

She Pushed All My Buttons: Or Did I Push Hers?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter tells the story of the author's experiences in working with a student who she initially experienced as being extremely defiant and resistant to instruction. It provides a narrative in which other teachers can see themselves and envision their own responses to the challenges she experienced. She was confronted with a student she did not know how to reach. The narrative invites readers to come on a journey with her as she recalls and explores the daunting relationship she had with this student at the beginning of the year. Readers are asked to join her in examining and interrogating her own practices, as they also reflect on their particular pedagogical challenges. The chapter documents how the author evolved over the course of the year as she struggled to teach in a more responsive and authentic manner. In particular, she notes that her inclusion of social-emotional learning and a more child-centered pedagogy, in the form of a reading and writing workshop, led to the positive outcomes she sought.

INTRODUCTION

The room was filled with happy chaos. Parents brought their children through the door, greeting me with smiles and—sometimes—expressions of worry and concern. Backpacks bulged with Kleenex, three-ring binders, pencil packs, and notebook paper. Some of the sixth graders walked right up to me and greeted me, while others skirted around the room and looked for their names on the carefully-arranged, well-scrubbed desks. It was a typical first day of school.

“What’s that?” a professionally-dressed mother asked, noticing a pile of large puzzle pieces I’d finished cutting out moments before the bell rang.

“It’s a class puzzle,” I replied. I explained that students would write their names on the pieces, add brief descriptions about themselves, and decorate the pieces with colored marking pens. Then we would assemble the puzzle together, and students would, I hoped, come away from the activity thinking about how important each person is, as an individual, and how we also work collectively to form a united and

complex unit. I'd come up with the activity myself and, to be honest, I was kind of proud of it. For me, it symbolized one of my foundational beliefs about teaching and learning: Each child is a unique individual, bringing many strengths and talents to the class. And each class is a synergistic whole, strengthened by its various members. Little did I know that this very day my belief was going to be tested.

Building those class puzzles with each of the middle school groups who came to me on that first day of school went well throughout the morning. In fact, my plans were turning out great. At lunch, I mentally chided myself about the worries and misgivings I had been having about this launch of the new school year. I wasn't exactly a newbie; after all, I had taught sixth grade for two years, right after getting my bachelor's degree in elementary education. But I'd taken time away from teaching to have one, then two, and finally three wonderful sons, two years apart. I felt incredibly fortunate to be able to stay home with them full-time during their early years. When the youngest was five years old and comfortably learning in a half-day kindergarten, I began substituting, to get back into the rhythms of the work. And now here I was, back in the saddle. My youngest child was a first grader, the year was 1991, and I had returned to a position as a middle-school teacher. Unlike the multi-subject sixth grade placement in a suburban middle school that I experienced during my first two years, I was now working in an urban independent school, with a departmentalized schedule for the middle grades. Even better, I was teaching my two favorite subjects: English language arts and American history. Things were looking good.

BACKGROUND

My new teaching position was in a Midwestern independent school in an urban area. Independent schools are a mystery to many. Misconceptions abound concerning this type of school, particularly with regard to inclusivity and diversity. The school featured in this narrative was (and still is) a member of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and it fell below the NAIS median for tuition cost, making the school less expensive for students and their families, in comparison to other independent schools. It fell generally at or above the NAIS median in the number of full-tuition and partial-tuition scholarships it offered for students from low-income families, making it a more inclusive independent school with regard to socioeconomic status. It also mirrored the typical diversity of NAIS schools. Currently, NAIS schools report that their overall enrollment of students of color as a percentage of total enrollment is 31.6% (Broughman & Swaim, 2013, p. 2). With a similar profile, this school reflected the diversity of the city in which it was located.

One popular misconception about independent schools is the notion that it is much easier to teach in them than in the public school. While it turned out that teaching in this particular school was a joy for me, it was by no means easy. An often-overlooked aspect of independent schools is the lack of union organization, and the absence of tenure. Teaching in such schools can feel tenuous at best. There is generally a high degree of parent involvement, but the intensity of this involvement can also be overwhelming. Additionally, the school had a highly-respected support program for children with exceptional needs, one which was organized on principles of inclusion, rather than separation and isolation. This program drew a number of students to the school who were dealing with challenging learning disabilities. The school also had a sizable population of both gifted learners and twice-exceptional learners—children who were gifted and also identified with one or more learning disabilities. (I will return to this subject later in the narrative.) All of these factors made this institution a very interesting environment in which to teach. I was thrilled to be teaching in this school, but that didn't stop me from feeling anxious.

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