“I wanted to teach so I could lead, not follow.”

Educating Esmé
Diary of a Teacher’s First Year

Written by: Esmé Raji Codell,
“Madame Esmé”

Samantha Fakhouri
Esmé is 24 years old and hired by the principal, Mr. Turner, to work at and help open a brand new public school in Chicago. She will be teaching 5th grade.

- Mr. Turner takes advantage of Esmé and the other teachers at the school. Most of the teachers he hired are young and attractive females, as if it were a beauty pageant.

Esmé’s class has bullet holes in the window, which never get repaired. This represents the area of the school and the type of environment she will be teaching in: low income with all of her students being at risk.

- Esmé decorates her classroom with lots of color, bulletin boards, and quotes. She thinks her room is the most beautiful and most fun room possible, while the older teachers think her room will be over stimulating to the students.

On the first day she gives the students a speech about how mean she is, and that they will work harder than they have ever worked before so she can gain their respect. They all do work really hard, and respect her— but she isn’t mean.
Esmé sets up a classroom library with books she supplied herself, because they will be reading and learning from these books and not text books.

- The library is beautiful, and she counts each book at the end of the day to ensure that no one has taken a book because most of these children do not have books of their own.

Subjects are called by names that she sees as more appealing to the kids:

- Math is “Puzzling,” science is “Mad Science,” social studies is “Time Travel and World Exploring,” language arts is “the Art of Language,” and reading is “Free Reading.”

Esmé is called Madame Esmé by her students and has developed a great relationship with them.

- Mr. Turner despises her being called Madame and threatens to fire her often because of it, but she threatens him back with the union.
A student, Twanette, has been bulling other classmates so Esmé speaks to her mom who explains that she’s 6 months behind on belt whippings but that she’ll get ahead of schedule tonight.

- This is the first reference of abuse, but it is shown to be common in the student’s daily lives, and in some cases is very serious.
- Esmé is sickened by the abuse, but doesn’t act upon it.

A comic book is stolen from the classroom library so she teaches the class from textbooks, like students are taught in normal classes, until it is returned.

- It is unpleasant for both her and the students but she stands her ground until the book is anonymously returned.

The kids are used to her fun teaching methods by this point. She is truly unlike any other teacher and they are learning more than any other class.

Esmé gets the author of a famous children's historical fiction series, American Girls, to visit their school on her tour.

- She organizes an extremely successful assembly for the entire school, but receives no gratitude from Mr. Turner.
- Mr. Turner doesn’t give compliments, just complains about her being called Madame like he has throughout the entire year.
Summary Continued:

- On a field trip, a gang member who is also a student, stones the bus and Principal Turner looks the other way.
- Esmé wins the Dr. Peggy Williams Award for outstanding new teacher in the field of language arts.
- Madame Esmé has had to take on many family roles with her troubled students and teach them things they should be taught at home:
  - 2 students sleep over while their mother tries to get a restraining order against the man of the house he shot her.
  - Multiple students are homeless or living in a shelter.
  - One girl brings her 2 year old brother to class all day because no one except her is taking care of her.
- Esmé doesn’t interfere much, she just lets the students live out the horribleness of their childhood while advising them to make good choices for their future.
- When Esmé asks Mr. Turner to discipline the student who called her absurd names, or really any students at all, he tells her that black children cannot be taught like white children.
On the Iowa Standardized Test of Basics Esmé’s class scored the highest in the school, jumping at least 1 to 3 grader levels.

Mr. Turner asks Esme to stay another year and she says she will but is really unsure if she can handle it any longer.

The students make Madame Esme a gold scarf with their initials.

3 Years Later...

Esmé’s watches 15 of her former 5th graders graduate 8th grade, who knows where the other 16 are.

Esmé stayed at Mr. Turners school for 2 more years, and had a baby.

Esmé now works at a high income school with involved parents and a wonderful teacher who gives her compliments and encourages her to have a life outside of school.
The students in Mrs. Esmé’s class did a lot of project based learning and it seemed to really benefit them.

Examples are:

- When learning about electricity they made light up quiz games to present and explain
- When learning about light they put on shadow-puppet shows and explained how they worked
- When learning medieval history they built accurate castles
- The kids had checking accounts in classroom economy
- They made commercials to promote their favorite books
Educating Esmé was a very beneficial read. Although it was sometimes hard to read about the terrible problems that the students faced, and ultimately that Esmé faced, it was important for me to know how hard at risk schools are for both the students and the teachers. I really like Esmé’s outlook on teaching and her free spirit and I hope resemble her when I am a teacher. I think uplifting spirits like hers are essential in schools, especially when the students aren’t getting much encouragement from home.