

We Are Only as Effective as Our Expectations (Alternate Title: Expect a Miracle)

Of Course, the AP Kids Are Fine

In a crowded auditorium, a trainer is leading a PD on testing regulations. It is the same training I have attended for the last 15 years; every year, the content is identical -- only the carousel of faces leading it changes.

But this year, the trainer says, "But you know what *our* kids will do," as he feigns bubbling what I will only guess is "C" over and over on The Test.

As a first year teacher, I would have had no idea what he was doing. As a second year teacher, I probably would have smiled -- *ah, recognition!* As a tenth year teacher, I probably would have bitten my tongue and let it go. But I'm getting old and crotchety and mouthy. I'm firmly into the "mom" stage of my career, and those are *my* kids, dammit.

"Dude!" I yell out because I am still not in the "eloquent-speaking-phase" of my old age, "Can we just acknowledge that not *all* of our kids do that? *My* kids won't do that. They need these scores."

"Well, yeah," he says, "but the AP kids are different. They'll be fine," and he moves on because we all want some small slice of our planning period.

Are they, though?

I love my kids. I see their progress, their epiphanies, and their growth in critical thinking, but currently only 10.7% of the senior class in my school is academically ready for college. That's 26 kids. *Twenty-six*. Twenty-six students out of a class of 278 are truly ready for the postsecondary world we keep dangling in front of them. And I teach 60 of them -- in their final year of high school in AP English classes. The fact that they're not all there yet weighs heavily on me. I own those stats, but I also know that this isn't just my battle to fight.

In my ACT Prep class for juniors -- kids chosen specifically because they were motivated and had scored close to benchmark on a practice ACT their sophomore year -- one girl is working tirelessly. "I want to break 30," she tells me. "Give. Me. More. Science!" Each word punctuated by a slap on the table. This girl has grit. This girl has determination. This girl has goals.

The next day, this girl tells me the story of her incarceration during her sophomore year.

This begs the question, then, what is it in this one girl that separates her from the others in my school who aren't aiming for 30? Who aren't aiming for benchmark? Who aren't aiming for college? Perhaps she has merely decided to set high expectations for herself.

While we, as educators, can do but little to magically undo a lifetime of low *intrinsic* expectations in our jaded, defeated high schoolers during a 45-minute class period, we have total control over the *extrinsic* ones. Perhaps it's through those expectations we set and control, that they all begin to see their intrinsic value.

At my school, and at countless schools, we do a great job of exposing our kids to opportunities: frequent counseling on post-secondary goals, career exploration, shadowing, job certification potential, and college field trips. But if they can't get into the college they've fallen in love with -- if their only choice is a technical school with no subject that holds their interest -- and if, should they get into that dream college, they can't cut it because they don't have the skills, then what's the point? And if college isn't for them -- and I'd never argue it should be for everyone -- if we aren't showing our kids how to recognize the predatory lender, or how to read the ballot, or how to make the choices that you and I make as functioning adults a thousand times a day, then what's the point? We are showing our students a world full of opportunities, but we aren't giving them the foundation they need to make those opportunities realities, so all we are giving them is soap-bubble dreams and self-fulfilling prophecies of failure.

Without critical literacy skills, we are forcing 16 year olds to close and lock a door that the 25-year-old them might want to walk through one day. We are sentencing them, condemning them, and failing them. We are crucifying them on the bar of low expectations. If we fall into the traps of stereotypes about poverty and at-risk schools, if we make excuses for them, we are not making life easier for them -- or for us, contrary to how it feels at the time. We are, in fact, keeping them from seeing their intrinsic value because we take their last-minute, slipshod, desperation work, and we call it "fine," but checking a box and giving a grade doesn't give them a pass in the real world. We need to see that this kind of thinking is the kind that kills futures, not builds them.

A change in this thinking will be hard because of -- not in spite of -- the fact that we care. It's going to require purposeful, intentional planning. But a few tweaks to a mindset and a few changes in plans could *start* to make a difference. If we can stop settling for "good enough," maybe our kids will too.

Comedy of the Absurd

It's a Tuesday in April, and I have given my English department members gift bags filled with fun office supplies, and I have filled their bellies with jolly ranchers and decent chocolate.

Clearly, it's a good time to discuss some pretty heavy topics. (*No, Alex. No, it isn't.*)

"I don't know about y'all," I say, "but I'm not sure I know what proficient writing even looks like anymore."

There are some nods of agreement: some of us have been here long enough to understand. In our district, we have forgone writing portfolios, and we have forgone marker papers. The majority of our accountability lies in multiple choice tests (and our track record with that is abysmal), and our only measure of student writing comes from the students we have. I show them blind samples of a national prompt by a proficient seventh grader versus an in-class response from a 12th grade AP Literature student.

The consensus is that the 7th grader has far better command of conventions. Their idea development is marginally better.

When I tell them that piece was written by a 12 year old, there's a vomit of emotion: shock, laughter, disbelief, anger, shame, eye-rolling-head-shaking: "of course it is."

"You know why this is, though, Moody, right?" says my 35-year-veteran-in-public-education department member.

"Honestly, no."

"We're not allowed to fail them."

And, in a sense, she's right. We're under enormous pressure to make sure that our kids don't fail ... our class. I've sat in "The Room of Despair" (alternately -- ironically -- "The Hope Factory") where seniors desperately try to meet graduation requirements online right up until the day of graduation. I've even, God forgive me, given the "magical packet that if you just do these things, it means you will pass my class." And I get it. I get that without a high school diploma, we are slamming every door and locking them and standing guard to make sure those kids never get out of the cycle of "at-risk-ness" and poverty. And I don't think any teacher wants to do that.

But I think she's wrong in the metaphorical sense. No online course with infinite tries, no magic packet proves they are ready to live productively in an adult world; we should have been teaching them that all along. No amount of saying, "whatever. It's fine," means they can attain success. But because of the beast we have created, because "failure is not an option," we are, ironically, failing them.

This does not come from a place of malice -- it would be far easier if it did. This failure comes from a place of love, and that is so much harder to fight. This is not the story of just my school: it's the story of yours; it's the story of your state; it's the story of your nation. As educators, we are bogged down by the next best thing; we are hamstrung by discipline data and our need to value *that* kid as much as *all the other kids*; and I

think a lot of us are trying the best we can, no matter how tired we are. Even the testing regulations trainer was a teacher once who felt the same things we feel: this need to make the world see our kids in their best possible light, this belief in them *if you only knew their story*.

But the world doesn't care about their story. The world cares only for what they can do. It is our job, then, to make them "do" and make sure the world is *willing* to hear that story. We are not their mothers and fathers -- as much as we feel like it sometimes. We may love them unconditionally, but that love must be tempered by pragmatism and reality. And if we aren't willing to take those risks and put in the hard work, *then why the hell are we here?*

The Expectation of Empowerment

The question then becomes, how do we get our kids to "do," and why aren't they doing it already? In any given year, between 30-35% of the juniors at my school hit the ACT reading benchmark. If two-thirds of our kids cannot read on grade level, and if we believe that reading is a critical factor for success as an adult, clearly, we are doing something wrong. A 35% is definitely a failing mark; any kid can tell you that. And, as a teacher, this level of failing is soul-shattering.

We are fond of data and teams at my school, so, in an effort to address this need, I pitched a "Literacy Team" to my principal: a group of teachers and other stakeholders who I knew would champion the cause and who are also passionate about literacy and already use it in authentic ways. These people are smart, respected, and well-liked by the students and faculty -- while this seems subjective and also an odd qualification, I know students learn better from teachers they like, and our staff (*everyone's* staff) will have those obstinate few who will be resistant to both minor and massive change, so this was a way to head off that challenge. I also wanted people who could balance idealism and pragmatism -- who would not turn this into the next-best-old-shiny-dog-and-pony-thing and who would also understand that change *can* be incremental -- as long as it is change for the better.

At our first meeting, we determined that year one of implementation should be all about exposure and developing collective efficacy. Kids should, at first, be asked simply to read and write more. Teachers should be given useable, manageable strategies to make that an obtainable reality. They should have embedded professional development, run by the literacy team, to help them implement and manage literacy in content-specific ways in their classrooms. We will gather data through shadowing students through their seven periods, literacy walk-throughs, and standardized tests. We will become coaches and mentors, sharing our own celebrations and struggles throughout the year. We will develop a communally decided upon literacy plan that ensures our kids have constant exposure to reading and writing.

Year two, we decided, is about responding to the data we accumulate and planning more specifically for individual student, subject, and teacher needs.

Fifteen educators from every acronymed department under the sun sit in my classroom on a sunny Friday afternoon in March. Spring break looms. Summer beckons. But I see in them the same sense of urgency and of purpose that I have. They know that critical literacy is just another way to say "we need to expect more." They also know the reality: our kids already come to us with significant deficits, barriers, and obstacles. But they are the people who recognize that this is our last chance, and who will say, "if not us, then who?"

Damned By Low Expectations

It would have been easy for me to fall victim to the same pitfalls of low expectations: I was a child of divorce with an alcoholic single parent in an unstable home with unstable income. My family, though, never believed in anything for me but college. And school... School was where I could shine, and I was lucky enough to have four high school English teachers who took an interest in me and pushed me, and they never once made excuses for me. In fact, when I told my freshman English teacher about my home life, she pushed me even harder, and I loved her all the more for it.

But then College Life landed, and that was where I learned condescension -- which is just low expectations writ large -- is infinitely more damaging than hatred. Hatred is easy to fight against: it's black and white, wrong and right. But condescension is grey and it trickles into your bones and becomes a part of you and makes you feel like you deserve far less.

In perhaps one of my more flagrantly bold decisions, I, this low-middle class, public-school-educated, dumb 18 year old southerner enrolled in an elite, private, northeastern liberal arts college in Vermont. I was from South Carolina, and I did not not own a coat. I had no conception of coats.

I also had no conception of life outside of the south.

And I really had no idea about other people's conceptions of the south either. I mean, sure, there were the obligatory barefoot-and-pregnant-at-fifteen-by-your-cousin jokes, but no one really believed them, right?

Right?

Well.

I got a lot of "wow, that's really cool you got in here" and "you don't seem like one of *those* people" and "it's so good they let you in." Like as a white female majoring in English, I was some sort of interesting data point just because of the place I spent in my formative years.

And maybe I was weak, and maybe I'm whining, but college silenced me for four long years. I would write essays and get back comments from my professors like, "why don't you communicate these ideas in class?" And I never did that because I never felt like I had permission to do that -- from my classmates.

While I feel those feelings were valid at the time, I can't imagine what this experience would be for someone who was not white and middle class and female and who didn't know from her grandmother how to set a table for company. And I can't imagine what would have happened if that same level of condescension came from my professors -- my professors who didn't care where I came from, who simply expected me -- as a person who had gained entrance to this school -- to be good because I *belonged* there.

And then, nearly twenty years later, I look at *my* kids -- my children of immigrants, my children of color, my children of poverty, my children whose families don't even know how to support them, my children who have worn "at-risk" like a birthmark or a scar, and I think, *what will this condescension -- even if it comes from love -- do to them? And, worse, what has it done to them already at this school that is seen, as one of my kids has said, "where the kids go if they can't get in anywhere else"?*

I was an AP kid, and I was fine. I survived. I have a career I love.

I teach AP kids, and we all *think* they're fine. Fine means "okay." It means "mediocre." It means "good enough."

Our kids deserve better than "fine" -- from us and from themselves. They deserve our best.

We must fight for theirs.