

If Holden Caulfield Were in My Classroom: Inspiring Love, Creativity, and Intelligence in Middle School Kids

Bernie Schein

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Many teachers, when confronted with Betsy's accusation that Maury stuffs her bra, would consider several options, not least of which would be becoming a balloon seller at the zoo so as never to face such nonsense again. Then, thinking about the loss of income that selling balloons would incur, they would pack the students off to guidance or the principal's office and consider themselves done with the affair.

Not Bernie Schein, however. Armed with forty years of experience as an educator, the support of an independent school, Paideia, and a middle school social studies class that runs like a courtroom, he supports the students as they prepare to try Betsy for slander. Organizing the book around this trial, Schein introduces the individual students who will act as judge, jury, and witnesses. Readers learn the personal histories of these students by reading the essays they wrote for Bernie's (as his students call him) English class, essays that are so personal that they are actually therapeutic for the student authors. Since virtually nothing remains secret in Bernie's class, the input and support of other students helps writers resolve longstanding emotional issues that Bernie believes have been blocking their creative and cognitive processes. In case after case, students write about heart-wrenching issues, only to find that afterwards they feel freer and able to think and write more deeply.

Schein's philosophy makes sense, of course. Many adults have tried to write while avoiding or suppressing the truth, only to find that their work falls flat and feels hollow. Similarly, Laura has been burying her guilt over not visiting her grandmother in the hospital because of how her appearance had changed. When she reads this story to the class, she is finally able to cry and admit the guilt and grief she has carried for so long. One girl, Tessa, responds by saying, "I love her...You're so, so...*human*."

Schein's confrontational style, while not transferable to all middle schools, gives teachers in any setting wonderful ideas about how to slice through the notorious insensitivity of middle school students. His unconventional techniques will help even the most battered middle school teachers realize that their jobs do not have to feel like fighting in the trenches of World War I.

Schein has published essays and stories in *Atlanta Magazine*, *Creative Loafing*, and *Educational Advance*. His first book, *Open Classrooms in the Middle School*, was a featured selection of the Educators' Book Club.

ELIZABETH BREAU (August 15, 2008)

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