

SOFD 328, Sec 013

Why Teach?

Or the Story of why I stopped running from my calling and decided to start teaching.

Sarah Jean Meyer
4-14-2015

I am not your typical teacher candidate. I grew up in not-quite poverty and I hated school yet, I cannot escape The Calling. I have resisted and run from it, but I am a Teacher because I have to Teach.

I come from a family that is socioeconomically between middle and working class. I'm never sure whether it sounds better to say upper-working class or lower-middle class. My parents are even educated. They met in college, and then dropped out to get married and have kids "to be young enough to enjoy them." They both went back to school when I was seven (my sisters were six, five, and three). My mom finished her BA in Developmental Psychology, and my dad got his Associate's in Computer Science. Unfortunately, these degrees don't allow you to get a job in your field without more education. We moved from apartments and townhouses in Ann Arbor to a trailer on 1/16th of an acre in Howell! Not much, but my parents would eventually own it (for a little while anyway.) My mom developed carpal tunnel from her data entry job at Parke- Davis (which is now part of Pfizer), and after coming back from workman's comp leave (when she had the surgery to "fix" it), she was "downsized." My dad did some temp work and got a job working in a factory that made the electrical insides of car doors. We were on food stamps and reduced lunch (I paid forty cents for lunch - I figured that I only paid five cents for lunch, because if you weren't free/reduced you paid thirty-five cents for milk). I was supposed to get free breakfast at school, but they stopped serving ten minutes before school and my bus didn't arrive until five minutes before the bell. When both my parents were working, we made too much for "assistance," but really, not enough to stay "afloat."

Being poor is knowing exactly how much everything costs. . . Being poor is having to keep buying \$800 cars because they're what you can afford, and then having the cars break down on you, because there's not an \$800 car in America that's worth a damn. . . Being poor is hoping your kids don't have a growth spurt. . . Being poor is not enough space for everyone who lives with you. . . Being poor is feeling the glued soles tear off your supermarket shoes when you run around the playground. . . Being poor is six dollars

short on the utility bill and no way to close the gap. . . Being poor is picking the 10 cent ramen instead of the 12 cent ramen because that's two extra packages for every dollar. . . Being poor is running in place. . . (Scalzi, 2005)

John Scalzi's words succinctly illustrate the struggle between trying to stay "afloat" and really floating. My parallel response to Scalzi's words are: middle class is spending money without counting pennies and doing calculations in your head alongside a prayer. . .middle class is having a loan for a previously-owned vehicle – from an actual car dealership. . . middle class is not worrying about your kids' clothing being skimpy, too small, or too short. . . middle class is buying brand new shoes instead of repairing old ones. . . middle class is paying your bills in full and on time with money to spare. . . middle class is soup with real meat and veggies. . . middle class is taking time to breathe, enjoy the view, and keep climbing up.

I have hated school for a very long time. School was boring. I learned that school was boring, and I was smarter than my teacher in first grade. I have definitely had more ineffective and downright awful teachers than I have had amazingly wonderful teachers. In first grade I stopped doing my work because it was boring. The story goes that I was in a meeting with my teacher (whom I have since learned was a brand-spanking new first-year teacher), the principal, my parents, the school psychologist, and the school social worker. I was wearing a pink dress, white tights and saddle shoes, sitting in an adult-sized conference chair with my feet sticking straight out in front of me, my curly brown hair in a half ponytail. When the school psychologist turned to me and asked, "Sarah Jean why won't you do your work?" I looked at her like she was an idiot, clicking my toes together, and said, "Two plus two is four. It is four in an apple, it is four in an acorn, it is four in a tree. It was four yesterday, it is four today, it is going to be four tomorrow. I'm bored, I want something else to do." The adults in the room were flabbergasted. They administered a bunch of tests. The results of which I still don't know, beyond my qualification for Mensa. Some of the professionals wanted to send me ahead to first grade, my parents just wanted me switched out of that class and put into the experienced teacher's class. The agreement that

was decided on (by the school officials, not my parents) was that I was given a contract. (I think this was a common thing done for children with behavior problems, which I actually did not have. I sat at my desk and read, drew pictures, or thought up stories in my head. I didn't act up, but I also didn't do my schoolwork. --In truth, I did my work, I just didn't write it down.) The contract system taught me one lesson - adults can be manipulated. I was to write down what I would do and what I expected in return for doing whatever it was, and the teacher and I would sign it. For example, I would write, "I will answer five math problems for a sticker." As the year went on, I, of course, tried to get away with as little as possible. Eventually I was writing things like "I will write my name on my paper for a piece of candy; I will write the answer to a math problem for a piece of candy. I will show my work for two pieces of candy." My mom was appalled. In another meeting, (during which I was waiting in the front office), the principal said to my mom "Mrs. Meyer, this is not normal." My mom didn't know how to answer that. (As a professional educator, why would you say that to a parent!?)

My second grade teacher, Mrs. Dennis, was actually wonderful. I loved school in second grade. She used centers and had rewarding related activities for students who finished early or mastered a skill. I played with Tangrams after finishing my math seatwork, got to sit in a bean bag chair and read a book of my choice (higher reading level) during reading. We moved around a lot, and pushed our desks into a big circle for whole-group discussions. Mrs. Dennis used engaging activities to keep the learning level high in her classroom, promoting autonomous motivation rather than resorting to extrinsic rewards.

When students are autonomously motivated they experience volition and self-determination. They perform an activity because it is interesting (i.e., intrinsic motivation) or because the activity is personally meaningful to them. In contrast, controlled motivation consists of feelings of pressure or coercion. (Wijnia, Loyens, Derous, Schmidt, 2014)

Mrs. Dennis worked toward developing a love of learning in me. She gave me choices, and encouraged me to explore subjects that interested me. (Which was, and still is, almost everything.) She

allowed me to move at my own pace in both math and reading. (Although, that backfired a little on me in later grades, as I had already mastered what was being introduced.)

When students were provided with more primary resources (i.e., recommended book chapters or articles), they had higher achievement scores. There was also a trend toward longer self-reported self-study time in courses that offered more resources. By offering more learning resources about a topic, it is expected that students will be able to construct a more complete and richer mental model of the mechanisms underlying the problem, which promotes learning. (Wijnia, Loyens, Derous, Schmidt, 2014)

Third and Fourth Grade were both awful and a direct contrast to my wonderful year in second grade. We had moved (between each grade – across town for third – which was when my parents went back to school, and to a whole new city for fourth – when we moved to Howell.) While the schools were vastly different, both teachers were equally ineffective. I completely checked out. I spent most of third grade in the library. I don't remember how that got arranged, but the school's library was arranged by grade level and I remember that I could only check out books for third graders during class library time, but when I was with the librarian I could read whatever I wanted. That was when I discovered *The Babysitter's Club* and *Sweet Valley High* series, they were in the fifth grade section.

For some reason my fourth grade teacher recommended me for Chapter One (which was supposed to help kids who were struggling to learn how to read.) The Chapter One teacher let me read silently, and I was thrilled to get out of class. Unfortunately, my peers thought I was stupid and neither situation was socially good for me.

Indeed, an extensive body of research suggests the importance of close, caring teacher–student relationships and high-quality peer relationships for students' academic self-perceptions, school engagement, motivation, learning, and performance, and children who experience lower quality relationships with their peers—who are rejected or socially

isolated—are more likely to become disaffected from school and drop out (Furrer, Skinnnet, Pitzer)

Fifth grade was half decent and half destructively terrible. Our classes were split between two teachers, Mr. Good and Mrs. McClure. Mr. Good was actually quite good. Mr. Good was the only male teacher in the fifth grade. He was given 22 boys, and 6 girls, and we had him for everything but math. Mr. Good embedded social studies (his passion) into every subject and nurtured our love for it as well. He read Historical Fiction novels to us every day before lunch. He made geography into such a fierce competition that we studied maps and atlases during every spare moment. He was a wonderful storyteller and made history come alive for us. Mr. Good taught us about the history of scientific discoveries and shared fascinatingly gross filmstrips about early surgeries and health codes violations. (I still can't bring myself to eat Kellogg's Corn Flakes.) Modern technology was not what it is today, but he incorporated it into the classroom as much as he was able— with the *Oregon Trail* and *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* computer games, filmstrips, and VHS videos. He kept the engagement level high in his room and I cannot ever remember him sending anyone into the hallway or to another teacher's room, or even to the Principal's office.

For math, we switched to Mrs. McClure, while her homeroom had social studies with Mr. Good. Mrs. McClure did not care about her students and she was mean. I'm not just saying this from a fifth grader's perspective, but from talking to other people and my parents' experiences with her as well. During parent-teacher conferences she put her feet (smelly, nasty sneakers) on her desk, leaned back in her chair and said "I'm on tenure, I retire in a year, *they* can't fire me." She must have had some hold over Mr. Good, because he let her pull kids out of his class to work on Math. We had to fill in the Multiplication Tables a bunch of times, and of course, as I considered this work dull, I wasn't having anything to do with it halfway through the first table. So, I missed many filmstrips in Mr. Good's class and all classroom parties until I had filled it out and done a bunch of extra busywork as a punishment. I think my mom ended up picking me up early on party days. I wasn't the only kid sitting in the hallway

(without an adult by the way), but I was the only girl and I was the only one who wasn't a "behavior problem." My grades from 3-5th grades were terrible, but because I scored over 100% on Standardized tests, I always got passed to the next grade level.

Middle School had one amazing teacher, two good teachers, one decent teacher and a whole bunch of terrible ones. Mr. Groth (pronounced Growth) was memorable in that I liked him as a person but not as a teacher, if you fell asleep in his class he beamed you with a Jolly Rancher, but he was the first teacher to send me to In-School Suspension for Insubordination (aka not doing what I was told - my homework.) Mr. Storey made Social Studies the most boring thing in the world, with a monotone voice that would put Ben Stein to sleep. I cannot remember my 7th grade English teacher's name, (my mom informed me it is likely because she got married over Christmas break) but she was fun, we learned about satire, read Newberry Winner books, and had spelling bee relay races with roll-y teacher chairs in the hallway. She was only at my school for that one year. Mrs. Bessert was awful. She gave me detention for "Reading Ahead," -I owned the book, had even raised my hand when she asked if anyone had already read it, brought in my own copy with a different cover and still got lunch detention for a week (which meant I got to eat my lunch in the In-School Suspension Room.)

Mr. Roose was awesome, I had him for 8th grade English and Reading (ELA was not a combined subject back then); he was a dynamic teacher who used different media in his presentation of material. He videotaped our demonstration speeches so we could watch ourselves. At the close of a unit we could choose how we wanted to be assessed; for example, after reading non-fiction texts about the timeline of events in World War II we could take a test, make a poster, write and record a radio show, give an oratory, etc. I made a 45 minute long Radio Show and recruited my friends and family members to help record it, I turned a shoe box into an "old-timey" radio and played the cassette tape for my class. He allowed me to express my creativity and I did way more work, and learned more than I would have for just a timeline assignment or a test.

A balance of high challenge and high support provides the right context for learning and growth . . . hold the bar high and focus on creative, targeted supports to help students engage challenging curriculum as fully as possible. (Athanases, 2012, p. 18)

I want to include a bit about the In-School Suspension Room and sending students out into the hallway or down to the principal's office. The In-School Suspension room in my middle school was in a room behind the gym. The contents of the room consisted of a teacher's desk and chair, a filing cabinet, and twenty cubby-desks circling the room and facing the wall. A single brown door led to a closet-sized bathroom. The lady who ran the room was obsessed with Elvis, so (thankfully?) instead of only pale yellow cinder-block you could gaze at giant posters of The King above your head. The rules of the room were posted by the door "1. NO Talking. 2. DO NOT put your head DOWN 3. No Sleeping. 4. Do your assigned work. 5. Love The King" I'm not kidding. During lunch, she would allow you to turn your chair around and listen to Elvis music with her. (I have to give the woman credit, she had the most boring job in the world —babysitting a bunch of hoodlums. I always felt kind of sorry for her being so far away from everything.) I do not think anyone got anything out of being in that room (beyond an appreciation for Elvis' apparel.) I do not see the value of forcing children to leave the classroom and miss out on valuable instruction time - especially a kid who isn't doing the work!

Sending an unsupervised student to the hallway or down to the principal's office is asking for trouble. I rarely stayed just outside my classroom, and instead would wander into the bathroom and correct the grammar of the bathroom graffiti with a red Sharpie. I was a "good" kid; I can't imagine what more violent or destructive kids did!

My high school experience was . . . More of the same. My ninth grade GPA was 0.067. I was written up for "insubordination" quite frequently. I lived in the hallway during freshman science. I actually spent a lot of time talking to another science teacher who was on his prep that hour. I learned a lot from him, as he sometimes pulled me into his room and let me do experiments that he was doing with his 12th graders. I dropped out of band halfway through the year, after the director said "We're only as

good as our worst player.” while looking at me. I took BASIC computer programming and got a D- which is what made my GPA so high. I also spent a lot of time with the Vice Principal. She used me as her secretary fairly often.

I skipped most of tenth grade. My parents left for work before I left for school, and I just stayed home watching game shows and movies. Occasionally, my assigned school counselor would pull me into her office and offer not-really veiled threats about the Truancy Officer (a person I suspected was as real as the Tooth Fairy) coming to take me to jail if I didn't come to school more often.

In eleventh grade, I got a new school counselor, and she helped me to realize that I would be in high school forever if I didn't get my act together. She spent a decent amount of time talking with me and figured out that I liked working with children. She pretty much forced me into the Vocational Child Care track, and set me up as a Teacher's Assistant in a special needs classroom of my peers (FERPA would never allow that now!) The vocational child care class was a two-hour block, we taught preschool two days a week. We also spent one quarter working in an outside placement. I worked in a classroom of moderately severe cognitively impaired middle school students. That track also allowed me to earn additional credits working in a before and after school program.

I managed to graduate high school on time and even had a semester on the Honor Roll. I left high school actually enjoying school and thinking I would become a high school English teacher. I enjoyed creative writing and dreamed of being a famous children's author one day.

I went to Concordia College Ann Arbor (it became University in early 2001.) I discovered that it is hard to get up for classes when you stay up all night playing cards with new friends. It is easy to sleep through “The World's Loudest Alarm” and your suite-mate pounding on the door. Napster, Neopets, and Yahoo! Games were awesome at 3am. It is also really easy to flunk out of college. Winter semester I applied to get back in and was put on Academic Probation (AP). I broke the rules of AP when I withdrew

from a class I was failing and was not allowed back for a third semester. (I wasted \$32,000 my freshman year of college!)

In the spring of 2001 I moved back home for a few weeks, before heading up North, to the summer camp for which I had been hired. I loved working at camp. Playing with kids all summer is a really rewarding experience. It doesn't pay well, but the experiences I gained were indescribable.

The following autumn, I was rehired at the Before & After School Enrichment (BASE) program I had worked for as a High School Senior. I taught enrichment classes after school, the most popular ones being *Author Author* (Elementary students wrote and illustrated their own books) and *Lego Club* (I presented students with opportunities to solve problems, rise to challenges, and express their creativity using Lego bricks.); tutored children in Reading & Math, and worked in the Latchkey program. I returned to the summer camp the following summer.

However, that autumn, I found myself directionless. I was a failure, unable to return to university, and not re-hired by the before and after school program. Directionless, I lived in my room (reading library books) until my parents started charging rent and said they would kick me out if I didn't get a job. So, I worked for Lyn's Cleaning, a small company that cleaned the UofM Athletic buildings at night. When UofM did not renew their contract for Lyn's Cleaning, I got a job working at Meijer. Within three weeks of working at Meijer, I was promoted to the All-Store Trainer, the woman who had previously held the job knew me from church and recommended me as her replacement while she went on maternity leave. After 18 months, at Meijer, I applied at and was hired by Borders Books as an Inventory Processing Team Member.

I enjoyed working at Borders, but wanted to do more with my life than work in a shop. So, I decided to go to Washtenaw Community College (WCC) for a degree in Humanities. I started taking one or two classes at a time. Unfortunately, WCC decided to drop that program, so I switched to General Liberal Arts.

While shelving books at Borders, I read the book *I am a Pencil* by Sam Swope, and was inspired to (again) work with children. I decided that preschool didn't qualify as "School that I hate" and switched to an Early Childhood major, with the plan to eventually open my own child care center.

I moved into an apartment in Ann Arbor (shared with one of my sisters and a girl we thought was a friend) and took on a full-time semester at WCC. I hoped to transfer to the Arborland Borders - instead Borders started giving me less hours. I got a second job at Talking Book World (TBW – an audiobook rental store) and dropped back to part-time school. Within a year and a half of my starting at TBW, both companies were almost completely defunct. I never officially quit Borders, they just stopped giving me hours entirely. I quit school, moved back home and worked at my church's child care center, until, I got fired for being late too many times. (I made a lot of poor choices regarding my internet games addiction and appropriate bed-times for 6am work.)

I ended up back at Meijer as a Cashier. At the time, I was really into watching Grey's Anatomy on television, and decided that I wanted to be a Pediatrician. My mom, wise woman, suggested I try Medical Assistant School to see if I liked the field, so, that week, I applied at Ross Medical Training Center.

I did REALLY well at Ross. I got mostly As and Bs - I got a C- in Accounting. (I seriously LOVE doing blood draws and giving shots. I'm really good at both. My sisters think I shouldn't share that with people because it sounds creepy.) However, when it came to my internship, I was BORED in a real office; I loved the patients, but got yelled at for spending too much time in patient rooms. I discovered that I have the ability to make completely miserable, tired, and ill children laugh!

Ross taught me that I could succeed at school. I decided that instead of working in the Medical field, I really wanted to be a Lutheran Youth Leader, but I didn't want to attend the Concordia where I had already failed. Instead, I applied to Concordia Chicago, and wrote a letter about how I had made poor choices nine years prior and was hoping for a second chance to fulfill God's purpose for me. I managed to

get accepted! I drove down for a campus visit and came home worried about how I would afford school. Even with all the loans I could possibly get, and the Pell Grant, I still needed more than \$8,000 for the first semester.

I met with my Pastor and he said something along the lines of “Are you sure this is the path God is leading you down? This looks like a “WRONG WAY/ DO NOT ENTER” sign to me. Think and pray about it.”

I did. I talked to lots and lots of people; Strangers, friends, people I trusted, I asked them all what career they saw me doing. I had total strangers ask me why I wasn't a teacher. I kind of felt like God was smacking me in the head with a stack of books. In 2011, I went back to WCC with the intent to get my GPA high enough that EMU would accept me. I resigned myself to the fact that I am meant to be a teacher.

I am done running from my calling. I am passionate about children. I am not overly picky about age groups; I enjoy the interest, wonder, and eagerness to learn exhibited by Kindergarten students just as much as the sassy, questioning curiosity of Fifth grade students. I love the look on a student's face when something clicks and a whole world opens up for that student. I love sharing knowledge with everyone. I love learning about a variety of topics. In truth, I already am a teacher; I just need the paperwork that proves it. If it were the 1880s, I would already have been a teacher for quite a long while.

I am still developing my pedagogy. I am doing all that I can to learn about creating a classroom community that is dedicated to learning about society and the world. I want to establish a safe space for children to proudly exhibit their intelligence, to be challenged, engaged, and grow into themselves.

I will be the Awesome, Amazing, Terrific kind of teacher, who not only teaches her students the curriculum, but also, how to be a great citizen of the world, to be themselves without hurting others, to be respectful, but not a doormat, to serve their community, to think critically and why it is important to do all these things.

Works Cited

Athanases, S. (2012). Maintaining high challenge and high support for diverse learners. *Leadership*, 42, 18-22, 36. Retrieved April 14, 2015, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ983556.pdf>

Furrer, C., Skinner, E., & Pitzer, J. (n.d.). The Influence of Teacher and Peer Relationships on Students' Classroom Engagement and Everyday Motivational Resilience. *National Society for the Study of Education*, 102-123.

Scalzi, J. (2005, September 3). Being Poor. Retrieved April 14, 2015, from <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2005/09/03/being-poor/>.

Wijnia, L., Loyens, S., Derous, E., & Schmidt, H. (2014, May 28). How important are student-selected versus instructor-selected literature resources for students' learning and motivation in problem-based learning? Retrieved March 7, 2015.