The Situation: What Awaits You with Tough Kids and within Tough Classrooms

Chapter 1: It's Not About You

If you're a teacher, you probably didn't come into your profession through happenstance. You chose to teach because of your experiences. After kindergarten and twelve subsequent years of school, you attended college for another four years. You spent that time and money so that you could spend another thirty or more years in a classroom.

The desire to spend the majority of your life in a classroom is rooted in your experiences. Through all the grades, you sat in various seats in many classrooms, doing your schoolwork and generally abiding by the rules. School was an okay place. The rules were okay and the expectations reasonable. Good things happened there. And there were good people. Some of the teachers you had were so significant to you that you decided to be a teacher, too.

So you were willing to attend college and study for another four years. Then you got your first job, and it was your turn to matter to a child as much as Ms. Barkley or Mr. Rivera mattered to you.

You spent a week preparing for that first day. You put a fine shine on your room. You lettered some rules on tag board and you did it twice just to have it look nice. And you prepared some activities, fun ways to engage your new students.

Maybe the first day went okay.

Maybe it wasn't until the third day or the third week that you were challenged publicly and painfully, that a child said, in one way or another: "I don't have to listen to you."

Or maybe it was subtle—a girl slumping in her seat or a young man gazing out the window. Maybe doodling or missing schoolwork. Or maybe it was harsh—a student swore at you or threatened you.

But whatever happened, it wasn't about you.

It wasn't about you even if the child looked directly at you and said your name and then swore.

It wasn't about you because you are complex. You can't be known in a day or a week or a month. After a few hours or a few days, no child will know enough to know whether you're worthy of trust. No child will know the nuances of your life outside of the classroom. Your complex history. The degree of your decency. Your range.

So, if one of your students looked at you and said, "I don't have to listen to you," it wasn't about you.

But if it wasn't you, to whom were they speaking? They were speaking to what you represent: it was about your authority.

Consider your response when you talk to a police officer. Your heart rate might increase. You might sweat. There might be some fear. Or you might relax, feeling protected. Although you know nothing about that person in the uniform, you still react in powerful ways.

Sometimes patterns can be perceived in responses to police officers. In many inner city communities, a patrol car cruising down a street induces anxiety in significant numbers of people. That same patrol car cruising down a street in an upper-class neighborhood actually lessens anxiety. Both responses have nearly nothing to do with the particular officers inside the patrol car. Rather, those responses hint at the respective histories of the communities with police in similar patrol cars.

A doctor can evoke emotion, too, for he/she embodies authority. A doctor can walk into an examination room and one new patient will relax. That same doctor can walk into that same examination room with another new patient and induce anxiety. Since both patients are new, neither response relates directly to the doctor. Rather, both responses relate to the respective histories of the patients with doctors.

A dentist and a lawyer can evoke emotion, too. So can a principal, a superintendent and a school board member. They all embody authority, and we all have complex histories with those that do: our parents, our former teachers and coaches, former bosses, police officers, doctors, dentists and lawyers.

It works that way for students too. When you walk into the room, they might distrust you, but it's not about you. It's about their histories with their parents or teachers or police officers, all of which combine to create a blanket response to authority.

And the child that challenges you on that first day or during that second week probably doesn't share your comfortable history with teachers as authority figures. School hasn't been a comfortable place for that child. Unlike you, that child does not intend to spend another thirty years in a classroom. Simply put, what's been good for you in schools has been bad for that challenging child.

And there's more to it. Whether you walk into your classroom as a Princeton-educated black man or an Asian woman with a Southern twang or a white woman with short hair, your characteristics, some acquired and some immutable, engender responses. Race, class, gender, age, place of birth and perceived sexuality are potent factors in the assembling of assumptions.

To complicate it further, there are 18 or 24 students in the room, each with different histories, each with different responses to authority and schools, each defined differently by gender, class, sexuality, age and race. Just as you are beyond your students in that first month, they are beyond you.

When one of them says, "I don't have to listen to you. You don't know what you're talking about," that cues you, however vaguely, to their history.

It is also an opportunity for your student to know you. It is a precious, pivotal moment, a place to understand and be understood. It is a moment that would be best served by lucidity. It's a moment when you need to infer. Inference is an analytical skill, and analysis is served by dispassion, but instead of being cool and calm and dispassionate, you're likely to be agitated.

You're likely to say, later that day, to your husband or girlfriend or roommate, "I can't believe she said that to me. I mean, she doesn't me know. She didn't even give me a chance."

However, from the tough student's perspective, you didn't give her a chance. She has a history with authority figures that currently precludes her learning. As best she can, she's alerting you to her past relationships with teachers.

To best reach and teach a tough kid, you need to consider and decode "I don't have to listen to you. You don't know what you're talking about." Those few uncertain words convey a tough kid's history with authority. They represent a moment of forthrightness that is rare with adults and whereas forthrightness is often rewarded and encouraged, in such a situation, a teacher is likely to discourage such communication.

If you expect a tough kid to package and present information so prettily that you coo when you receive it, you will be disappointed. It is my sincere belief that most people do the best they can with what they have, and it has been my experience that such an assumption applies to tough kids, too. So, when a tough kid challenges you on the first day, it's not about you, and if you let it be about you, you'll miss a chance to glean some poignant insight from a slight pair of sentences.