

## **My First Year of Teaching**

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Many moments during my first year of teaching could have defined me and, ultimately, who I would become as an educator. My car was slathered with mustard and pelted with eggs. My water was tainted with hand sanitizer, which I didn't discover until I drank from the bottle. Some of my sixth-grade students regularly called me a "fucking bitch" and then were immediately returned to class by the principal. A student swung a closed fist within inches of my face. Students shot dice. My administrator lambasted the staff at every meeting saying, "If you do that like Ms. Smith, you'll get fired."

Despite this and the crack whores and dealers who worked the corner and alley just outside my classroom window, my career was given its definition by the success of my students. They performed a student-written reader's theater for the Area Instruction Office. Their ISAT Reading scores skyrocketed to the highest in the school and were, in part, the reason the school was taken off academic probation and no longer considered a failing school. None of this, though, influenced me more than my relationship with just one student.

Kenneth began the school year determined to learn nothing from me. He had mastered the art of talking to his classmates despite the fact that I was standing two inches from his face. He destroyed his textbooks by tearing pieces out and chewing them incessantly. He stared blankly at the answer sheets of the first in a series of pre-standardized tests, refusing to do any work. I tried calling home to enlist the support of his mother or any family member, but all phone numbers were disconnected.

Kenneth's first-quarter report card was bleak. He was failing every subject. I hoped to discuss strategies with his mother when she came to pick up his report card for parent conferences. She never showed, and his report card remained in the office until the next quarter.

One day in the middle of a reading lesson, a woman appeared in my door. She surveyed the class and staggered in.

"I heard my son been givin' you trouble," she slurred.

"Who?" I asked as she weaved from side to side.

“Kenneth,” she pointed across the room to the precocious boy now ducking his head in the back of the room.

She rattled off a phone number that she assured me worked, then zigged and zagged her way to the door.

Kenneth’s behavior worsened. When he wasn’t absent, he was usually more than an hour tardy. I was relieved when he wasn’t on the playground at the start of the day. I would breathe a sigh of relief knowing I wouldn’t have to deal with keeping him in his seat, trying to get him to do his work. I wouldn’t have to dodge whatever he was throwing across the room.

Then he would show up at my door. I believe it was during these moments I spent at the door with him that a shift began.

My policy is to say good morning to each student before he or she enters the classroom. We shake hands, practicing how people might greet each other in the workplace. On certain days some students would grouse about the practice, but I held firm and encouraged them to leave their discontent at the door. As for Kenneth, I had no idea that this routine would be a way for student and teacher to build a relationship.

I began to ask him what his goal for the day was. We came up with rewards, like a piece of candy or extra computer time, in return for sitting with a group of students.

Kenneth and I would have good days and bad days. Good days notwithstanding, he still wasn’t doing his work. After one particularly trying day, I decided to use the number handed to me by his mother. His mother was, to put it mildly, incapacitated. She could not speak. Her monosyllabic grunts sounded like a cassette tape slowed to a crawl. After some time I simply gave up. Later, I learned that this is what someone high on heroin sounded like immediately after shooting up.

As usual, Kenneth was late the next morning.

“I talked to your mother yesterday,” I said, shaking his hand. His eyes grew big with disbelief. “I don’t think it was a good time,” I said. He shook his head from side to side. “When would be a better time?”

“Uh...” was all he could manage.

“Who gets you up in the morning?”

“I do.”

“Who gets your breakfast and dinner?”

“I do.”

“What about your laundry.”

“I do that too.”

I led Kenneth to my desk where I showed him his grades. Virtually every subject was blank. I told him that I would not be like other teachers that just passed him on to the next grade. With just a few weeks left in the second quarter, he would be failing again. He listened solemnly. I told him the only thing he had to worry about doing in my class was his work. He didn't have to figure out where he would scrounge up a pencil or notebook because that was my job.

“What's your favorite subject?” I asked for no reason.

Without missing a beat, he said, “Writing.”

I nearly fell out of my seat. This was the student who wrote only a single word on a practice extended response.

By the end of that quarter, Kenneth had turned in enough work to raise his failing grades to Ds. As was his style, Kenneth arrived late on the day report cards were going home. I met him at the door.

“Report cards go home today,” I said after our morning formalities. His head hung, and he refused to make eye contact. “You're not failing anything.” His eyes held their gaze on the tiled floor. “I said you're not failing.” The words finally penetrated and his head popped up, eyes beaming.

“Really?”

“Really. Good job.”

Kenneth began working ferociously. I noticed he never took home a book. I suspected home was not a place conducive to studying. I gave him a wide berth in class to complete work. Sometimes he finished work for one subject while I was teaching another. I'd send him to complete work in classrooms where the teachers were on prep so he could have a quiet place to work.

I started to give him classroom responsibilities, like hauling a box to another teacher, cleaning the classroom, and running messages to the office. Through his morning writing assignments, he also began giving me a clearer picture of his life. His brothers

were all in gangs and strung out, he had no idea where his father was, and one day he wanted to be a sports writer.

I pressed Kenneth to keep writing. By the end of the third quarter, he was filling two pages with thoughtful work, and his previous quarter's Ds had risen to Cs and Bs. In the last quarter, my class produced a reader's theater based on their lives. Kenneth wrote a rap and rallied a handful of other boys to perform.

Near the end of the school year, the staff was planning a luncheon. Teachers were being honored with such accolades as Best Hair, Best Dresser, etc. Since I was new to the school, I was stumped on whom to vote for in some of the categories. So, I turned to my students who I thought were the real experts. I ran down the list. They shouted out answers and I cast the vote. Then, I got to Most Inspirational. The room was silent. I explained that it meant someone who encourages you to keep trying even when you don't believe in yourself. Still there was no answer.

Then, one voice at the back of the room said, "That's you, Ms. Hemesath."

I looked up and saw Kenneth at the back of the room meeting my gaze. I wrote down another teacher's name.

Kenneth didn't show up the last week of school. I assumed he had decided there was nothing to gain since he was required to attend summer school because of his excessive absences. I assured him that he had passed sixth grade. Now, he simply had to do the time. I assumed I wouldn't see him again since I had accepted a position at another school.

On the last day of school, I told my class that I would not be returning next year. I told them I was going to teach at a school where students needed a lot of help. The hour came and went. Still no Kenneth. I was disappointed; my departure felt unfinished. As I packed up the last of my belongings, I heard a sound at the door. It was Kenneth, sheepishly waiting at the door. I told him I was leaving, and his face fell. I also reminded him that he walked the razor's edge: on one side were gangs and drugs, and on the other was a powerful writer that the world was waiting for. He was the one who was going to decide where he ended up.

As he helped me carry out the last of my things, I reminded him of the day when he said that I inspired him. He shook his head. “My friend,” I said holding his gaze, “you have inspired me to be a better teacher.”