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Op-Ed

Extraordinary isn't enough

Yes, we need to get rid of bad teachers. But we can't demand that teachers be excellent in conditions that preclude excellence.

July 31, 2011 | Ellie Herman | Ellie Herman is a teacher at Animo Pat Brown Charter High School in South Los Angeles

The kid in the back wants me to define "logic." The girl next to him looks bewildered. The boy in front of me dutifully takes notes even though he has severe auditory processing issues and doesn't understand a word I'm saying. Eight kids forgot their essays, but one has a good excuse because she had another epileptic seizure last night. The shy, quiet girl next to me hasn't done homework for weeks, ever since she was jumped by a knife-wielding gangbanger as she walked to school. The boy next to her is asleep with his head on the desk because he works nights at a factory to support his family. Across the room, a girl weeps quietly for reasons I'll never know. I'm trying to explain to a student what I meant when I wrote "clarify your thinking" on his essay, but he's still confused.

It's 8:15 a.m. and already I'm behind my scheduled lesson. A kid with dyslexia, ADD and anger-management problems walks in late, throws his books on the desk and swears at me when I tell him to take off his hood.

The class, one of five I teach each day, has 31 students, including two with learning disabilities, one who just moved here from Mexico, one with serious behavior problems, 10 who flunked this class last year and are repeating, seven who test below grade level, three who show up halfway through class every day, one who almost never comes. I need to reach all 31 of them, including the brainiac who's so bored she's reading "Lolita" under her desk.

I just can't do it.

I've been thinking about the challenges of teaching a large and diverse class in a new context lately. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently said that, in his view, the billions spent in the U.S. to reduce class size was a bad idea. Many countries with high academic achievement, he noted, have accepted larger class sizes to pay talented teachers more and concentrate larger numbers of kids with the best teachers. "The best thing you can do," he said recently in an interview with Andrea Mitchell, "is get children in front of an extraordinary teacher."

That's a common viewpoint at the moment. Every day I see data showing that in countries such as Japan and South Korea, students score higher in reading and math, often with larger classes, and that the U.S. has spent a tremendous amount of money reducing class size to little effect.

But a huge percentage of students in Japan and South Korea pay for after-school tutoring to make up for a lack of individualized attention at school. Finland, with the best scores in the world, has average class sizes in the 20s, and it caps science labs at 16. Still, it's become a popular fantasy that all you need is a superstar teacher, and that he or she will be just as effective even as budget cuts force us to pack more kids into each classroom.

I've taught for the last three years at a charter high school in South-Central Los Angeles where all the teachers are excellent. Our test scores are high. We have terrific administrators, and because teachers are a priority, unlike almost any other LAUSD school, we haven't had layoffs; even so, our school has had to allow enrollment to rise to stay on budget. My largest class last year was 34. My smallest was 20. And I can assure you I was a whole lot more "extraordinary" in my smallest than in my largest.

I'm not sure what the breaking point is, but once you get much above 25 students, providing individual attention becomes difficult. To keep my English class of 31 under control, I have to rely on high-energy routines and structured group activities. In place of freewheeling discussion, I pepper the room with rapid-fire questions. To respond to their essays, I use a rubric emphasizing the four or five qualities I'm targeting for the whole class, and then write one or two short individualized sentences at the bottom of the page. With more than 150 students in my classes, I don't have enough time to spend more than five or 10 minutes on each essay.

Do students really learn best this way? A whole chunk of my students are alienated by this highly structured environment: the artists, the rebels, the class clowns -- in other words, some of my smartest kids.

On a good day, about a fourth of my students don't do the reading or the homework; if I set up a conference after school, they might show up and they might not. Why? Because one kid thinks he has an STD, and another girl's brother just got out of juvie, and another guy wandered to the ice cream truck and forgot. Because they're teenagers. Because they're human.

And that's my biggest problem with the myth of the extraordinary teacher. The myth says it doesn't matter whether the crazy kid in the back makes me laugh so hard I forget what we were talking about, or two brilliant kids refuse to accept my rubrics, scrawling their long-winded objections as a two-part argument that circles over every square inch of the backs of their essays -- the makeup of the class, the

nature of each student and the number of students are immaterial as long as I'm at the top of my game.

But nobody talks that way about the children of the wealthy, who can pay for individual attention in tutoring or private schools with small classes. I understand that we need to get rid of bad teachers, who will be just as bad in small classes, but we can't demand that teachers be excellent in conditions that preclude excellence.

Our children -- even our children growing up in poverty, especially our children growing up in poverty -- deserve to have not only an extraordinary teacher but a teacher who has time to read their work, to listen, to understand why they're crying or sleeping or not doing homework.

To teach each child in my classroom, I have to know each child in my classroom. We teachers need to bring not only our extraordinariness but our flawed and real and ordinary humanity to this job, which involves a complex and ever-changing web of relationships with children who often need more than we can give them.

I'm willing to work as hard as I can to be an excellent teacher, but as a country we have to admit that I'll never be excellent if we continue to slash education budgets and cut teachers, which is what's actually happening in California despite all our talk of excellence, particularly in schools that serve poor children. Until we stop that, we'll never have equal education in this country.