REDEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS

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The longer I teach, and maybe the older I get, the less arrogant I become about what I think I know. Like, for instance, with the issue of grading. A number of my teaching colleagues would prefer to eliminate grades. I have silently considered this issue one of pedagogy: making sure students clearly understand the evaluation criteria and have the ability to demonstrate the required knowledge and skills. I’ve believed that the problem is resolved if students who receive poor grades know how and why they didn’t measure up. In thinking back about Ken and Jeremy (not their actual names), however, I’ve become unsettled with this position.

Ken and Jeremy were students in my first period social studies/language arts block for 7th graders. Both were abused and disengaged, certainly disillusioned. They had reacted in typical yet opposite ways. Ken retreated, rarely attending school. When he did attend, he hunkered down in the back corner of the room, his overly mature, oversized body cocooned in baggy pants and a puffy, hooded coat. He buried himself in a book, usually by Stephen King, and read as though the class didn’t exist. Jeremy, on the other hand, fought back through extreme, attention-getting silliness, nothing violent yet, just outbursts of laughter or movement, tripping over desks, spilling the contents of his classmates’ notebooks and purses. Both students walked that fine line between avoiding the curriculum and committing insubordination. Both of their stories began with a spelling test.

Our spelling program was of the common middle school variety. We gave students the list on Monday, provided study opportunities throughout the week, and tested on Friday. The first Friday afternoon of the school year, after correcting the first batch of spelling tests and recording points in the grade book, I remember staring at two tests, wondering what to do. One belonged to Ken. His words were painfully scrawled in second grade print, sloping at odd angles, some letters completely indecipherable. Not one of his words was spelled correctly. Not one was even phonetically close. The second test belonged to Jeremy, a student who had hidden the blackboard erasers, dumped an entire container of fish food into the fish tank, and accidentally dropped the three-hole punch out the second-story classroom.
window but had not done any work the entire first week. His test had a perfect score.

It was fairly easy, even for a third year teacher, to conclude that Jeremy had cheated on the test. I made a mental note to wander back to his desk the next Friday. But when the time came for that next test, I found no papers lying face up on the floor by his desk, no words written on arms or legs, no papers slipped under the spelling test sheet. Jeremy got another 100 percent on his test. I was determined to figure out how he was cheating. When handing papers back on Monday, I looked him in the eye saying, “Jeremy, you’re a really great speller.” Instead of the taunting wisecrack I anticipated, Jeremy sat up a couple of inches taller and replied, “Yes, I am.” Later that period, while standing at the blackboard, wondering how to spell a word, I had an idea. “Jeremy, how do you spell sedentary?” “S-e-d-e-n-t-a-r-y.” There was no hesitation, and I suspected he was right. His innocence proven, Jeremy became my personal spelling assistant and the class’ official spelling expert. When students asked me how to spell a word, instead of the automatic, “Look it up,” I told them, “Ask Jeremy.” Although Jeremy now had an important role in the class, it did not satiate his need for negative attention. And, despite continuing to earn perfect scores on his spelling tests, he did little else.

As for Ken, it was apparent that his attempting the “regular” spelling list was absurd, as well as cruel. Individualizing the spelling lists further revealed that he couldn’t write at all. He misspelled words like “the” and “ran.” He didn’t speak much either, and when he did, it was an inaudible mumble. But he read, voraciously and with sophistication well beyond his years. According to his records, he read at a twelfth grade level. His records also revealed and subsequent conferences confirmed, that he lived with a deaf and mute mother and sister. Communication at home was sparse, and Ken had retreated into a world of books.

Ken, his counselor, and I determined that his goal for the year would be to come to school. He was welcome to come and sit and read. He was always invited, but never pressured, to join in the activities of his classmates. This was an invitation he politely declined. When I could find the time, I talked with Ken about his books. I read ones he recommended. He read ones I recommended. At my urging, he wrote short sentences about his books.
To Jeremy I suggested that, because he excelled at spelling, he might want to complete the assigned spelling worksheets, which accounted for half of the spelling grade. He agreed. A short time later, I told him that when I graded compositions, part of the grade was based on mechanics, which included spelling. So, even if he didn’t have anything to say and even if his organization was terrible, he’d still get credit for spelling everything right. And so he wrote. My comments on his papers responded to his ideas and celebrated his creativity, which was as lively and inventive on paper as in his misbehavior. Now that Jeremy had added some complete writing assignments to his perfect spelling scores, his point total began inching toward a passing grade. When I urged him to do enough work to earn a “D” for the semester, he instead chose to earn a “C,” completing 87 points worth of extra credit over the weekend.

I should point out that going from an “F” to a “C” by doing extra credit wasn’t usually an option in my class. And as I look back at this incident from atop my constructivist perch, I feel a bit queasy at the idea of students buying points with extra credit, a kind of educational piece labor. Jeremy’s focus here was accumulation, not quality and not learning. He was doing assignments to earn a grade. And yet, he was doing assignments.

The last month of the school year, we read Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor. It was one of Ken’s favorite books.
Somewhere in the reading, we took a break to investigate selected aspects of the story. One group was assigned to find information on the setting and Ken was invited to join that group. In the library I noticed him sitting at their table, copying from an encyclopedia. The next day he was meticulously recopying an entire page of writing. When the time came for groups to present their findings, Ken walked up to the front of the room with his group. When his turn came, he stood up, looked down at his paper, and read the words he had copied. The class was quiet. I fought back tears. I doubt they felt the true weight of the occasion. Neither the class nor Ken could know that that moment was the pinnacle of my teaching career, a moment not achieved again in the twenty years that came after. At that moment, from Ken, I came to understand the connection between learning and sense of self worth. Ken didn’t do that presentation to earn a grade. He didn’t do it for me. He did it because he wanted to and because he could. It defined success for him.

Now, as a teacher educator, I tell Ken’s story to my education students. They resist accepting how Ken’s story could be considered a success even though he failed my class. They want to know why I didn’t just give him a “D” to acknowledge how much he improved or how much he tried. It’s hard to explain that what he achieved that day was monumental. He and I were forever changed. Ken’s success could not, should not, be measured with a grade.

In contrast, Jeremy’s successful spelling scores brought him acceptance in the class, socially as well as academically. He found success in climbing an arbitrary point scale, and by reaching a “C,” he discovered and was reassured that he was okay. His grade not only labeled, but orchestrated his success.

Whose story, Ken’s or Jeremy’s, should prevail as more instructive? I’d like to ignore the whole grade issue as unimportant and argue that teaching isn’t about grades, it’s about helping kids gain confidence, to find that bit of talent, that one skill they can build on, rely on, trust, and use as a foundation to take the next step. But the reality is that grades are too much a part of how we measure what we choose to measure to be ignored. They will continue to stand as inaccurate signposts misdirecting students in their search for personal definitions of success.