Walking the Walk with Baby Steps

By Kris Parsons

Last night, I sat in front of our television watching old home movies. This is a practice that my family enjoys but rarely does either because we don't think about it or because I can't figure out how to work the video camera. One of my favorite movies is footage taken of my daughter, Blakelee, learning to walk. In this particular video, Blakelee is standing between her father and me, one hand just letting go of me, the other stretched toward her father's waiting arms.

While watching these movies, my mind wandered, as it always does, to my classroom. I was suddenly struck—as if for the first time—by the similarities in Blakelee's first steps and my attempts to create change in my classroom. I remembered the first time I had made this connection.

As a new teacher, I was constantly searching for new ways to help my students connect with their learning. I attended workshops, read books, and came home fired up for creating change. I spent hours preparing new lesson plans, purchasing necessary items, and trying to create just the right atmosphere. With each new venture, I would talk to my students about our "new" techniques and then put them into place. But what happened? Each time, some major catastrophe happened, and disaster was the result. Quickly, the "new" plan was abandoned, and I would begin looking again...for another book, another workshop, another plan to transform my class into the wonderful community of learning that I envisioned—the perfect classroom.

After reading The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher by Harry K. Wong, I decided to write all the assignments for the day on the board. The classwork, complete with page number and instructions, was written there, as well as all homework assignments for the day. I spent the next two hours trying desperately to hold the students' attention while I discussed prepositional phrases with them. But the students weren't entering into the discussion; they were busily doing all the classwork and homework that had been written on the board for them at the beginning of the class period. Upon closer inspection of their work, I found most of it done incorrectly because they had failed to listen to the explanation of that work. (I quickly erased the board before my second block of students came into the room.)

The final blow came after what I call "The Peer Editing" incident. I had read about peer editing in an educational magazine. This, I thought, would be the answer. I spent an entire weekend grouping and regrouping my fifth grade students into editing groups. I considered personalities and strengths and weaknesses.

The following Monday, I explained the two-step process to the students: we would spend the first day writing and the next day editing one another's papers. So that day, the students struggled through their writing assignments. The following day, Tuesday, I explained to the class that each student was to exchange papers with the person to his or her left. My instructions were to check the paper for sentence fragments, subject/verb agreement, punctuation errors, and spelling errors. The students were to mark the errors on their classmates' papers. I had even provided a chart with all the proofreading marks illustrated. My final instruction to "Be nice" obviously fell on deaf ears. The havoc that ensued during this peer editing incident is indescribable. Let me just say, I learned that no fifth grade student wants another fifth grade student putting a mark of any kind on his paper. (Can you say "Post-It Note"?)

It was after a year of failed attempts such as these that I learned about a technique known as the reading workshop in a graduate class at Mississippi State University. A professor recommended the book In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning by Nancie Atwell. I bought the book and immediately devoured it. After reading it through once, I went back through the book, chapter by chapter, highlighting anything that I thought I could use in my classroom. Still, I was hesitant to try the techniques, afraid to set myself and my students up for failure again.

One evening about the same time, we happened to be going through the home movies. When we came upon the footage of Blakelee learning to walk, I was struck by the parallel. How had I reacted to Blakelee when she began to walk? Had I immediately taken her to Foot Locker, fitted her with a new pair of cross trainers, and

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signed her up for the high school track team? No. I had supported her when she needed support. I had tried to be sure that there were no obstacles in her way, and I had given her the freedom she needed. I had let her try, fall, and try again.

Why, it occurred to me then, should new steps we take in the classroom be any different? Armed with this philosophy, I made some decisions about my classroom. The first thing I decided to do was start off small. I decided to take one small step. If the change was positive, I would build on that success by taking another small step. If the change was not successful, rather than throwing out the whole idea, I would reflect on why the change wasn’t working. With each new strategy, I began asking myself questions, such as, “Did I model the strategy well enough for my students?”; “Was I clear in my instructions?”; and “Is this a skill that the students are ready to tackle?”

I found that with reflection, I was able to figure out what doesn’t work, make changes, and try again with more success. This reflection also gave me permission to fail. I began to understand that I could pick myself up, regain my balance, and try taking another small step. With this realization, I was ready to make real changes in the classroom.

The first baby step we took was so gradual that I almost didn’t recognize the change. I started out by changing the way I talked with my students about books. As a class, my students were reading *Something Upstairs* by Avi. I asked my students who their favorite character from the story was. One of my self-proclaimed nonreaders, (which is what I call a student who has the ability to read but chooses not to read), Caleb, raised his hand and answered that his favorite character was the Ghost. When asked why the Ghost was his favorite, Caleb told me that he liked the Ghost because he was brave. I asked Caleb how he knew that the Ghost was brave. Caleb recounted a couple of incidents from the story that proved that the Ghost was brave.

“So,” I asked, “how does Avi help us to know the characters in the story?”

This one question led the students to a wonderful discussion of ways in which the author lets his readers know about his characters. By the time we had finished this discussion, the class had discovered that an author can let a reader know a character by the things the character says, by what the character does, and the author tells you directly about the character. What a great literary discussion, and all from one little question! Just one small step.

Another small success came about in a writing lesson. Using the book discussion as a springboard, I created a minilesson on show-writing for my students. We reviewed the ways in which an author can develop his characters for his readers. Then we practiced different methods, trying to determine which might be the more effective method of developing a character for the reader of some of our own writing. For example, Shayla wrote, “Steve is a mean boy.” Then she wrote, “Steve pushed the boy down and hit the little girl.” The class decided that, in most situations, showing rather than telling was a more effective way of letting a reader get to know a character.

Perhaps the greatest success of all was with writing workshops. Instead of having the students write paragraphs all with the same topic, I began to use prewriting exercises before each writing assignment. The results were tremendous and immediate. The students rarely asked, “How much do I have to write?” And several times when the timer went off, students would say, “I need a little more time.” It was hard to believe these were the same reluctant writers who would moan and groan every time I asked them to write a paragraph. Another small step.

I have to admit that my excitement grew with each small success. I had to constantly warn myself not to move too quickly so that I would not overwhelm the students and myself. But with each small step, the attitude in the room changed.

I stopped asking questions about literature such as “Who is the main character in this story?” Instead, I learned to ask questions like “What character was your favorite? Why?” or “Are you like any character in this work? Explain,” and “What kind of person do you feel the author is? What makes you feel this way?” As we finished the year, the same students who began the year moaning and groaning about having to read and write were actively participating in discussion comparing authors and their work. This new skill spilled naturally into their writing.

Even today, I don’t proclaim to be where I want to be as a teacher. The difference is that I now realize that the job of teacher is a journey, not a destination, and I am determined to move toward the goal one baby step at a time.

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