

All I could think on the first day of school in the fall of 2022 was: *Wow, this is uncomfortable and I am so awkward.* The twenty pairs of eyes staring at me as I stumbled through my introduction to the class didn't help. And then they started asking questions.

"Is this assignment practice or performance?" Someone asked.

"Ummm I'm not sure. That's a great question, I'll get back to you." I stammered.

"What's the next unit going to be after the launch unit?"

"Another great question, I haven't thought that far ahead."

I was hired two days before the start of the school year, and I was feeling incredibly overwhelmed. I had never taught 7th and 8th grade English before. I had been teaching special education, and I had gotten very comfortable planning small lessons for individual goals. Sticky note to-do lists were piled everywhere—on my laptop, on my desk, on the board. The room wasn't set up, my schedule wasn't created, and most worrisome of all to me—I had no lessons planned. So, as a result, most of the sticky notes were all about curriculum.

I was so insecure about the curriculum and felt that that was my priority. Surely, as a general education teacher, my subject expertise and ability to teach reading, writing, and critical thinking must be the most important aspect of my job, I thought. And I must put all my time and energy into mastering curriculum and lesson planning. And grading. Does my lesson plan have explicit instruction and time for practice? Are my assignments clear? Do my rubrics make sense? Did kids achieve the lesson learning goals? Those were the questions that I asked myself every day. Despite the self doubt, the year was ok, even better than I had expected.

Perhaps, the more important question I should ask myself about last year is: why did it work at all? Why was there some success? I have several theories but here are a few that seem most probable:

The first theory is that I was around all the time. Not just on my scheduled office hour day, but nearly every day, after school. This wasn't because I was anticipating students dropping by for help or to discuss a grade they earned, or just to chat—I knew that they had busy social lives and extracurriculars to attend to. Staying every day after school was out of necessity for myself. As a first time English teacher, I had too much work that needed to be completed and not enough time to complete it. Meredith started staying after school to do their homework before they had to go to piano lessons. Then Logan joined. Melissa started staying after school to make prioritized to-do lists with me, in an effort to complete work on time. Abby, Emily, and Laura offered to clean and organize my room occasionally, which turned into them playing Taylor Swift and Abby practicing plies and pirouettes. Then I had students wanting to meet about their writing, but they would bring friends, and once we were done with the writing conferences there was always chatter about their lives or school, or staying up too late binge watching tv shows. Wendy dropped by with Anna and talked about how the dynamics among the 8th grade girls were "complicated and weird" and how friend groups changed drastically

since 6th grade. Brianna started coming by toward the end of the year, giving me homemade treats and eventually staying to decorate my windows with beautiful, colorful drawings that remain today. I didn't mind that my quiet, solitary work afternoons became filled with teen chatter and energy, a few days a week.

The second theory of why the year was somewhat successful is that I tended to share honest answers to many questions kids asked, and I was very transparent with them about assignments, deadlines, and grading. I was also pretty transparent about my emotions. This honesty and transparency unintentionally helped me build rapport with students. One morning I was sitting at my desk and Pam came to class a minute or two early. They looked at me to say hi and instead said "Um, what did you do to your face?" I knew they were referring to my very red upper lip. I replied, "I got my lip waxed yesterday and have very sensitive skin, so that's why it's still red." They looked at me with a puzzled expression and said: "why did you do that?" I said "I don't know." Perhaps in that moment, that level of honesty wasn't the way to go, and as the year progressed, I continued to learn the boundaries to set with my students. I blush frequently, and especially when I am angry or embarrassed. One day during that school year, I blushed in front of my students because I was embarrassed that I had sweat stains that were becoming larger and larger the longer I stood in front of the kids to teach. One student, Joe, called out: "Ms. B., your face is unusually red today!" Eloise piped up: "Joe! That's not something you should say to people, especially your TEACHER!" There were nervous giggles around the room, and I finally responded with: "Yes, it is red Joe." It's hard to find the balance between being yourself and sharing things about your life and then being "the teacher" and setting high expectations in a structured environment. I think you can do both, but I think both take time.

The third theory of why the year was somewhat successful is that I was learning alongside the kids, so we both had to practice lots of flexibility. One student, George, was particularly frustrated with me during a project at the end of our dystopian unit. In true fashion, I had been transparent with the students and told them that I had never done this project before, and that they were in the unique position of being able to do it for the first time and give me honest (but constructive) feedback. George marched up to me at the end of class and said "You know, Ms. Bjornson, you really need to be more clear about deadlines and get better at telling us exactly when things are due." I looked at George and said, "You're absolutely right. I do need to get better at identifying exact deadlines. It's hard to know how much time you will all need to complete things when I've never assigned this project before." I was very up front about my uncertainties and I think this helped kids understand that I needed flexibility from them on my behalf, and that I would also practice flexibility on their behalf. I also tended to be a champion at accepting late work, which went hand-in-hand with the challenge of establishing deadlines. In an effort to be more strict and help kids practice meeting deadlines, I decided that if kids missed their book talk, they would only be able to receive up to half credit. Between the tears, frantic attempts to finish at the start of class, and me being too empathetic, this policy fell apart immediately. It specifically fell apart in 7th grade. I would announce the book talks of the day at the beginning of each class. One day, it was Rachel's turn. "Alright we have Rachel's book talk today" Rachel looked up, red in the face, tears welling in her eyes and said "I don't have it." After class, I told Rachel to present the book talk after school the following day. Similarly, Erika was supposed to do

her book talk and she knew it wasn't done. For the first twenty minutes of class, she was upset in the hallway and the bathroom. I spoke with her and said to sign up for a new date on the calendar. Jenny missed multiple book talk deadlines. Instead of taking points off, we made interim deadlines, and she was required to come check in with me after school to show me she had completed the task we assigned. Sometimes, I thought to myself: "You're being a pushover and not helping kids learn how to meet deadlines by being so flexible and accepting late work." Other times I thought to myself "It's devastating to see kids cry in front of me and/or their peers, and I think we have a mutual understanding that we both need the space to mess up and figure things out, which I truly believe is at the core of the middle school experience.

What I realized is that despite being so uncomfortable with the curriculum and insecure about my abilities to deliver the instruction, kids learned. And now that I have had a chance to reflect on this year, I'm realizing that they learned because they felt safe. They learned because they felt connected. They learned because we had mutual respect for each other. Whatever my inadequacies were that year, my adequacies made up for it. I gave the 8th graders an end of year survey that asked the same questions about each unit. I was genuinely curious about the student experience taking the course, and wanted to know what they would change or keep. I did bribe them with extra points if they completed it; however, even with the bribe, I got such thoughtful answers, and answers that helped me understand why this school year was successful. One student, Nick, left a particularly kind and honest response: "Even though I left a decent amount of criticism, I think you were a fantastic teacher. Not only did you (almost single handedly) teach me how to take notes and do notebook pages but you also helped me write better essays and memoirs. Not to mention you lent me some of the best books I have ever read! And you were a cool person while being a great teacher! Thank you." Wendy wrote: "thank you for being my teacher!! It was so fun having you, and I'll definitely miss you in high school. You're really chill most of the time, and you seem like a teacher I can be more open with." I don't want to give you the wrong idea, there was definitely warranted constructive feedback, in addition to the compliments. I was not surprised in the least by my buddy George's comment: "You can be more strict on the deadline." Succinct and true. Justin said: "This course was very fun overall. It just needs to be polished a bit more, which I'm sure will happen naturally with experience." Very true, Justin. I made a lot of mistakes in the 2022-2023 school year. I have many notes on what I will do differently for certain units, going forward. I have no notes for myself about making connections with students. I think the answer to my question of "why did this year work?" is simple. I connected with kids in an authentic way, and that got me much further than I realized it would.