

Marching On, Marching Off: Retaining our Teachers<sup>1</sup>  
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10:30 a.m., Room 401, Ms. Kopf's classroom

"Get out! I don't want you in here right now! Go across the hall to Ms. Hope's room."

Saira heard the argument from across the hall. Manny, again. Testing his boundaries with Amanda Kopf. He pushes so hard, and the same thing happens every day, she thought.

"I didn't do nothing Miss. It wasn't me!" Manny screamed back, shaking his head and squinting his eyes in anger, his nostrils flaring. "Why you always pickin' on me? You never tell them anything."

"Don't you *dare* talk back to me. They," gesturing to the rest of the students, seated with their eyes glued to the unfolding argument, "weren't throwing paper balls across the room. They weren't banging on their desks and yelling threats that they were going to beat someone up. I don't want to hear it... Out, now or I'm calling Mr. Diaz [dean of discipline]."

"I hate you, bitch! You're so unfair," Manny spat back. Behind him, some kids began to giggle, while others were whispering, "Just shut up and go already."

Saira heard the door slam loudly, followed by three bangs at her door. Manny opened the door, his face still red with fury, his head hanging low. Barely making eye contact, he muttered, "Ms. Kopf sent me over."

### ***Exton Academy***

Exton Academy was a Pre-K to 5 elementary school in Upper Manhattan. Serving approximately 580 students from the neighborhood, primarily Hispanic and Black students (60% Hispanic, 30% Black, 5 % White, and 5% Other), the school offered a variety of resources aimed at meeting the educational needs of its diverse population. Specifically, there were many programs aimed at test preparation and building math and literacy skills, which were major concerns for the school as it had failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) for the third year in a row and was now identified by the Federal Government under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act as a school in Restructuring. Most of the programs were offered either after-school programs or were pullout programs.

The school was very data-focused, and Principal Rachel Daniels had made it clear that improving student achievement on the Math and ELA exams was an absolute must, as the school faced closure if it did not make significant gains on the state exams. This pressure had trickled down to the classrooms and had manifested itself as test-preparation heavy curricula and an overwhelming focus on results. Teachers recognized the urgency for improvement, but did not feel supported in meeting those goals for all children. The school had once been focused on creative, interdisciplinary instruction, and now many children were reacting negatively to the stressful atmosphere and more restrictive curricula. In the past year, school suspensions, classroom disruptions, and student

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<sup>1</sup> This case is inspired by *The Power of Peer Tutoring: Success for a Retained Student*, by TNLI Fellow Leigh Mesler, *Cross-age Peer Tutoring & Service Learning*, by TNLI Fellows Joseph Gottschalk and Joseph Rafter, and *Stressed is Dessert Spelled Backwards: Taking the Responsibility of Discipline Off the Teacher and Placing it on the Student*, by Abby Sipress.

fighting had increased, and even with the addition of a dean of discipline, Mr. Anthony Diaz, the number of students with multiple disciplinary infractions had increased.

Saira Hope had been teaching at Exton Academy for six years. Coming from a background in education (both her mom and dad were educators), she knew from an early age that she wanted to be a teacher. Although she had imagined herself working with kindergarteners or first graders, she now found herself loving the older kids. After graduating from college and getting her Master's in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, she quickly found a job through the New York City Department of Education at Exton Academy.

Over the years, Saira's role and responsibilities at the school had increased, as she became more involved with the school's instructional leadership team. Now, along with her classroom duties, she also served as a mentor, working with the new fifth grade teacher, Matt Handle, and led the fifth grade team as the grade leader, facilitating common planning meetings with both Matt and Amanda Kopf.

Matt Handle was a first year teacher, entering the teaching force through a traditional teacher preparation program at Marion College. He was smart, energetic, creative, and hardworking, just what the kids needed. He had a great attitude, trying never to give up, even though most days were extremely trying for him. Every day was a learning experience, and sometimes it all became a bit overwhelming. Though he had Saira as a mentor, someone to talk to and get help from, he still wished he had more support and professional development.

Amanda Kopf had been teaching for 15 years. She was an excellent teacher, recognized by both the school and the city for her achievements in motivating students and moving them leaps and bounds each year on the state exams. Last year, her fifth grade class made the most progress on the ELA, and most students scored in the highest percentile of state and local standardized exams.

Amanda had been working at Exton for five years, and before that had taught in the Chicago public school system. In her years at Exton, she had witnessed the New York City public school system transform dramatically, and with these changes, the pressures on teachers had also increased exponentially. She was drowning in paperwork, and the amount of testing and pressure to "improve test scores" was sucking the creativity out of her teaching. Though Amanda was dedicated to the profession, in recent months, the demands of the job were starting to take a toll.

*12:45 p.m., Staircase C, between the third and fourth floors*

"Mr. Handle!!!" screamed Shanice. "They called me a n\*\*\*\*r!" She shot Antonio a searing look.

"Oh..., you better watch out boy, I'm gonna beat your ass..."

Then, turning back to her teacher, Matt Handle, she screeched in a whiny voice, "Aren't you gonna do something?!?"

The words flew out of her mouth at a rapid pace, yelling from Matt to Antonio and the other boys who were spitting out vile words. It was all Matt could do to get the kids up the stairs. Thirty-two of them, traipsing up the stairs. What a sight. Some hanging on the railings, some jumping from stair to stair, others screaming and laughing, and then, this conflict between Shanice and the boys.

"All right, all right, enough! Let's just get up to the classroom and then we'll deal with this," Matt yelled from the back of the line. His voice broke as he forced the words out, demonstrating his exhaustion and frustration.

Matt had been teaching for just over four months, and this was not what he had imagined. He came to work every day, tried new and innovative things, and still, each day left feeling defeated and unsuccessful. He had had a year of student-teaching before starting at Exton, but nothing could have prepared him for Class 402.

“Mr. Handle, do you need some help?” Saira whispered to Matt. She didn’t want the kids to hear her offer. Her kids were lined up behind her, and, except for a few who were messing around in the back, most of them were waiting patiently to continue to their classroom.

“Umm...no, we’ll be fine once we get out of the stairwell. This is just the worst time of day for these kids. Right after lunch, they’re all riled up,” Mr. Handle stated with resignation. “And now, to top it all off, I’m going to need to spend the next period holding a class meeting to discuss all the misbehaviors and name-calling, and we’re going to have to forgo our math lesson. I just hope Principal Daniels doesn’t come in. She’s already angry with me for making other adjustments to my schedule. I mean, I know that instruction is important, that’s why I became a teacher, but I wish she wouldn’t be so rigid. There are some days, like today, when the kids just need a break...Anyway, I need to get them upstairs and in the classroom.”

“Yeah, of course. Good luck with the class meeting. Let’s talk later, during common planning period, when the chaos has died down,” she said.

Noise erupted from her line, and Saira quickly turned around and shot her class a look. “Not a word,” she stated sternly.

#### *1:30 p.m., Common Planning Period, Teacher’s Resource Room*

“I can’t believe how he acted in class today...throwing pencils, banging the table, with his fists, throwing paper balls. And then he had the gall to ask me what the assignment was, after I had just spent ten minutes teaching and explaining the lesson. I have had it. I’m so frustrated and overwhelmed. Teaching is getting more and more complex, and I just can’t do it all anymore!” exclaimed Amanda Kopf. She looked around the room imploringly from Saira to Matt, as she explained the incident with her student, Manny, from earlier in the day. The three were gathered for their common planning period, and were supposed to be planning their reading and writing units for the next month. However, the period had quickly become a rant session.

Amanda continued, “I expect my students to sit, listen, and learn. My job is to teach them what they need to know in order to be prepared for state exams, and beyond that, to be ready for the world. There is so much I want to do with them. They are all really great kids, but together, all crammed in that room, they are losing their minds, and my mind’s going with them. Manny’s not the only one. But he is ruining it for the rest of them. If I have one more day like today...he’s done.”

Amanda was fuming. Ten minutes into the writing lesson, Manny had started clowning around, as usual. At first, she had tried to ignore it, but as the lesson went on, he began to throw things at other students and continuously interrupt her instruction. The last straw was after she had assigned independent work, and he jokingly asked with a smirk, “Miss, whatta we doing?” That sparked an argument, which escalated until she couldn’t take it anymore and kicked him out.

Sitting with Saira and Matt now, she was still angry hours later. It had affected her entire day. And as she finally had a chance to process it all, she realized that she was also very tired. Tired from the day, tired from the week, tired from the month. Eight years of teaching, and each year, it was just getting harder and harder. It wasn’t only the behavior of the students and the class sizes that the school was expecting teachers to

teach. It was everything. The intense testing, the focus on classroom environment and what went up on the walls, the rigidity of the schedule and the curriculum. Each year, the challenge to teach became more and more complex. New initiatives and demands were introduced, adding to a teacher's workload.

Saira had never seen Amanda so angry and upset. She rarely ever lost her cool, even on the worst day. "Well, you know," Saira interjected timidly, "when Manny's with me, he seems to at least sit still. But I have noticed that he is extremely fidgety, moving all the time. I usually have to stand right next to his desk to keep him under control. Have you referred him for an evaluation? Maybe there's something more going on?"

Amanda snapped sarcastically, "Ha! A referral? I did that in October. No one from the Special Education Evaluation committee ever got back to me. They have so much on their plates, I doubt they'll ever get to Manny's case. And seriously, I've tried a lot of the same strategies as you have, but I really can't keep babying him. He doesn't deserve that kind of time and attention. What about all the other students who manage to control themselves? Manny needs to learn that there is a time and place for certain behavior. That kid better shape up, or the only place he has to look forward to is jail." She regretted the words as soon as she said them. Amanda only wanted the best for all of her students, but frustration was getting the better of her.

"What does his family say? Maybe they have some ideas about dealing with him," Saira suggested. She knew she sounded naïve. But she wanted to turn this conversation around. From the corner of her eyes, she could see Matt leaning in to listen to the conversation. She didn't want Matt to feel even more discouraged about his own class because of what Amanda was saying in a moment of anger.

"What family? His father's in jail, from what I know, and his mother works all day and late into the night, so there's no one around most of the time. I think there may be an older sister, but she's only 16, so that's not much help. Even with all that baggage, I have tried to call them. But nothing's changed," Amanda replied.

She continued, her voice finally beginning to soften, "I think he really has no one at home, and so home isn't really safe for him. He doesn't care what his mom says, because she's not around enough to enforce anything. It's sad though, because maybe that's exactly why he's acting out."

"I think that's part of the problem with my kids," Matt broke in quietly. "I've tried everything to get them to sit down and just try something, *anything*, related to one of the school subjects. Yesterday, I brought in my guitar to sing some of the poetry we are studying, you know, to show the connection between music and poetry, and you know what? By the end of the day, my guitar was busted. I have no idea who did it, but of course, no one in administration seems willing to help me find out. I'm trying my best to teach these kids, and do everything that Principal Daniels is asking, but, I'm also still learning. I've never really done this before. I wish they'd give me a break, or some more support at least. I mean, I have you, Saira, but you also have your own class." Now Matt was letting it all out. Except, unlike Amanda's rant, filled with anger, Matt was speaking softly, like he was ready to give up.

Saira wanted to steer the conversation away from behavior and stress, and try to get back to planning. At least that would be in some way helpful for the next month of instruction. "Matt, Amanda, don't give up. I'm feeling the same way right now. I'm extremely frustrated with all the crazy demands. This class of fifth graders is especially difficult, and I'm just trying to do my best, like you both are...I think right now, maybe we should all just take a breath, and get our minds off of the day

However, Amanda was not quite finished. Ignoring Saira's suggestion, she looked at Matt and said, somewhat bitterly, "Well, you know what Matt? Good for you for trying. I feel like working as a teacher is a constant juggling act, with so much to do—we're educators, social workers, guidance counselors, police officers, actors, entertainers, mothers. Or in your case, fathers. My job is to teach. I did not earn a Master's in Education to be a police officer, social worker, or mother to every uncontrollable kid. That is not what I am here to deal with. It's no wonder teachers leave the profession so often. You know, I read in the union newspaper the other day that teacher resignations are up. I'm not surprised at all. They work us like dogs for little pay, with no kind of respect. It's truly ridiculous what we have to deal with on a regular basis."

Amanda was worked up again, all the frustration spilling out with each sentence. And then, her eyes started to well and she covered her face in embarrassment.

"I've been doing this a long time," she sniffled back her tears, "and I'm not sure how much longer I can last. I care so much for these kids. I know their lives are rough, and that school may be the safest place for them. But I am exhausted. I feel like I've given everything I have, and it's never enough."

"Amanda, take a breath. It'll be alright. The day's almost done, and hopefully things will get better tomorrow. I'm thinking maybe it would be a good idea to bring this up with Principal Daniels. It's obvious that none of us is getting the support we need right now. And I definitely don't want you to feel like giving up or resigning. You are an amazing teacher, who just happened to have a very, very bad day."

Amanda wiped the tears from her face, and then rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, actually many, many bad days this year. And we'll see what Principal Daniels says about all this," she said sarcastically.

Amanda then turned to Matt, "Hey Matt, at least your kids didn't make you cry today!" she said with a deep breath and the beginnings of a smile.

"Yeah, well, they make me cry everyday. Just wait, the day's not over yet. Something will happen as we walk out," he replied with a chuckle.

Saira noticed the mood lifting, but knew that the stress that had caused today's mini-meltdowns was not gone. She needed to express her concerns to Principal Daniels, though she was afraid that they might fall on deaf ears.

*3:00 p.m., Room 110, Principal Daniels's office*

Saira approached Principal Daniels's office door, and knocked tentatively.

"Come in," a tired voice replied.

"Principal Daniels, do you have a second to talk?" Saira had been working closely with Principal Daniels for over a year now, on the instructional leadership team, but even so, she felt timid when bringing up issues.

"Oh, Saira, yes, yes, come in. I was just looking over our interim assessment results. We didn't do as well as I had hoped. It worries me. We need to work with the teachers to get them to implement more differentiated instruction, or we'll never improve our test scores." Principal Daniels was trying to pull Saira into a conversation about the data.

"Umm...Principal Daniels, I actually was hoping to talk to you about something that came up at the fifth grade planning meeting."

"Oh yes, how's that going? You are a great team, no doubt. Your planning this year has been fabulous."

"Well, actually, things aren't going so well. Amanda, Matt, and I are becoming extremely overwhelmed with everything. Between the testing and all the behavior issues,

we actually aren't getting that much teaching in. Plus, with 32 kids in a class, it's nearly impossible for us to give our students the individual instruction that they need to improve. I mean, and that's not even the worst of it. Some of our students really need help. They need more than we can give them in the classroom."

"I hear what you're saying, Saira. I'm sorry that you're all stressed out. Have you talked with Mr. Diaz about the behavior issues? He should be able to address those problems."

"Yeah, no, he really hasn't been too helpful. He removes the kids for a few days, and then they're back. Anyway, that's not really the main issue. The kids need more than discipline. They need extra attention, counseling, things we can't give them. We are all just overworked and feeling under-supported. We are on edge. Amanda, one of the best teachers I've ever met, is thinking about leaving next year. And poor Matt, I'm hoping he'll stay, but we aren't really giving him what he needs to grow as a teacher and feel confident in himself."

"Saira, you're bringing up things that even I'm not sure how to deal with. The school is facing budget cuts again next year, so hiring more support staff or reducing class size is just not an option. And believe me, I know how much these kids need. But I don't know how to provide it. And to top it all off, if we don't make some progress on those state tests, we may not even be around next year. You know they are threatening to close the school, right?"

"I know, I know. But really, do we have to be so rigid with everything. Part of the problem is that the teachers don't feel that they can be creative. They feel like they have to implement the curriculum exactly as it is, because that's what the school is expecting, and that's what is needed to improve test scores. But it isn't working in the fifth grade. And to top it all off, we have all this added paperwork; we have to show evidence of this, and evidence of that. Principal Daniels, it is so much!"

"Saira, you know how it is. You work with the teachers, as a colleague, a mentor, and a grade leader. And you're on the instructional team. You know why we need to be so structured. We can't trust that *all* teachers will do what's necessary to make significant gains. We can't afford to loosen the reins right now. We have to improve."

"But..." Saira tried to interject.

"Look Saira, the bottom line is that we are all faced with the pressures of the job. I know that teachers work extremely hard, and that we demand so much, but it's ultimately all about the kids. I definitely don't want to lose any great teachers, especially Amanda and Matt, but things aren't getting any easier. In fact, they're just going to get harder. NCLB, the demands of the city and state, it's all about test scores and improving academic achievement. At what expense? I don't know. All I know is that right now, we need to stick together for the sake of our students. Please pass that on to Amanda and Matt, and any other teachers who are grumbling about all this." Principal Daniels ended her statement with finality. That was the end of the conversation. She went back to looking at the assessment results, seemingly unaware that Saira was still in the room.

"Umm...okay. I guess. I mean, I didn't really think of all that..." Her voice was drifting off. She was a bit stunned, not knowing really what to say.

Saira began to back out of the office. "So, okay, thanks for talking with me. Have a good night," she whispered as she closed the office door behind her.

*3:15 p.m., Room 402, Saira's Classroom*

Saira sat down at her desk, dejected. She stared out at the empty classroom, 32 desks, once strategically and meticulously arranged, now twisted and turned as if a

tornado had swept through the room and scattered everything everywhere. Her eyes began to tear as she scanned the desks—moving slowly from Kiara’s desk, to Steven’s, and to Jose’s—before settling with resignation on Ciara’s desk. Looking from one to the other, the day flooded back to her mind.

Saira wondered, what was her job as a teacher? She always believed that every child deserved a great education, but where was she supposed to draw the line? When was she supposed to say, “Enough is enough. I can’t help him. I can’t do anymore”? Was it her responsibility, like Amanda said, to draw the line and focus on the rest of the students? And what was the school really doing? Saira wasn’t ready to give up yet. But she didn’t know how long Amanda or Matt were going to stay in teaching if the pressures kept mounting. Even Saira was feeling less motivated, less energized, less willing to give her whole self to the job, than she had been a few years before. But then what? What if they all left? Then what would happen to the Mannys and Shanices of the world. And all the rest of the kids. They definitely deserved the best teachers. But what if the best teachers were either never developed or nurtured?

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What strategies can Ms. Kopf and Ms. Hope (the two most veteran of the teachers) use to bring Principal Daniels to a place where she understands what’s happening in the school?
2. Are there ways that the teachers, working together, can address the discipline issues they see emerging in their classrooms?
3. What other supports can be offered to help the teachers?
4. How can the teachers bring Mr. Diaz into the situation so that he can become more of a helping figure and not merely a disciplinarian?