

## **The Reading Teacher**

**By: Kamille Samborski**

Oftentimes I think about when I was at Michigan State University for my undergrad degree, and how I was so excited about my future career as a teacher. I can remember watching a particular movie about one hundred times during my time as an undergrad- “Freedom Writers” with Hillary Swank. My roommates still joke about it and laugh about how many times I made them watch the movie! I found her character, Erin Gruwell, to be so inspiring, she truly reached the students. As much as I enjoyed the story of the “hero teacher” coming in and saving the “inner-city students” from “broken homes,” I always thought in the back of my head that I will not be in that type of situation. As I thought about teachers getting their first jobs in such difficult, challenging situations, I secretly thought “...but that’s not going to happen to me.” I thought I would score the perfect, dream job in my small town, maybe even at the elementary school I attended, where the worst behavior problem I witnessed was a student writing a “bad word” on the bathroom door, where parents and families all knew each other and attended every school event, and teachers never yelled. Well, of course things did not go as planned and I ended up working with the “inner-city students” from “broken homes” but I’m afraid that I am not the “hero teacher”... and oftentimes this keeps me up at night.

I hate to admit that one of my “pet-peeves” with teaching is receiving a new student. I am a perfectionist when it comes to all of my students having the same nametags, supplies and textbooks perfectly distributed and labeled, desks in even groupings, names posted in alphabetical order on the wall, and bulletin boards neatly arranged with student names. As soon as the secretary walks in with an unfamiliar young face, I know it means I have a new student... and everything is thrown off! I spend days re-explaining every procedure and re-organizing the room until I am okay with the appearance of it in the end. Don’t get me wrong, I come to love every new student, but the first few days are frustrating.

AJ joined us a few weeks into the school year. She walked into the classroom with a glowing smile, taller than her fourth grade teacher. I asked AJ to fill out to beginning of the year student questionnaires to get an idea of who she was as a child and a learner. After deciphering her responses, I quickly realized that AJ was going to need a lot of support in the classroom. She wrote “lobd skul” (loved school) but she was “dab” (bad) at “greebing dooks” (reading books). AJ and I spent a lot of time together in the next couple of months as she became one of my Response to Intervention students and I kept her for small group tutoring sessions four times per week during her gym and art time to focus on reading and sometimes math. During our initial interactions, AJ did not want to practice reading, but she began to open up and become more compliable. I was learning a lot about AJ as a student and as a person, too. Her mother had passed away when she was younger and she was still grieving every day, she lived with her father, abrasive stepmother, and numerous stepsiblings in an unstable home environment.

One day, AJ looked at me and casually said “Ms. Samborski, I never liked reading ‘til I was in your class.” Those words have stuck with me ever since. It was clear to me that I had impacted AJ’s life in a way that no other teacher had before... maybe I was a “hero teacher” to someone!

Reflecting back on my experience with AJ, I think I motivated her as a reader. I encourage other teachers to assess students’ reading attitude, motivation, interests, and engagement. Be sure that the tasks you are providing in your classroom allow students to think about their work, plan, discuss with others, encourage effort, try many strategies and visualize the role literacy will play in their lives (Turner & Paris, 1995, p. 663). Include aspects of choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructive comprehension, and consequences of competence and efficacy (Turner & Paris, p. 666). Implement open tasks that have students set goals, select and organize information, choose strategies to use, and feel challenge rather than closed tasks (insert citation here). Always connect the learning and the task to previous knowledge and make the value behind the learning and the task explicit. Do whatever it takes to make students read widely and frequently, as this results in reading proficiency (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Build and maintain intrinsic motivation. Make reading enjoyable by giving students hands-on experiences, teaching worldly knowledge, and providing frequent opportunities for social interaction and rich discussion. Engage students by listening to students, ask what they want, provide a rationale for work, consider student feedback, give feedback, and recognize challenges (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Instill self efficacy and allow students to feel success (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Create an engaging environment by providing large amounts of texts and resources that build curiosity and excitement, differentiate for all students, and promote “authenticity and relevance” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 90). Serve as a model for your students, show that you value reading and show that you are aware of your “personal identification as a reader” (McRae & Guthrie, 2009).

I hope that every educator has at least one opportunity during their teaching career to feel the way I felt when AJ shared those words with me, that I was the “hero teacher.”