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It Was Our Classroom

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When I was in second grade, I had a teacher who was known as a bit of a maverick. Every other second-grade classroom at our elementary school sat in rows and spent their days neatly, dutifully completing worksheets in preparation for our standardized tests. I could see one of those other classrooms across the courtyard each morning from my perch on the windowsill where I was completing my own worksheets on a clipboard. Some of my classmates had their clipboards and were curled up in our puppet theater, a refrigerator box in the corner of the room. Others were sitting at desks. Our teacher told us that we too had to do those worksheets each morning and to do them well. But in the afternoons, we took a trip to Kenya, boarding a plane in the school gym and then “flying” back to our transformed classroom. We pored through the *World Book Encyclopedia* (this was in the 1980s) searching for information about the word or phrase our teacher would post daily to spark our inquiry. We wrote stories and plays and shared them with one another in messy performances. I can still feel over 30 years later the absorbing, intense joy of that second-grade classroom. Yet we completed those worksheets, took the standardized tests, and somehow those practices didn’t sap our joy. They amplified it.

How did our teacher do it? I remember being excited when he distributed those worksheets; he framed the whole enterprise as a kind of game. We were up against a force beyond all of us and while we would do what others deemed important, we would do it our way. As a seven-year-old, I didn’t

know who was behind those worksheets and those tests. What was important, though, was that our teacher was part of the “we”; he was on our side as we faced those expectations. We had a sense that we were pushing back together to preserve our classroom. This was critical, too—it was *our* classroom. He created openings for us to make choices: where to be physically, what to read at times, what to write. Those openings offered us ownership.

Years later, as a secondary ELA teacher myself, I found that things were quite different; we didn’t have as much time together as we had in that second-grade classroom, and we couldn’t necessarily rearrange the physical space. The stakes of those standardized tests were often higher. But there were some elements of that second-grade experience from which I continued to draw. I attempted to position myself as a coach alongside my students, acknowledging that we are all up against the same demands and were all on the same side. I reminded students that those standardized tests were externally generated, and we worked to determine what content and skills those tests valued. We discussed the extent to which those values exemplified on a given standardized test aligned with our own; this test may be what others believe English to be, but what do *we* believe is most essential to the teaching of English? How would *we* evaluate the work of our class if given the option? These were questions we took up together.

I have a three-year-old son who loves to hear books aloud, and often it’s the same book on repeat. Lately, that book has been

Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* So I've been thinking about the Grinch and his assumption that the joy in *Who-ville* resides in the trappings of Christmas—the presents, the decorations, the food. As a teacher, I assume sometimes that the joy in my classroom is similarly contained, that it lives in specific assignments (that multigenre project!) or lessons (acting out scenes from *A Raisin in the Sun!*). But I'm beginning to understand that it's bigger than that, this joy.

My second-grade teacher was cultivating joy and collective classroom ownership by building relationships. When pushing back against school policy, he was forging those bonds by demarcating “us” versus “them.” Within our classroom, he was encouraging us to work together on small group tasks. When we worked individually, he was urging us to offer that work to the class as a whole—to tell our classmates about that whale book we were reading on our own or to share the picture we had been sketching of an igloo. That sharing was never evaluative; we were never asked to critique or praise our classmates' work. We were asked to engage, to talk about what their work made us think and feel. We were weaving connections by gifting to one another our individual thinking.

Over the past several years, I've stepped out of the ELA classroom as I teach

secondary ELA teachers, and we all grapple with what it means to be an educator right now. My students struggle to decide what texts they can teach and what kinds of conversations they can initiate. Some of my students chafe against the demands their school contexts and both the overt and subtle ways those schools stifle teaching and learning. But even as they venture into the fraught, complex realities of our current educational landscape, my students are determined to create their own joy-filled classrooms. They're designing classroom environments in which students can make meaningful choices about what and how they learn. They're crafting projects through which their secondary students collaborate with purpose both within and outside the classroom. They're standing at the classroom door to greet their students individually, and they're pausing as they circulate to check homework to ask about a recent school basketball game. They're centering relationships with their students and among their students.

We may not be the *Whos* in our ELA classrooms, holding hands in a circle and singing. Our joy as students and teachers, however, has the same source: It emerges from and is sustained by our connectedness.

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