The Growth of a Growth Mindset

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Glen Rock Middle School

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The Growth of a Growth Mindset
By Scott Hebenstreit

I’m in the car on the way to the gym. One of my best friends is in the passenger seat. Our conversation shifts to special education: this week, I’m attending a student’s IEP meeting.

James laughs. *I remember those meetings,* he says. *I had to sit through one every year.*

James is not a teacher. It has never dawned on me -- before this moment -- that he had an IEP as a student. Sure, we rarely had classes together. And he took his morning classes at Vo-tech after sophomore year. But he had an IEP? As we talk, I silently think about school. I strain, but I can’t even remember a class with a support teacher. Was too naive to even notice?

At the end of my second year of teaching, my principal called me into his office. He told me I would be teaching an inclusion class the next school year. On the way back to my classroom, I ran into the teacher who requested the schedule change.

*I just can’t do it anymore,* she said, walking away. *I requested the schedule change in June. I can’t do another year with a new support teacher and,* she paused, *the parents. They’re so demanding.*

I searched her face, but she never made eye contact. My mind shot off in every direction. What if the students couldn’t handle my (infallible) lessons? What if I had to slow my curriculum down? What if they couldn’t handle my high standards? Weren’t inclusion students poorly behaved? I was closing in on my tenure year -- what if this affected my evaluations?

*New Jersey English Journal* 40
As soon as I left, I talked to a coworker about these feelings. *Relax,* she said. *Honestly,* my inclusion classes have some of my best students.

Despite my fears, September came. During independent reading time, I sat down with each student in the class. I didn’t get through everyone in one day. But, slowly, I got to know them all.

*I hate reading,* a boy said. His mother was a reading specialist. How can he hate this? I wondered. It’s in his blood. There was no way his mother accepted this, right?

One boy, a long-haired kid in a Led Zeppelin t-shirt, was reading *Harry Potter.* When we sat down to talk about it, though, I did the math. He was only completing a page a night. Were they all going to spend the whole year fake reading? Was that all I could expect?

A few months into the school year, though, things changed. On the margins of the class, I started to notice things. The boy who claimed to hate reading finished his second book of the year. *Yeah, reading is pretty lame,* he said loudly on the way out the door. When everyone ahead of him left the room, though, his voice lowered. *That book was pretty cool, though. Do you have any more like it?*

In meetings, everyone claimed he was a nightmare in class. *Maybe if you don’t know him,* I said. *You’d be surprised, though. He’s so smart, when he finds something he’s interested in.* I felt accomplished; I felt like a codebreaker who figured out a World War II-era secret.

That was, actually, the secret: he hated reading, but when I showed him books on my historical fiction shelf, he started chattering. *Oh yeah,* he said, as he pointed at book after book, *I read that one. And that one. In fact, I read most of these.*
In mid-October, I looked out over the class while teaching a lesson.

I paused.

Under their desks, two students were reading their independent reading novels. They weren’t fake reading anymore. They were pretending to do other things while they real read.

What am I supposed to say about this? I asked my class. I mean, I asked for this, right?

After that period, my co-teacher and I talked about the students’ personalities. Jack, the rocker kid, he has his own YouTube channel, he said. You need to see his stop-motion. He remade the Terminator movies with action figures!

Really? I asked. I thought back to the summer. This is what I was afraid of? These kids were so unique -- they were awesome. We gave Jack a copy of Hatchet. He described it as “metal.” It was the first book he finished in years.

Another girl, Marie, had perfect handwriting. You know, my co-teacher said, she finished her draft on the last writing piece a week early.

Really? I asked him.

She said she heard us say that it was a good idea. Then she said that when her teacher says something is a good idea, she does it.
On the ride home, I laughed. This was what I was afraid of?

Parent-teacher conferences finally came. We met with the reading specialist, the mother of the boy who “hated” reading. There were five teachers at the table.

He doesn’t try in my class, one began. I don’t think he likes my class, another said. Then, and I’m sure he doesn’t like me.

It was my turn to speak. He’s devouring books, I said. Did you know he loves historical fiction? I literally can’t get him to try another genre.

He loved them when he was younger, mom said. She looked at me and smiled. I appreciate how much you and your co-teacher do for my son. You’re both so understanding. That’s what he needs.

She started to cry.

When the school year closed, we wrote reflections on our personal reading histories. I told the students that I read a book a week on my drive to school.

A book a week?! How do you do that? they asked.

My life is different than yours, I said. I’m in the car every day, so I have tons of time to listen to audiobooks. It’s what works for me.
Then, an argument broke out between two students over who had read more books.

*His books were easier than mine,* the one boy said. He finished 30, most of them 300-page fantasy novels.

He finished the whole *Harry Potter* series in one month, and nothing could tear him away from it.

*But I read more,* the other replied. He was classified mid-year; he didn’t read much, but when he found *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* we couldn’t tear the book from his hands.

*It’s not about reading more than someone else,* I said to them. *It’s about pushing yourself to be better -- to keep growing.*

Everyone reads for different reasons; you just want to keep trying to be a better version of yourself.

Hey, Mr. H, a kid interrupted. *Do audiobooks even count as reading.*

All eyes turned to me. *It’s what works for me,* I say. *I can’t sit still enough to read anymore.*

I drove home and read all about their reading lives. Everyone’s was different.

One summer morning, my mother pulled out a copy of my elementary school report card. Under leadership, there was a single word handwritten in fifteen-year-old pen: *Stressed.* In the self-control section, the teacher had added one more line: *Cries often.* My mind went two ways at once. I laughed.

And I felt ashamed. *Someone really took the time to add this to my report card? Like, it was so notable they took the time to add to a section instead of checking off the boxes?*

I talked to my mother. *You know,* she said, her mouth turned up at one side, *your teachers told us that you couldn’t sit still and that we should put you on medication.*

*New Jersey English Journal* 44
I never realized.

When I think of transformative teaching, I think of that first inclusion class. I had never taught a student with an IEP before. I was prepared for conflict with parents, for students who couldn’t (and wouldn’t) read. But I wasn’t prepared to become a better teacher myself.

What I discovered was a class of students like any other. And, at the same time, I discovered a class of students unlike any other.

These students transformed my teaching by reminding me of the human element. I realized that the key to helping them succeed was getting to know them. After all, isn’t that the point of an individualized education plan?

When I was a kid, I was obsessed with statistics -- with data. As teachers, as a teacher, I learned to gather data, both quantitative and qualitative, to identify the individual needs of each student.

I try to keep a running record of each student’s needs and interests and skills so that I can tailor instruction and conferences for them.

Jack (the boy with the long hair who loved metal music) made stop-motion videos, spoke with a southern accent, read at a level S, and was going through one of the rougher divorces I’ve seen. Of course he loved Hatchet. The story about a teenager alone in the wilderness who would not speak the secret of his mother’s infidelity was more real to his life than anything I could’ve assigned.
Marie (the responsible girl who completed her draft in advance) loved dance, had perfect handwriting, made her own pasta sauce, read at a level U, and struggled with misreading the most common words. We tried audiobooks, and I brought her stack after stack of books to try. She didn’t finish many, but she loved Flipped.

My students read independently in class every day, and when they do, I talk to them about their reading life. I catalog this information. Once a marking period, I test their reading levels. I that goes in the catalog, too.

But I’m most proud of my work in the halls and in the cafeteria and at soccer games and in conferences with parents. Because those are the times when I learn about who these students really are as people. And I think that makes the difference.

When I discuss differentiation with colleagues, a pall sometimes falls over the conversation. With their eyes and their tone, they suggest that we are both party to a sinister secret: it’s nothing more than a buzzword. But I disagree.

There is nothing that brings me more pride than the conference I had at the end of the school year, with the mother of the boy who hated reading.

My co-teacher and I gushed about the student, who finished 25 books that year. He’s an awesome kid, he’s just disorganized. It’s not a big deal, I said, but his 8th-grade teacher might not be as accepting. His mom, the reading specialist, was crying. I don’t know what you two did this school year, she said, but it worked.
I think he just needs someone to understand him, I said.

I think that’s what all of our students need. Teachers who see them as treasure troves of data, and, at the same time, unique and special human beings. Each year, I work hard to research strategies and practices. In the end, though, I’ve come to realize that great teaching begins with humanity and empathy.

I think about the teachers who I’ve needed and relied on in my life. Teachers who helped fix my own speech impediment. Teachers who pulled me aside to ask why my grades were slipping. Teachers who smiled and taught me when I couldn’t sit still. And students who counted my audiobooks as real reading.

We all have unique learning needs. A good teacher is like a good reader, who finds what the students need, and pushes them to be better versions of themselves.

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Bridget Fajvan is a sophomore at Newton High School in New Jersey. Her interests include horseback riding, writing and reading. She loves the color green because it's the color of nature and the heart chakra. She loves her friends, her mom and dad, vintage clothes, and her two cats. As an artist, she likes to draw more than anything, and she loves to experiment with new styles.