Lesson 4: Find the Key

Leon

Legend had it that the children in Leon's family never started school on the first day of the school year. It wasn't until a truancy officer traipsed through the woods to visit their home and issue threats that the children actually began their academic year. I learned of this legend when Leon, who was on my roster, did not show up for the first few weeks of school. When he finally did arrive, he came bearing a note from his mother that read:

> *Please excuse Leon from school these past few weeks.*
>
> *His feet are allergic to hot cement.*

The note was an original, and so was Leon. His skin was a rich, milk chocolate brown, and his hair was so sparse that his scalp was clearly visible beneath a mere peppering of black. This gave rise to a lot of "bald jokes" that never seemed to offend him. Leon responded to every stimulus with the same slow-spreading smile that brightened his gentle face.

Everything I had heard about Leon left me with the preconceived notion that he was a hopelessly slow learner. Indeed, he began first grade in late September barely able to write his name and possessing a miniscule sight word vocabulary. While he was well-behaved and adorable, reaching minimum standards for promotion to second grade seemed too distant a goal, especially with such a late start.

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However, there were a few things working in our favor. We had abandoned our reading basal series for a writing-first approach to reading. With this change, we taught a brief, highly-structured phonics program in class, and used actual children's literature for reading. Every day, students wrote, read their own writing, received phonics instruction and practice, listened to literature being read aloud, and had access to library books. This literacy recipe may not have worked in all places with all children, but it certainly worked for Leon. He enjoyed writing, loved humor, and combined the two for the pleasure of his listening audience. The feedback was so participatory and satisfying that he was motivated and inspired to write more.

Leon was also a good listener. He carefully critiqued each book after read-aloud time. He became astute at commenting not only on content, but on authors' styles. He picked up new vocabulary and new fodder for his own humorous writing. His favorite author was Ezra Jack Keats. Initially, I sensed that Leon identified with Peter, the main character in so many of Keats' books. This child's enthusiasm prompted one of my first author studies, and through it I realized that so much of what Keats represented and sought to portray was familiar to these Pace County children; they saw themselves in his books. Leon was so disappointed when he learned that Ezra Jack Keats was deceased, so we could not write to him to tell how much we enjoyed his books.

I had only been teaching a few years at this point, and my personal collection of books was still slim. Therefore, I was a big library user. I checked out stacks and stacks of library books, and we instituted daily sustained silent reading time as many students became independent readers.

One day, I received a note from the librarian alerting me that I had a large number of overdue books that needed to be returned to the library. (It's so much easier to *own* books!) I told

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the class we'd have to search the room and locate every book on the list. The children were assigned to sections of the room and ready for action. As I called out each title, students began to look around designated areas. Leon, however, quietly bent to look beneath his seat and struggled to loosen wedged-in books from the storage area in his desk. Nearly every title came out of that same desk, handed to me beneath that quiet, beautiful smile. The "bald jokes" ceased after that day; everyone called him a bookworm instead.

By the end of the year, Leon was one of my most proficient readers. While some children struggled to meet minimum standards, he soared way beyond them. He had found motivation in positive feedback from his peers, and he had found books worth reading. Those were the starting blocks for Leon. He taught me that part of my job as a teacher was to find the key that unlocked two essential elements of success in my students: desire and confidence. It's different for every child, but if you can find it, you'll open the door to learning.

I don't know where he is today, but I know that Leon is a good, kind person. I'm sure that somewhere he possesses a stash of books, and I wouldn't be surprised if in it, there's still a little bit of Ezra Jack Keats.

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The Takeaway

Before the new school year begins, it's an exciting moment when class rosters are released. Suddenly, everything you've been planning for becomes real. There are real names of real students on a list, and those students will become the very real classroom community you will create. Once those rosters are released, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other interested parties tend to be eager to provide background information about each student on your roster.

This can be a dangerous practice. Some information is helpful, like learning about academic breakthroughs or finding out if a child has suffered a prior emotional trauma. However, tread carefully into these conversations. Do not allow yourself to develop preconceived notions about the behavior, ability, or personality of these children. As teachers, we must:

1. **Meet each child with a clean slate.** Preconceived notions often create unintentional bias. For the child, a new school year is a fresh start. Introducing expectations about negative behaviors, academic weaknesses, or atypical family cultures only serves to reinforce negative bias and perpetuate unhealthy patterns. For the teacher, a mindset of possibility is the healthiest way to begin the year, and every child deserves that. Avoid the info-dumping sessions around class rosters and allow each child a fresh start, free from any baggage of the previous school year.

2. **Seek to motivate.** Sometimes that's an exhausting thought. However, teachers who truly understand the power of motivation have the power to create lifelong learners. Motivation is bigger than games and rewards. Work to develop *intrinsic* motivation in each student. Establish a culture in which you share your relatable struggles and triumphs, and encourage students to share their own. By expressing encouragement and faith in your students' abilities, you will model this behavior, opening the door for your students to interact similarly. Use specific praise about things the student can control, like behavior and effort (rather than appearance and "intelligence"). Set high expectations, but define realistic goal increments so that each individual can experience success. Guide students in understanding that struggles are a sign of growth, not failure. Applaud their efforts and remind them to keep moving forward.

3. **Allow choice.** Each student has preferences and comfort zones. Allowing for choice in your classroom acknowledges and values your students as individuals and strategically encourages their buy-in. They are more likely to feel ownership, and what follows is usually higher and longer-lasting engagement in learning tasks. You control the goals, expectations, and timelines, but when possible, allow students to choose the materials, modalities, books, music, and prompts.

Each child is an individual, but this principal is universal: Once you find the key that unlocks desire and confidence in a child, you have opened the door to lifelong learning.

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