

Why do people want to be teachers? For good teachers, teaching is a vocation rather than a job--a summons they can't refuse. Teaching is a call to service; a way to change the world. There's so much potential in a classroom. I read on the National Education Association webpage; "Teaching is the profession that makes all other professions possible."

When I was chair of the Mathematics and CS department, I often talked with high school students who wanted to know about majoring in mathematics. Many would say they wanted to teach in high school. Even as I smiled and told them about our program, to myself I was asking, "Does he really want to teach? Does she have what it takes--complete the major, satisfy all the licensing requirements, give up a whole semester to practice teach. Most who consider teaching as high school students don't, I'm sad to say. But the ones who do make it inspire and encourage me.

Have any of you have read "Educating Esme: the Diary of a First Year Teacher." Esme Codell graduated summa cum laude from Northeastern University. In spite of mentors who were shocked that she was going to teach when she could 'do so much more", she became a 5th grade teacher in the Chicago public school system, in a district that most people had given up on. I loved this book. I think the author is writing full time now rather than teaching, something I find a bit sad, but I like what she writes about. In an interview she said,

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I have always loved the traditional classroom, because the setting is so weird, it's almost like science fiction. Where else in the world do people sit in rows, ask to go to the bathroom, raise their hand to speak? Where else are the talents and abilities of so many souls subject to the approval of a single person (besides, maybe American Idol)? I thought the limitations of setting were challenging as a teacher...The answer ...came from thinking about the classroom as an artist's studio, where each person is trying to paint a picture of the year they'd like to have. There's a lot of possibility in a classroom like this.

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I have an acquaintance in town, a mathematics teacher at a local private school. He's married to a teacher and their children (both in their 20's) are teachers as well. It's a family that lives and breathes teaching--a family for whom teaching is a vocation. He taught for years, moving up the ranks until he moved out of teaching into administration and became head of the upper school. And he was good at it; he was successful. Then he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He had to take time off, to learn to deal with and live with the disease. He re-evaluated his priorities. He gave up the high pressure administrative position and went back to the classroom. I ran into him at a mathematics meeting. Knowing he had seniority, I assumed he was teaching advanced placement, college preparatory courses. He replied that of course he liked to teach the high achievers. But he said, that's not really teaching. It was mainly pointing them in the right direction and staying out of the way. To him, real teaching was working with the kid

who needed concepts explained in multiple ways and then would still probably not get it. The challenge was in teaching the unteachable.

I think that's why I was so inspired reading about the experiences of Esme. Her first year experience was full of challenges, situations many people had given up on. But she tackled each with energy and the conviction that she could make a difference.

Marian Wright Edelman, educator, lawyer, activist and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, wrote, "I do not know how to help the 40 year old alcoholic sleeping in the Brooklyn subway. But tell me how to save his child." I envy you. You're entering a profession with the potential to save the world, or even better the potential to positively influence a child.