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Journaling and Positive Reinforcement

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I had read the book twice, marked notes in the margins, and spent hours writing a paper for a college course. When the assignment, worth a large portion of our grade, was returned, I eagerly flipped to the back page to find my grade. Instead, I found this written in red pen: "You are writing far below the level you should be. No transitions. Your thesis is muddled. You're paper is missing a 'so what.' Why should I care? This is not college level work. Cannot assign a grade right now. Rewrite for grade."

Turning to the cover page to make sure my name was on it and not someone else's, I was certain there was a mistake; English was supposed to be the subject area I was strongest in, so how could I have done so badly? Feeling overwhelmed, several questions came to mind: What if the rewrite was just as awful? Could similar comments be made if while sharing in class discussions? What if I really was incompetent? Was college even right for me? For the first time, I doubted my abilities and myself. The class became a tedious chore that took an abundance of effort. I wasn't sure it was worth it. It took some time, but eventually, I was able to overcome my fear of failure and earn a decent grade; however, now that I am a teacher, I recognize that some students aren't as lucky.

I took over a middle school English classroom for a three-month period for a teacher who left on maternity leave. It was expected for me to invent lesson plans, attend faculty functions, hash out middle school curriculum, and grade assigned homework. I earned the same paycheck as substitute teachers who filled in for one day and held study halls during class only to leave for home with a clear head. Instead of complaining about my small

paycheck and growing list of responsibilities, I savored having my very own classroom and students filling it. Each day I swept the gritty wood floors, scraped bubble gum from desk bottoms, and presented lesson plans with pride. I was determined to try my best to teach and reach students; however, not all students cared about succeeding as much as I did.

Bobby was an eighth grader who was overweight, friendless, and prone to violence. He never worked in class. Instead, he repeatedly threw a ball into the air or read *Harry Potter*. When confronted about his infractions, Bobby exploded, left class, and punched the lockers up and down the hallway. The school counselor told me it was best to allow Bobby to do as he pleased, even if it wasn't coursework, and at least he wouldn't be a behavior problem. The only trouble was that other students wanted to read *Harry Potter* and throw balls in the air during class. "How come Bobby gets to do it?" some started asking. I feared parents calling to complain about how I, merely a substitute teacher, couldn't control the class on account of one student.

Frustrated not only with Bobby but with myself for not knowing what to do, I listed possibilities why Bobby didn't care about school and how I could change it. For some reason, my college writing assignment kept popping into my head; the red inked margins haunted me. While discussing the dilemma with a trustworthy school secretary, she told me that Bobby liked to draw. Surprised I didn't know this, I kept thinking about it throughout the day until I had an idea.

My students filed into class, and I delivered the lesson while Bobby ignored me and doodled in a notebook. In one hour and ten minutes, he never once looked up. Class ended, and I asked Bobby to stay after. He immediately assumed a defensive posture and puffed up. He thrust his wide chest forward and an outline of his jaw formed from his clenched teeth. Instead of the reprimand he prepared for, I softly said, "I hear you like to draw."

He quickly searched my face, perhaps analyzing possible ulterior motives for a seemingly innocent question. After a moment he let his guard

down a little. His eyes remained hard but his face softened and his chest fell. He appeared relieved as he mumbled, "Yea."

"If you draw a picture related to the journal entry topic given for the day, I'll give you two points towards a journal entry." As he scrutinized my motives again by searching my face, I shrugged and added, "I'm curious about how well you can draw."

"Maybe," he said gruffly as he returned my shrug and left for lunch.

The next day the dirty tennis ball lay motionless on Bobby's desk as he sketched a picture while the other students wrote. When journal time was finished, Bobby kept drawing. I was curious and relieved. Part of me knew that two points towards each entry was not enough to help him pass, but another part was relieved that at least the other students weren't witnessing him undermine my authority on a typical day.

At the end of the week, Bobby handed in one drawing for each of the five journal entries. His pictures were crude and amusing, but I wrote lavish comments about how much I enjoyed them and wanted to see more. I told him that if he could write a paragraph after each describing what was going on I would give him four points instead of only two per journal entry. The next set he handed in had paragraphs explaining the pictures he drew. Again, I complemented them and when I distributed the graded journals back, I winked at Bobby and said, "Nice work."

Bobby smiled and answered with a soft, "Thanks."

The following week, he began completing more assignments than just journal entries. On them, I made sure to concentrate on his strengths instead of targeting only what he did wrong, a blunder too many teachers like my former college professor make. Bobby's progress was evident by flawless grammar assignments and quizzes earning perfect scores. "Maybe he just needed someone to tell him he could be good at school," I told the middle school secretary.

Like many students with behavior problems, Bobby came from a rough family. Even though, in

the short time I was a substitute teacher and never had the chance to attend one of his IEP meetings, the stories were legendary. Bobby was raised by a single mother who would scream obscenities at him, tell him he would amount to nothing, and threaten to "beat his ass." More than once the gathering had to be temporarily adjourned so his mother could be calmed down and repeatedly warned about her behavior. It was easy to see where Bobby got his confrontational, negative attitude from, and I had to wonder if no one else in the world thought to let Bobby know he was worth something.

The final semester project was the creation of a tall tale book. A multitude of criteria had to be followed such as devising a creative plot; developing characters; drawing pictures; demonstrating a multitude of literary techniques such as metaphor, simile, and exaggeration; and adequately working together as a group. I worried about Bobby because he didn't get along with his classmates. Knowing the strong possibility of him shutting down if forced to work in a group of peers he thought would judge him negatively, Bobby was given the option to complete the book individually, and he quickly decided to attempt the project on his own.

"You do realize you are going to have to do the work of a whole group if you do this alone, don't you?" I warned him.

"Yea so what?" he said, his eyes burning over my face a little.

"It's not that I don't think you can handle it, because I know you can. That's not what worries me. You are finally passing, and quite honestly, I'm proud of how well you are doing. You have skills the rest of the world never knew about until recently, and if you decide to not show them off by skipping the tall tale assignment, I'll be very disappointed." Bobby answered me with a slight smile and another one of his so-what shrugs. I'm pretty sure he saw the deep sigh of hope that escaped me as he shoved himself into his desk.

Each day, as the groups worked on their tall tale books, so did Bobby. Afraid of pushing my luck, I made sure to leave him alone, but the day the assignment was due, Bobby was absent. As the tall

tale books were collected, frustration settled in. Was Bobby avoiding handing in his assignment? Did he even finish it? Did I do something wrong?

Seventh period drolled on until the minute hand signaled to release my students. As my eighth graders left through the door, Bobby came heaving in, pushing some of them backwards. His chest rose and fell, as if he had been rushing. He handed me a manila folder, and said, "Sorry I missed class." Then he turned and abruptly left before I could say anything. I opened the folder and inside was his tall tale book. After school I read it and was surprised to discover it was better than most of his peer's, and Bobby couldn't be faulted for getting some of his ideas from *Harry Potter*.

A few days later, Bobby got angry at a teacher in another class and left to smash more lockers. His teacher called the office, and the secretary who had told me Bobby liked to draw offered to intervene. The student was found scowling and pacing through the hallways on the third floor. The secretary walked alongside him.

"If you could work as hard and behave as well in every class as you do in English, life would be much easier for you," she said. When Bobby didn't reply, she added, "Miss Cristan talks very highly of you. She told me you're better at writing than drawing, and if you keep it up, you'll do well this semester."

His features softened a little as he replied, "Really? She said that?"

"Yeah, she did."

The pair walked in silence for a while longer. Bobby was working something out in his head. "Can I wait in the office for this period to end and then go to my next class? I don't have to be sent home this time. I'll be okay. I want to stay for English," he said.

"Sure. That'll work," the secretary answered. Bobby made it through the rest of the day without incident and nearly finished the semester without any more behavior problems. He went from failing to earning a C- for his final grade in English class but was just as proud of his grade as those who earned an A.

My last day was the final Friday before spring break. As students arrived, I stood in the hallway to greet them. Many brought me goodbye gifts and told me how much I would be missed. My arms were filled with items ranging from candles to homemade pottery and pencil holders. The tears that rose in the corners of my eyes were forced back down as I smiled at each student and said, "Thank you."

Suddenly, the school secretary grabbed my arm from behind, pulled me into her office, and shut the door. "Bobby is in big trouble. He attacked two first graders who called him fat yesterday after school. The police were called, and the parents want him expelled. I'm not sure what will happen, but it isn't good. He won't be here today." Bobby's mistake felt like my own. There was nothing I could do; I would never see him again. While packing at the end of the day, I realized why earlier in the semester Bobby and my college paper were connected. The professor's comments were all negative, and if they could cause me, a usually confident college student, to feel inadequate and question my abilities, imagine what a life filled with belittling comments could do to an eighth grade student.

Too often, parents and teachers solely focus on a child's "weaknesses" instead of strengths. Bobby's confidence and self-image were so low at the beginning of the semester that he could not identify himself as being able to succeed. He was too worried about being judged and deemed a failure. Bobby had shut down and needed help building his confidence and redefining himself as a capable student. That was why drawing the journal entries worked. The activity was one that had a low failure risk. Bobby needed to know he was able to succeed before feeling confident enough to attempt other assignments knowing there was the possibility he could fail.

I scanned the roster sheet one last time, picked up the phone, and dialed his number. It rang until the answering machine picked up. I hung up, took a breath, and dialed again. This time I left a message: "This is Miss Cristan, Bobby's English

teacher. I just want to say how much I've enjoyed having Bobby in class. He is smart and a great writer. I hope he continues to work hard. Sometimes, it is too easy to focus on the negative instead of the positive... I just want Bobby to know that I saw more good in him than anything else." I hung up the phone, quickly wiped a tear off my cheek, and hoped his mom would get my point.

About the Author:

Amber Cristan Kinonen has earned both a bachelor's degree in Education and a master's in English/Pedagogy from Northern Michigan University, where she is currently employed as an adjunct faculty member in the English Department.