan. The "Do Now." More on that later.

We were given intense teaching preparation during the summer immediately prior to my fall assignment at Harlem High. The NYCTF program required a one-month field placement of supervised teaching. Since I was already assigned to HH for fall 2005, the principal allowed me, along with several other Fellows, to fulfill the mandated fieldwork there. This entailed classroom observation as well as teaching, even as we Fellows took daily master's-level courses at colleges throughout the city. Adrienne and I were attached to the Graduate School of Education at Fordham's Lincoln Center campus.

My field assignment gave me some early storm warnings, but I was determined to avoid prejudice. For several days I observed two seasoned veterans teaching, and then I stood up before a class and conducted English language skills exercises myself, under the watchful eye of Ms. Akiba—who was also, as it happened, to supervise my French classes in the fall. Ms. Akiba was a worldly, well-educated émigré who spoke beautiful French and lightly accented English. She conducted classes in rigidly organized blocs of time. Her detailed lesson plans were chalked on the blackboard so that her students could see—if they bothered to read it—where that day's class was headed. Her English skills classes were for eighth graders from around the city who were slated to enter Harlem High's middle school.

These summer students were relatively easy to manage. They were unaccustomed to HH's culture and not allied to existing student cliques. Some were cowed by their new surroundings or timid in the face of new peers; only a few distinguished themselves right away. To be sure, some of them didn't work hard and some were disruptive, but as I looked at them I was freshly aware that they were at the age when hormones rage and individual personality emerges. Lessons were

divided by workbook exercises that aimed to clarify essential narrative elements such as cause and effect, sequencing, and setting. The workbook contained mostly multiple-choice questions following each reading and allowed for classroom quizzes and reviews.

I chafed a bit under Ms. Akiba's plodding routine, although I admired her command of the classroom using a regimented management style that ran counter to the one I was being taught at Fordham. Although relatively soft-spoken, Ms. Akiba had no problem challenging students who hadn't completed homework, arrived late, engaged in private communications, or otherwise wasted her time. She exhibited a resolve that simply said, "I mean business," and she never negotiated bad behavior in front of other students. Sturdy, athletic black boys in their early teens withered under her direct gaze.

In this, she marginally resembled another teacher I observed that summer, an African-American man, probably just over thirty, who laid down the law hard and consistently. Unlike Ms. Akiba, who taught her newcomers grammar as well as HH's renowned creed of honor and discipline, Mr. Blaine had older students who had failed the state Regents exam and, consequently, his course. They were repeating a subject, some for the second time.

Mr. Blaine held forth in a theatrical style and with a quick temper, fixed in his determination that the spotlight shine only on him. He would routinely criticize bad behavior, embarrass chronic gum-chewers, and mock those who mumbled or responded slowly—all while working incredibly hard, covering quantities of American history at great speed. More than Ms. Akiba had, he held to stringent standards of classroom comportment by using fear to enforce his rules; he also wasn't averse to shaming students in ways that I am convinced no white teacher ever could without fear of being accused of racism.

On occasion, Mr. Blaine gave me a damning inside scoop on HH's administration, describing the school as a place where loyalty to the principal was the one sure way to guarantee his support in a dispute with a student or parent as well as the occasional faculty perk. Nor was Mr. Blaine beneath saying to me, in a loud, bogus stage whisper while his students were engaged in their "Do Now," that the reputation of HH's student body was undeserved—as I could see, couldn't

I?—and referring to his present class as laggards. This shocked me more than his calling individuals to account; it conveyed his essential condescension to any students within hearing, also showing them that he dared share his attitude with me, an unknown white observer.

If Ms. Akiba was decorous in her criticism, Mr. Blaine was blatant. Yet in time I learned that Mr. Blaine also seemed committed to his students. He communicated with their parents by phone during the first week of school, after the third week, and once a month thereafter. He remarked that parents were sometimes not especially receptive. He used his first phone call of the semester merely as an introduction; his second, he said, was to let parents know “what I’ve noticed.” For her part, Ms. Akiba told me that parents could be quite rude. She sometimes felt that they did not support her attempt to maintain high standards for their children. Her black skin did not shield her from parental pique.

So in counterpoint to my textbooks, the examples of Ms. Akiba and Mr. Blaine persuaded me not to engage in negotiations with students. While I might hope to entertain my class, I should not hesitate to establish firm rules and ease them only after I had earned my students’ respect and cooperation. I could see myself as a benevolent despot like Mr. Blaine, or even a resolute disciplinarian like Ms. Akiba. Yet I could not imagine what it was going to be like to stand in front of five classes every day and keep my mental balance if, alas, my full energies had to be devoted to maintaining the attention of street-wise students whose greatest achievement might be watching me fail.

While I observed two seasoned professionals that summer, I also attended education classes at Fordham Lincoln Center with a cohort of Fellows, many fresh from college. We were all training to teach English at the middle or high school level. We were chronic complainers, although we had good reason: we were juggling field work with exhausting amounts of reading and writing. That left us little, if any, leisure time.

We traveled in two distinct groups between our summer classes and the group advisement sessions that were intended to prepare us for the realities of teaching. During those meetings, a practicing public school teacher helped us anticipate the kinds of classroom management challenges we would face. This

advisement component also had required readings, with supplementary video viewings on classroom paradigms and problems. All the work left us weary, but occasionally exhilarated by an infectious spirit of collegiality, like shipwrecked sailors who sight land only to have it disappear into the vapor of a mirage. While we harbored great affection for our advisement leader—an openly gay African-American man who constantly shared homespun dicta based on hard-won battles—many of his assignments felt like a return to grade school. It did not escape our notice that he taught elementary grades although we, as a body, would be working in middle and high schools.

During that summer, we privately questioned the various theoretical models rooted in the utopian ideal of the differentiated classroom that we encountered in our texts. The old tracking model—in which students of similar intelligence were placed in homogeneous classes so that the slower ones didn't impede the more advanced—was giving way to integrating students of mixed abilities and skills, forcing teachers to find creative ways to address a heterogeneous group. Furthermore, in response to changes in social custom and law, students with a wide range of disabilities were being mainstreamed into public school systems.

It seemed to some of us as if an inordinate burden was being placed on teachers, requiring them to be all things to all students. Several of the people I knew outside of the educational system were totally skeptical of a process that was fast-tracking novice teachers into high-needs schools when it seemed logical that, instead, those with the greatest teaching experience should be persuaded by economic incentives to take on demanding students in the most challenging environments.

The summer became especially fraught as we moved deeper into August and Harlem High still had not given Adrienne, me, or any other Fellows our fixed teaching assignments for the fall. Of verbal assurances we had plenty. The irony of our situation was patent. Even as we learned to structure lesson plans in our Fordham classes, and to adhere to New York State standards for each grade level, we HH novices didn't even know which grade we would be teaching.

And that would make all the difference. The ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade summer reading lists were all different. Like my students, I also had to read

the books on the summer list. (For ninth grade, amazingly, this included Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, whose narrative frame and rarefied language would be challenging even for a 14-year-old from Bloomsbury, England!)

Indeed, our courses on classroom management and teaching methods stressed preparedness, especially in that crucial first year when everything is new for the beginning teacher. Success in the classroom, we were constantly reminded, depended in large measure on establishing solid routines so that students would know what to expect. They should enter a classroom knowing that they must be prepared to work, with their immediate "Do Now" assignment on the board in front of them. Then, while they took out their papers and pens, the teacher could take care of attendance and other administrative chores, or deal with individual student problems. And of course, we were told that our classrooms should be physically organized in ways congruent with our needs and those of our students. We might group desks in blocs so that students could work in pods of four, or create a large semi-circle with aisles that allowed easy access to all students as we walked around to observe them while they did in-class assignments. We needed to establish a library or other quiet work area. Walls should be covered with such displays as exhortations "to be all that you can be," quotations from African-American writers, the list of HH's rules of behavior, and pictures of great literary figures.

Yet we were only days away from the start of the fall semester, and our pleading to be given our permanent assignments went unanswered. For me, and for others who also were scheduled to take on two subject areas, this refusal to acknowledge our dilemma was especially maddening. Already, I began to see that my commitment to teach French as well as English was a mistake. How would I ever manage to devise daily lesson plans in two subjects if I barely had experience doing so for one? And how was I to prepare lessons for the first couple of weeks if just days away from the start of the semester I still didn't know which grade I was going to teach?

Anxiety and panic ran rampant through the ranks of the new Fellows at Harlem High. Among us, the talk was of nothing but "have you found out what grade you're going to teach? Have you been given a room assignment?" It was as

though we were being taught two simultaneous (and very different) lessons: the theoretical one where, in a perfect world, the new teacher is given ample time to plan lessons and decorate a classroom; and the real-world one, where the new teacher is trapped, waiting around in a system whose processes and rationales are opaque, knowing that marching orders, when given, will require moving at double-time pace. The school year was about to begin, and we had been given neither our classroom nor our grade assignments. Amazingly, neither had any of HH's teachers—but the veterans were used to it. They could rely upon lessons and curricula from many previous years of teaching.

By the time our assignments came through, a mere day or two before classes started, Adrienne and I had given ourselves up to the fates, as if we'd been set up to fail and would do so in a blaze of glory. We shopped together at a supply store near the old Board of Education office on Livingston Street in Brooklyn, gathering those essential instructional items teachers pay for out-of-pocket, like water-soluble marking pens for whiteboards, attractive posters in our subject areas, and boxes of dust-free colored chalk for blackboards.

But as it turned out, I wouldn't even have a room to call my own; my two French classes were held in different rooms, each of which was to be shared with at least one other teacher. Another new Fellow took pity on me and offered me a closet in the classroom we shared; it was a long cupboard with a single high shelf, so my papers and materials were stacked helter-skelter on its floor. As the days progressed, these papers included dated lesson plans, quizzes, and exams, all amid the boxed rubble of my personal supplies.

The days advanced at a mad pace. From the start, I was playing catch-up. I missed the first of my two French classes during the chaotic opening day when an auditorium full of new students awaiting class assignments required supervision. Consequently, I was continually a lesson plan behind in that class during that first harried week, when as much time was spent discussing rules as actually getting around to content.

Despite the safety net that NYCTF intended to provide by assigning all Fellows NYCTF advisors (each of whom had a cohort of new Fellows to consult with on a rotating basis), the well-intentioned young woman with whom I spoke

on several occasions was powerless to spur the HH administration into action. She could commiserate with me about my not having yet been assigned classes in my official subject area, English, but she was hardly prepared to do battle with a principal and assistant principal whose formidable reputations were well established.

While awaiting my English class assignments, I had my first experience of standing before two classes of African-American and Latino youngsters to teach French, a language that, on the face of it, might not have seemed likely to draw their interest. As I had been taught to do at Fordham, I sent a letter of introduction home to their parents and guardians. I hoped to persuade them that knowing French, widely spoken throughout the world and particularly in Africa, is a marketable skill in the United States and abroad. I also wrote that developing proficiency in French would give their child a sense of accomplishment that would reinforce self-esteem and make him or her ready to tackle other school challenges. Addressing these letters to parents and guardians personally and letting them know that I was available to meet with them was supposed to assure them that they were regarded as partners in their children's education.

The classroom was another situation. The initial control I had over my two French classes began to crumble. Preparing lessons that allowed students not merely to memorize words and parrot me, but to get on their feet and discover real-life usage with their classmates, taxed my powers of imagination. And each class had a few students with behavior problems. They usurped class time, undermined my confidence, and obstructed progress. This was to be expected; I was a novice and had been warned—both at Fordham and by Harlem High's own administration—that students can sense an inexperienced teacher's fear and will try to take advantage of it.

What made it worse was that my morning class followed immediately on the heels of a Spanish period, so I had to post my day's lesson plan in the short interval between the end of the previous class and the beginning of mine. Again, my Spanish-teaching colleague—a cheery extroverted Englishman—found a partial solution: I could write most of my lesson plan on the backs of the freestanding wheeled boards on either side of the room and then merely have to swing the boards around when I entered the class. This still left much of each plan to be

hastily scrawled on the permanent center blackboard while my students watched me racing to complete the task. The “Do Now” might always be in their sight, but as my own attention was elsewhere, they could dawdle, dally, and chatter with impunity until I turned to face them.

Abruptly, about two weeks into the semester, I was assigned yet a third elementary French class. There I was, waiting to be assigned my English classes, but instead undergoing a thorough immersion in teaching French! This new task made me feel even more overwhelmed: another group of students whose names I needed to memorize; another class whose lessons fell behind the other two; another class to whom I had to introduce my classroom rules after they had already gotten used to someone else’s. The feeling of things spiraling out of control intensified because I worked from a French textbook that (to prevent theft) my students were not allowed to take home. So I had to photocopy pages from the book in a harried teacher’s queue before the start of morning classes and then distribute them as needed later in the day.

By now, I also started calling parents and guardians with whose children I was having difficulties. One student fell asleep sitting up, another was constantly engaged in minor disputes, and one was forever chatting with her best friend. An atmosphere of unpreparedness pervaded. I never yelled in class, but I learned to impose myself by proximity. I stared students down, getting into their space, and moved those who misbehaved to new seats. And once I stood at the front of the room in silence, my face frozen in dismay, until they all noticed that I was waiting for their attention. Three weeks into the semester I had them write a paper on why we can’t learn if the class rules aren’t followed. In English.

Then, out of the blue, near the end of the third week, I was assigned two English classes. My third French class was taken back. I should have been delighted, but instead I felt shell-shocked. Now I really had two subjects to teach, two lesson plans to write. I would run between classrooms to chalk the “Do Now” before the students were at my back; I would rummage through my increasingly disorganized closet. My attendance records were becoming a shambles as I neglected to do a proper accounting in my haste to get classes underway.

In the week that followed, I never had a final roster of the students in one