# *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56*

*by Rafe Esquith*
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When thinking about their experience in fifth grade, not many people recall activities such as reading *Bridge to Terabithia*, authoring a book, constructing a rocket, creating artwork in the style of Matisse, learning to keep score at a baseball game, being compensated for hours worked, balancing a budget, and performing in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. This is not the case for the fifth graders in Room 56 of Hobart Elementary School. Located in a rough neighborhood of Los Angeles, Hobart is a year-round elementary school where classes begin each July. The majority of students speak English as a second language and despite starting out with what might be perceived as obstacles, students in Room 56 are beating the odds and succeeding every year.

Rafe Esquith, author of *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*, is an educator who has created the unique learning environment in Room 56. A number of years ago when he was questioning whether or not to continue teaching, Esquith found himself in a situation with a student who was struggling to complete a chemistry experiment. He was so engrossed in assisting this student light an alcohol lamp that he did not even realize his hair had caught fire. Esquith stepped away from this experience with a new outlook; he learned to face every day and every challenge with that same dedication. He decided to focus on students and create an ideal learning environment which he describes in the following manner:

> In a world that considers athletes and pop stars more important than research scientists and firefighters, it has become practically impossible to develop kind and brilliant individuals. And yet we've created a different world in Room 56. It's a world where character matters, hard work is respected, humility is valued, and support for one another is unconditional. (p. x)

Esquith begins the book by discussing his philosophy of education and the expectations that he sets for students in his classroom. He is bothered by the discovery that many classrooms are managed by fear. Esquith frames his classroom environment in trust: "…students learn the first day that a broken trust is irreparable. Everything else can be fixed" (p. 7). Esquith builds trust with his students by creating an environment focused on dependability, discipline, and appropriate behavior. He chooses to treat his students as adults and, in return, he gains students who deliver respect and reliability.

Another major component of the author's classroom atmosphere is the integration of Kohlberg's (1976) Stages of Moral Reasoning. Kohlberg's theory is a six-stage sequential structure that represents the relationship between an individual's thinking and society's rules

and expectations (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Esquith begins the process of teaching a simplified version of this theory on the first day of class. Esquith is quick to admit that fifth graders will not grasp the concepts immediately but that many students actually look at their behavior and that of their peers with new insight. In his terms, most classrooms are based in Stage 1 thinking. This stage is described as "obeying rules to avoid punishment and refraining from physical harm to others and their property" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 103), or more simply, students act in a certain way to avoid getting in trouble.

Stage 2 is also found in many classrooms when teachers offer rewards to students for correct behavior. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) describe individuals in Stage 2 as "maintain[ing] a pragmatic perspective, that of ensuring satisfaction of their own needs and wants, while minimizing the possibility of negative consequences to themselves" (P.103–104). "Stage 3: Interpersonally Normative Morality" and "Stage 4: Social System Morality" both share the trait of individuals doing the right thing, in one case to please someone and in the other to maintain a directive to follow the rules (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 104). While both of these incentives result in right behavior, neither of these levels guarantees that the student actually understands why they should act in a certain way.

In order to teach students about the fifth stage where "laws and social systems are evaluated based on the extent to which they promote fundamental human rights and values" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 104), Esquith introduces the character Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This novel enables the students to grasp Stage 5 thinking: considering the feelings of others and adjusting behavior accordingly. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) describe the sixth and final stage as a place where, "decisions are based on universal generalizable principles that apply in all situations" (P. 104–105). Esquith uses a number of examples from literature and film to give students a sense of Stage 6 thinking. While it is rare, even in Room 56, to find students who have achieved this stage, they at least have a goal for which to strive. Esquith wraps up his discussion of Kohlberg's stages with the following thoughts:

> If you are skeptical about trying to get kids to this level of thinking, I don't blame you. Any teacher who is sincere and ambitious about what he does opens himself up to colossal failures and heart-breaking disappointments… We cannot allow incorrigible behavior to make us lower our standards. (pp. 24–25)

*Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire* takes the reader into the world of Room 56. Esquith shares a subject-by-subject review of innovative activities and methods used in his classroom. Each chapter offers the reader some insight into the current educational system, particularly in California, and the areas where these activities help by filling a void or pushing students to do more than is expected. These insights are particularly evident in the chapter on writing. Esquith gives the read a timeline of his first 12 years of teaching and the progression that has taken place in terms of expectations for writing and grammar lessons.

The economic system in Room 56 is particularly fascinating. Each student applies for a job on the first day of school. Each student also pays rent for their seat in the classroom. They are then paid in classroom currency and keep track of their own personal budgets based on their salaries and expenses. Students who plan and save well can purchase their seats. Particularly industrious students actually purchase the seats of classmates and earn monthly rent from those students. Esquith hopes that this elaborate system allows students to see the value of hard work and sacrifice—lessons that will serve them well in all aspects of their lives.

The final section of *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire* focuses on activities that make Room 56 an entirely unique environment. The classroom opens every day at 6:30 a.m. for students who want to start learning early. These morning sessions are focused on teaching problem-solving skills and analytical thinking. Learning in this classroom also continues after school and on the weekends through a film program. Esquith also offers music lessons during recess and lunch periods. Students learn to play instruments on their own and eventually in the classroom rock band.

Throughout the book Esquith refers to his students as the Hobart Shakespeareans. This title refers to their signature event held each year. After school a group of students spend their time learning, rehearsing, and ultimately performing an unabridged play by Shakespeare. Woven into the text of the play is music chosen by the students and performed by the rock band introduced in an earlier chapter. The nearly three-hour performance incorporates theatre, music, dance, and writing skills to which even most adults have not been exposed. Finally, the students of Room 56 also find time for community service. Every year on December 24, current and former students come together to serve meals, donate clothing and supplies, and entertain 500 of the city's homeless.

While this book may not jump out as an obvious choice for new student reading programs, it offers lessons that go beyond the fifth grade classroom setting. Esquith took the situation at Hobart Elementary and made the best of it. He found a way to reach out to the students, took them further than anyone thought possible, and worked around small budgets and low expectations. This book may not have a large number of applications for higher education; however, it could be a great inspiration to students in the field of education, particularly those who have an interest in working in elementary schools. As an all-college reading within a school of Education, this book would help provoke thoughtful discussions. Esquith sums it up well in a note to the reader, "I hope that people who read this book realize that true excellence takes sacrifice, mistakes, and enormous amounts of effort. After all, there are no shortcuts" (p. xii). This advice is applicable to anyone.

## References

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