

Lesson Two: Adjust the Lens

Antonio

Antonio had already been retained once by the time I taught him in first grade. He set himself apart from other students in clothing and in attitude. While others gained status through the names on their sneakers, Antonio wore shiny black shoes and thin dress socks. Rather than jeans or cargo pants, he wore dress slacks, usually gray, with pleats and pockets in the front. I think he saw himself as slightly older than his peers, perhaps because of the retention, or perhaps due to his chosen point of view.

Antonio lived with his young, single mother part of the time, with his grandmother at other times, and visited his father occasionally, from what I understood. He was very private about his home life and I don't recall meeting any of his family members. I respected his privacy, and the limited information I obtained was heard from other students.

For all of the academic and perhaps personal challenges he faced, Antonio had a keen sense of creativity and I loved the way he put words together. I was fortunate at the time to teach with a writing-first approach to reading. This was extremely effective in this area of limited background experience and vocabulary. There was daily explicit phonics instruction, students read trade books independently, and of course I read to them, but their main text for instructional reading in class was their own writing. We worked hard to build background experience and vocabulary that could be readily applied and internalized through writing.

We had a computer lab filled with word processors (back when they were a new phenomenon) and students composed and printed at least twice a week. To begin with, stories ranged in topic from local agricultural events to church meetings or family get-

together. As the school year progressed, I was able to guide the students into more introspective writing. Feelings and thoughts began to emerge – sometimes sweet and sometimes alarming. Through writing, the students began to process the world around them. Antonio was one of my most prolific writers, usually putting his thoughts and feelings into poetic form, free verse and unrhymed. He gained status as our class “poet laureate,” which appeared to please him.

One gray Monday morning, Antonio sat at the word processor and stared out the window, experiencing a classic writer’s block. I tried to inspire him with banal subject matter, asking what he had done over the weekend or what he planned to do during recess. It was readily apparent to me that I was not going to become his muse in this manner. I left him alone to stare out the window. I paused, however, to share the view with him. This is what I saw: Directly across the street there was a cinderblock building with a flat roof. It measured about 500 square feet and was used as a pool hall at night. During the day, it was vacant. White sand and rocks surrounded the building. It was bordered in the back by woods. Between the building and the woods there was a small graveyard. The front of the building sat on the highway, where most cars sped through on their way to somewhere else. Across the highway there was a trailer park. Most of the trailers were in poor condition, some with plastic sheeting taped over broken windows. One trailer had burned, and the charred remains still stood on the grounds. Through my eyes, it was a sad and desolate place.

Antonio finally overcame his writer’s block that day. After staring out that window for quite some time, he composed these words:

The world is full of laughter

and beautiful people.

*And the people at this school are beautiful people,
especially the children.*

Those words are some of the loveliest I've ever read, and they are forever etched on my heart. In the midst of what I viewed as sad and desolate, Antonio saw all of the good things that life has to offer. This was his world. It was what he knew. And it was beautiful.

**Addendum: About two months after I composed this vignette about Antonio, I learned of his death. He was shot while being robbed. It was a sad and senseless loss of life.*

I went to the funeral on a Saturday. It was held at a community center on the basketball court. I stood in a long line of people waiting to visit the casket to get one last look at Antonio in a pressed blue suit, hands crossed, at peace. The mourners filled the bleachers on both sides of the community center and at least one hundred chairs spread across the court. There was a band, there were singers, his parents were both there...and it was an inspiring service. His mother spoke with great passion and encouraged all of the young people in the audience to make good choices about the road they took in life and the people with whom they traveled. His father wore dress pants and thin dress socks, just like I remember Antonio wearing, and his knee bounced continually as he rocked back and forth in his chair. The eulogy was delivered by Larry, Antonio's best friend since first grade. Although sad, the world was truly a beautiful place that day.

The Take-away

We each carry with us a perspective built by our own experiences and lifestyles. When we walk into an environment that is very different from what we know, it's natural to feel uncomfortable. However, we must realize there is a difference between noticing a difference and passing judgment. What we may see as cluttered, substandard, sad or desolate may be, in the eyes of residents, the warm comfort of familiarity.

Be careful not to apply your value system to the child. I once heard of a teacher who used the term "garbage books" to refer to picture books written about television and movie characters. While you might desire to encourage stronger literature, this kind of condemnation can devastate a child. Guard your words and facial expressions. You can expose children to new and wonderful books without condemning their prized possessions.

1. **Honor your students.** Genuinely value their experience and place of being. Acceptance is key to building a trusting relationship.
2. **Learn what your students value.** Encourage them to speak and write about the things that are important to them rather than generic writing prompts. You can expose them to a grander world once you have established a relationship of trust and acceptance.
3. **Recognize the difference between unsafe and merely different.** Of course, if a child is not safe at home or does not have basic physical needs being met, it is your responsibility to refer that child for services.

Every school exists within a community. That community may fit well with your background and value system, or it may be very different. In order to accept your students and build trusting relationships with them, you may need to *adjust the lens*.