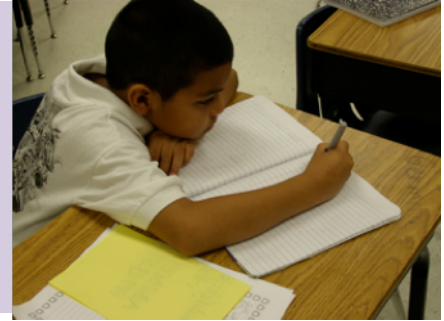


Literacy Leads

A Sense of Agency
July 3, 2010
By Karen Haag



“When I think back to our anchor classroom and others like it, it’s this same kind of spirit that permeates the very air. Children seem to breathe in, “I/We can do this” and breathe out, “Here’s how.” They see themselves and each other as kids with purpose; they see themselves as the kind of kids who can figure things out. These children sense that they have the capacity to roll up their sleeves, take action, and get things done. And wouldn’t you know – the teacher sees herself, *and* them, that way, too? We see it in their faces. We witness it in their actions, their work, and their words. Peter Johnston (2004) might say that these children have developed a sense of “agency.”

Teaching With Intention, Debbie Miller, p. 46

As I read Miller’s words above, Jerome’s story rolled through my head. Jerome came to my southern, 5th-grade classroom from New York City. The last school listed on his record had burned to the ground. The names of schools he’d attended filled both sides of an index card in his cum. Yet, despite his 10 years, Jerome could not read. His grandmother brought him to the south to get a fresh start.

After listening to Jerome read the first time, I assessed his reading level to be that of a first grader. I sighed when I came face to face with his failure to read. I felt bad for him. He wouldn’t “fit” into any reading groups; he would be a group of one. Felt bad for me. How was I going to take on another student, much less one who couldn’t read? Felt bad for the rest of the kids in the class. It was the middle of October, the schedule was finally running smoothly, the students were grouped so that I could reach each child, and now this. A child who reads on a first grade level takes as much time to teach as a couple groups. Would I steal the time from them?

But then, I looked at Jerome: head down, eyes diverted, aware of his failure. I remembered the index card and tried to picture all he must have been through. From evidence both real and imagined, I could see this child was in

need. It wasn’t about me. It was about Jerome. I decided to teach him to read by having him write. I talked with him to find out what he loved to do. Turns out, he loved jokes. So, I asked him to write a joke down every day.

When he was out of the room, I appealed to my class to give Jerome their support. The best thing they could do, I explained, was to laugh at his jokes. The last few minutes of class, he read to all of us. Of course, being kids, armed with reason and explanation, they did everything in their power to make Jerome feel welcome.

Jerome progressed. Every day he read joke books during literacy time, picked jokes he wanted to share, and wrote the best one in his notebook. The technology teacher grabbed extra time when she could and helped Jerome get the jokes typed on the computer into a real book. Every afternoon, he read a joke, haltingly at first. He really did make us laugh. It made for fine endings to often-hectic days.

Soon, I noticed his reading was becoming more fluent. Later, he began selecting harder books to read from the bookshelves.

And then came that day in April.

I was teaching, but I heard a knock at the door. Surprised, I meandered through the kids' desks over to the classroom door continuing in my task. There, in the hallway, stood an older woman. All I remember about her appearance now is that she was wearing a long brown coat and hat and her eyes were slightly turned down. She asked quietly if I was Mrs. Haag. When I said I was, she took my hand and looked up. "I came down here," she said, "to meet the teacher who taught my grandson to read. Thank you."

Ahhhhh! Those are the moments we live for. But, reflecting now, I realize I didn't "teach" Jerome to read. I gave him time to recover and grow, his choice of topics (in this case, the jokes), response from the other children, coaching from the technology teacher and me, and a strong sense of belonging to a community. We all worked on different projects; his was one of many. I don't think he felt singled out. I believe Jerome had a sense of agency – that he could roll up his sleeves and get things done - as Peter Johnston teaches and Debbie Miller reminds us.

Jerome saw himself as a kid with a purpose. *He breathed in "I can do this" and breathed out, "Here's how."* I saw it in his face, his words, and his actions.

A question I've been thinking a lot about lately is what kind of work do students do when they're not with the teacher, especially when the teacher is conferring or working with small groups? What tasks give kids purpose and meaning? As a coach, that's the question I get asked most often. I think we can learn from the Jeromes of the world and apply these lessons in our classrooms.

When giving students the chance to work independently, first and foremost *expect* each child to breathe in "I can do this" and breathe out, "Here's how." Then, follow through with your belief; let children show you their way of working, their ideas for engaging, the messiness, the ambiguity, the time to play with ideas. Embrace it all! Their work should not look like yours or any one else's if you truly are giving them the chance to make this work their

own. Jerome's only direction from me was to go ahead and create a joke book. He explained his invention to all of us.

Make the tasks something students can do with clear permission to solve problems for themselves. Independent work should be an application of something students have learned previously. This is not a time for teaching new concepts. Jerome knew he was learning to read by writing but when he hit a snag, he tried his solutions and we applauded.

Students shouldn't have to interrupt the teacher with questions if they own the idea and potential pitfalls are predicted. I give students a few minutes before they begin independent work to talk through, "What problems do you anticipate you will have to figure out without me?" Helping Jerome talk about what materials he needed and how to solve potential problems relieved him of the anxiety he felt when stuck. But I had to be true to my word. I empowered him to make those decisions so then I cannot be disappointed when he solves problems differently than I would.

To give students "a sense of agency" as they work independently, I further suggest:

1. Find out what each child can do and wants to do and then turn her loose to do it.
2. Learn each child's story and help the child work within her circumstances.
3. Interview each child to help her find her audience and her deadlines. Try many different systems to make sure she is successful at finishing.
4. Give her all the support she needs to be successful even if you feel like you're spoiling her.
5. Give children time and space to do their work.
6. Make space in your day and your room for students to share their work with one another so the ideas spread like wildfire.

Jerome "saw himself and the others as kids with purpose; he saw himself as the kind of kid who figures things out." What better preparation could a child receive?