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The Kid Sleeping in the Back

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The Kid Sleeping in the Back

by Eric Paragallo

In the back of your class there is that kid. You know the one I'm talking about: any moment of silence is an invitation for this student to talk. No homework assignment is simple or short enough for this student to complete. And no classwork is ever engaging enough to call this student from slumber. This student is a distraction, a crack in your hold of your classroom, and a reminder, a reminder—buried deep in your subconscious, under mountains of denial—that your teaching strategies are *not* working for everyone.

So what do you do? What is the solution? You have already tried every form of punishment in the book: lunch detention, after-school detention, a call home, a private talk, a conversation with the principal. Instinctually, I think the gut reaction is to punish any problem into submission. But this student will not submit. And as a result of this student's defiance, you are once again reminded that your strategies are *not* working for everyone.

So you wallow in pity for a while, and as you do, an even worse thought occurs to you: *how do I remove this mark of shame from my room*. You push this thought aside quickly, though, because you know good teachers do not entertain such thoughts.

But—still—you have no idea what to do next.

I am a student teacher. The teacher I described above may be you, but he is also me. My corresponding teacher has released one of her three classes to me. In this grade level class, there is just such a student—one whom I cannot seem to reach. I will call him Pedro¹. He is a good kid. Every time I get observed by my university supervisor, this kid turns into a model student. On those days, Pedro's head rises from the surface of his desk, his back straightens and he engages, answering the questions I pose to the class with genuine insight. I realized after my fourth observation that Pedro wanted to make me look good in front of my supervisor. As I said, he is a good kid; he cares. But I just can't seem to get him to care about learning outside of those special occasions.

The urgency in reaching Pedro becomes all the more real when you consider his present circumstances. Every day he enters class wearing the same tattered red Nike sweatshirt and the same black sweatpants. Every morning, from my classroom window, I see him walking the cracked sidewalks of Paterson, past a notorious corner where drug deals are frequently conducted, toward the front gates of school. Like 95% of the students who attend the school I student teach in, Pedro is eligible for free breakfast and free lunch. Pedro lives in poverty. I believe that his resistance to learning stems, in part, from the unfair and harsh circumstances that surround him. I also believe that it will be exponentially more difficult for Pedro to overcome those circumstances, if he does not soon gain the skills I am charged with teaching him.

What's my next step, though? Where does a teacher go after punitive measures fail?

As previously noted, I am a student teacher—as such I have the privilege of speaking to a number of intelligent and insightful professors and supervisors. I also have the benefit of searching for answers in the books those professors and supervisors recommend.

In one such book, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (1995), the author Martin Haberman provides the transcripts of two interviews he conducted with two teachers. In the interviews, Haberman seeks to

¹ Pseudonym

find out how each teacher would deal with a student who will not do his homework. Just what I was looking for. The first interview is with a teacher he labels as a “non-star teacher” and the second is with a teacher he labels as a “star teacher.”

The “non-star” sought solutions for the problem outside of the classroom—he or she sought the principal, the guidance counselor, and the school therapist for help. The “non-star” believed that there must be something mentally wrong with the child and that only a trained specialist could cure the issue. The “star” believed that there was nothing wrong with the child, but rather that the student simply had a different type of intelligence and that intelligence required a different type of education.

There was my answer. I was going about the problem all wrong. Pedro wasn’t a problem, but my approach in engaging him was. All Pedro needed was a different type of education, one that was more aligned with his interests. As Haberman taught me, it was my job to find that solution.

Pedro pointed me to one possible solution during an after school detention I held. He was sitting in a desk across from mine and, somewhat randomly, he asked, “Do you watch *Impractical Jokers*?” *Impractical Jokers* is a show about four adult best friends who compete to embarrass each other by playing practical jokes on each other. I told Pedro I did watch the show and that I actually met one of the stars of the show, bumping into him by chance at a New Jersey Devil game the previous year. This seemed to excite Pedro. A flurry of questions leapt out: “Was he cool?” “Was he filming an episode?” “Did you ask him how he came up with his jokes?” Finally, *finally*, I had Pedro engaged. An idea ballooned in my head.

After Pedro left, I designed a project—a project that would play to Pedro’s interests and require him to utilize writing and critical analysis skills:

- First: Pedro will write two to three sketches for an *Impractical Jokers* episode.
- Second: He will write an explanation for how the sketches he wrote will be funny and successful.
- Third: He will create whatever he would like to, to enhance his sketch ideas: videos, illustrations, etc. This is where Pedro really gets to take control of the project, if he so chooses.
- Fourth: He will write a letter and query the *Impractical Jokers* with his episode plans.

I do not have an answer as to whether this project will work out or not. I am waiting until the current semester ends before putting it into effect. But I’m excited. I’m excited because the project has a chance of working. It has a chance of showing Pedro that the skills my corresponding teacher and I are teaching him in class everyday are worthwhile life skills and, that with those skills, he can achieve his some of his desires.

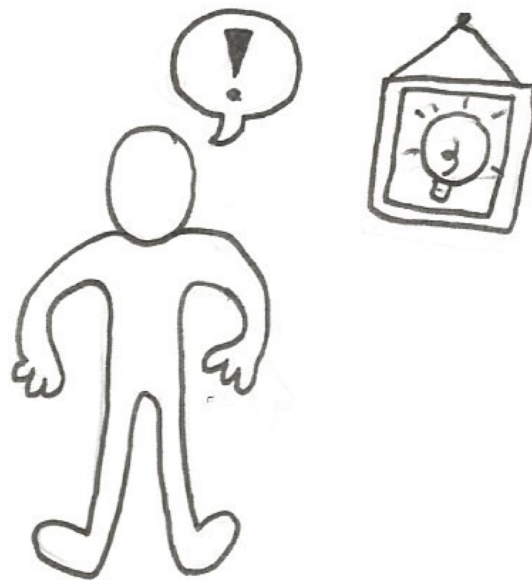
Once Pedro glimpses success in putting together his *Impractical Jokers* project, he will hopefully crave that feeling. He will remain engaged in future classes, knowing that to do so will bring him that much closer to his dreams and desires.

As teachers, we must try our best to avoid punishing disenfranchised students and instead seek to understand them—their behaviors, their lives, their interests, their goals—for in understanding those students, we will find the keys to open the doorways that those students sleeping in the back once assumed locked.

Works Cited

Haberman, M. (1995). *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta.

Eric Paragallo is currently a student teacher at New Roberto Clemente middle school, pursuing a Masters of Arts in Teaching degree at William Paterson University (WPU), Wayne, New Jersey. In 2012, he received an undergraduate degree in English with a concentration in writing from WPU. He has contributed articles to [The Alternative Press](#).



Artwork by Izzy Boyce-Blanchard