

## SAVING ROOM FOR THE ROSE AND THE SUNFLOWER

(by Linda Bean, first grade teacher  
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I believe in children's questions, but often I don't hear them. I am a teacher and yet I don't listen to the voices that are my true guide to teaching well. They are lost to me in the din of the latest education-speak and the clamor of increasingly absurd demands from politicians and administrators on our precious learning time. I won't name all the pointless, contradictory, and mind-numbing distractions that separate me from the good work of knowing a child, for fear I will never get to the story I have to tell. It is a teacher's fairy tale, without the fairy godmother and with a hard-work ending. I believe the tale is spun from one part child magic, one part the art of an observant teacher, and the mundane act of showing up every day. I've been showing up for fifteen years now, and in every one of those years a child's unexpected question has pierced through the nonsense so pervasive in our education system, to reveal that person as a learner to me.

Ironically, my lesson was about questions, but not the kind that make one stop to join the child in wonder or to think about what is going on inside the mind and heart of the asker. My objective was a pretty straightforward English language lesson designed to get my students to make a comparison using the word *but*. I provided cute examples such as "Why are clouds

white, but not green?" hoping someone would get the pattern and lead the class to generate more queries so we could practice speaking them. I was proud of my lesson because I was not only re-teaching Nevada State Standard *students will be able to ask who, what, when, and where questions*, to prepare my first graders for the next standardized test; I was planning to up the ante to address a current buzz word, *Higher Order Thinking Skills*, by adding *why* and making comparisons. I was intent on milking it. I would collect student questions and make a class book for reading practice as well. Listening for correctness, in this very effective lesson, (effective lesson also being a buzzword) I plodded along. I had no thought of actually listening for children's experiences behind the questions or how the questions might reveal a student's passionate interests and thereby inform my teaching.

Some lessons with six- and seven-year-olds go according to the plan more successfully than others, especially when active listening skills are involved. In first grade, the timing of *the look* that enforces the appearance of listening can make or break the lesson. The expectation for nineteen little ones is that they refrain from waving hands, and control the urge to eagerly call out ooh!, me! ooh! ooh! Instead, they must sit in unison on the rug, and pretend to patiently, quietly, attentively listen to another child called upon.

All the while, just like most adults, they are not listening, but thinking of what to say next. Over

the years, I have honed the craft of *the look*, which, when such occasions require, can freeze the potential interrupter before making a sound and restore hands in mid-flight reluctantly to their polite, good-listener, folded-in-lap, positions. With this year's ratio of thirteen rambunctious boys to my six chatterbox girls I was fully prepared to use my arsenal of teacher expressions. To my surprise my classroom control method was unnecessary because of an unexpected silence.

It was not the blessed, refreshing kind of silence we teachers appreciate after a hectic day, nor was it the buzzing hush of children engrossed in some captivating activity. The silence felt like dead air on the radio, and I knew something was going terribly amiss. My goal to elicit English for thinking on a higher level was reduced to accepting any utterance, in any language, on any level. Anyone? Anything? Silence? Where did that come from? Absolute silence, such a rare event in first grade, announced the death of my carefully constructed lesson. No one was getting it. Where were the usual eager interrupters? My future flashed before me. Nineteen vacant stares would inevitably lead to restless wiggles and if left unchecked, that anarchy peculiar to first grade would follow. I would have to pull back, regroup to Plan B. I wasn't really all that worried, I always had a Plan B, but I was still disappointed. I took a chance and waited.

Then a timid hand rose. I closed my eyes and resisted a groan. I am a professional, so I also refrained from letting my eyes roll back in a gesture to the heavens. The voice that was about to speak was one that was usually, exasperatingly off topic. She gulped hard before speaking.

I waited, holding my breath. "Ms. Bean, Why does the rose smell good, but not the sunflower?"

Other interesting questions followed; they were sparked unexpectedly, by a child who took three long months and the hard work of a tutor to recognize the word *the*. It is likely the framer of that restorative question will be labeled "at risk" under No Child Left Behind. Her future contributions will be dismissed as she does time in our dehumanizing system.

The lesson was saved, but something much more profound occurred that morning, something that holds great implications for the choices I make in my classroom every day. I was reminded to value, to welcome and even to expect the unexpected, but it is what we teachers choose to do within our practice following such moments that is important. We can plod on as before, with our focus on covering standards and programs, ignoring the strengths in learning our students already possess. We can blame the child for not fitting neatly into the program or we can make the program fit the child. It is at this point that we meet with the hard-work ending to the teacher's fairy tale.

I am suggesting that teachers interested in such work begin by resisting the scripted programs that promise everything in the name of standards, but deliver nothing more than the mediocre status quo. I am suggesting that we teachers do four things: 1. Trust in children's innate love of learning. Follow student interests such as the rose question and create a far richer curriculum than the experts could ever imagine. 2. Make time for children to explore and research their interests, 3. Teach the standards by helping students write about these abiding interests. 4. Trust our own professional judgment based on observations of students and their work; read the wealth of research that supports these practices; and be willing to justify these choices to administrators. The traditional classroom can be transformed from a dehumanizing, alienating experience for students and teachers, into an experience where possibilities are recognized, and all kinds of learners are valued.