

# Literacy Leads

## I Am What's Most Important

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### Collaboration Corner

Anonymous

Oh and to answer the bad Friday afternoon question from last week ... at our recess I had some kids hide behind trailers and then take off running and almost get hit by buses using our bus lot for the new middle school (I had a mini stroke/heart attack/aneurysm/....) Then as I am trying to discipline them and get my heart rate under 200, I find a parent waiting for me at my room to "drop off supplies" but she's really waiting to chat with me, I'm getting the AP on the phone to continue the chewing out to these three kids, a child pukes in the trash can next to me. I call the janitor and put that wastebasket in the hall. The mom still is not taking no for an answer so I just ignore her, then the AP comes and we chew out the kids again, and another kid throws up all over the floor, chair himself, and my only other trash can... Finally the parent gets the hint and I manage to finagle the kids onto the bus and I RUN for coffee chat with my colleagues.... So, how are you?



### Real Life

So that's an email from a friend and colleague. I love the story because it says so much about us: the emotional bond we have with our students, the pressures from outside the room, the hundreds of decisions we make daily, our uncontrollable days, the time we spend on every thing but teaching, the exhaustion, the desire to connect... our real teaching lives.

As I pause to consider my friend's real teaching life, I begin to wonder what is the true student's life? Is it as full of havoc as this teacher's afternoon? Do these kids go to a home, an apartment, a condo, the street? Is anyone there to be with them when they get there? Is there a place for them to read or do homework? Are they taking care of other children, feeding them and getting them to bed? Do they hear gunshots at night?

And, what kind of world will my students inherit in a dozen years? I read over the weekend that the World Wide Web was introduced in 1990. Seriously! Google didn't even exist until 1998 and now it's become a seamless part of my life. YouTube was launched in 2005? When I look back like that, I realize I can't even imagine what is just around the corner. What will real lives demand of these kids then and me...now?

### At this time of the year, we set our course.

But what should that course be, really? What is truly important?

Jeremy (not his real name) came to my 5<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom at a well-respected elementary school in mid September one year. He'd been to so many schools their names filled two index cards front and back. He was angry. He threw a desk at me – several times. I finally realized two things: (1) writing assignments made him livid and (2) he could draw. As a young teacher, I differentiated. I didn't know that's what I was doing; I only knew I was surviving. I asked Jeremy to make a bulletin board every time we had a major writing project due.

Jeremy went to the back of the room and drew for hours. I gave him big pieces of construction paper, pencils, and colors. He drew impressive explorers just by looking at their images in books, for example. I had the best bulletin boards that year. He mounted his illustrations and I posted the other students' written reports. Jeremy learned several things about himself from this arrangement: (1) he could sustain attention for long periods of time on a task, (2) the work he did was complimented by others, and (3) I was going to wait for him to draw away his anger before I asked him to attempt schoolwork – and then in baby steps.

Jeremy walked, then crawled and by January transformed into an A student. He learned to write and do all his schoolwork despite tough obstacles. I'm not saying everything was rosy. Eventually, we lost him again. In the summer, he was sent to the mountains to a home for troubled kids. His brothers had him running drugs. I don't know what happened to him. I can only hope he remembers the year that he felt what success feels like, that he can anticipate the feelings that come with doing well one day, and that his 5<sup>th</sup>-grade experience sustains him when he tries again.

Dr. Robert Marzano offers an interesting perspective on these students in our classrooms. You can read his full description in *Classroom Assessment and Grading That Work* (ASCD, 2006). In the book he comes to terms with how much we should grade homework and participation. For example, in the case of my friend, should she be docked for not making an after-school meeting that day?

### **Drive Theory and Attribution Theory**

To understand real life, it helps to know about drive theory as Marzano defines it. Drive theory attempts to explain human motivation. As many of us know just from living life, people are driven by 2 factors that compete with one another: (1) trying to be successful and (2) fearing failure. *Over time*, people habitually exhibit one trait over the other due to what life throws their way and how they interpret those events. And... they apply this belief about life to new tasks.

So, if a person is successful time and time again, she will view new learning as a place to feel successful again. What's more, she even views failure differently. If she does not do well at the learning task, she believes she can find out why, work harder, and master it. On the other hand, a person who has failed repeatedly does not believe she will be able to do well...ever. She expects to fail and feel the failure. She does not even try because not trying is not failing. She avoids new learning. She may put off the task, blame her perceived handicaps, or set goals that are too high. She envisions what she wants on paper and then gets frustrated when her attempts don't match. She establishes what Marzano calls an "academic wooden leg."

In addition, students attribute their success or lack thereof to four factors: ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty. "One of the most encouraging aspects of attribution theory is that students who do not believe their efforts produce success can learn over time that they do (Marzano, p.8)." And here's some good news: "...it is widely believed that student effort is *modifiable through the action of teachers* (Marzano, p. 7)."

So, as I chart my course for the new year, I realize that I am what's most important. I can say it. I am why Jeremy succeeded in fifth grade. You are most important, too.

Therefore, I conclude the content is not as important as the process. How we give feedback will add to the evidence students collect proving they are successes or failures. Whether they stay in ability groups all year will influence how they see their potential. What we write on their papers will affect their attitude about their worth. The words we say will add another layer to the stack of positive or negative feedback they've been accumulating.

I will do my best to envision what is critical for my students to learn and make decisions to ensure they live abundantly in 2030. And I know without reservation that I will do every thing I can think of so they learn to believe in their abilities and so that you believe in yours.