

Lessons Learned Along the Way

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I am currently a teacher of students classified as exceptional children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities in a high school setting. I have twelve years of teaching experience in this county, and while I prefer teaching at the high school level, I enjoyed the five years I spent teaching in middle school. It was a great learning experience that has had a positive impact on my teaching. I have also been blessed to watch former students from my middle school days enter high school and progress through to graduation.

Enter: MG – A Former Student

One such student whose growth I've had the privilege of witnessing is MG (pseudonym). I have had the privilege of watching MG grow and flourish academically, socially, and in maturity from middle school to high school and on to graduation. MG has Down Syndrome and presents with mild intellectual disabilities, which meant that the majority of her middle and high school experiences were in a self-contained classroom. The curriculum focused on functional academics, daily living skills, and job skills. She was assigned to my class when she began sixth grade and remained my student throughout her seventh and eighth-grade years, as well as for three years after we both moved to the high school setting. At the end of that third year in high school, I became a co-teacher in regular education English classes and was no longer MG's teacher; however, I continued to maintain contact with her throughout her high school years.

MG has always known exactly what she wants and needs to be successful. She has never shied away from making her wants and needs known to those in authority. I reflect on my

student-teacher relationship with MG and understand that we were learning from each other. She was learning the skills she needed to live and thrive as independently as possible as an adult, and I was learning how to live life to the fullest from her. As teachers, I truly believe, we can all learn important lessons from our students if we take the time to truly get to know them.

Lesson One: Standing Firmly and with Boldness

One of the most valuable lessons MG taught me was the importance of standing firm in my beliefs. When she was sure that she was right, MG stood firmly and with boldness; her self-assurance made her a force to be reckoned with. For example, MG did not like sitting in her seat on the school bus. Her mother, the bus driver, and I worked diligently to help her understand that she needed to sit down to be safe in case the bus had to make a sudden stop or was in an accident. We tried talking to her, having the principal speak with her, posting a visual of her sitting in her seat on the back of the bus seat, and providing lessons about bus safety, but MG was determined to stand up. Finally, after many unsuccessful attempts, MG informed me that she was too small to see over the back of the seat in front of her without standing up. We talked about the alternative of looking out the window beside her seat and how that would be much safer. She never tried to stand on the bus while it was moving again.

From MG's many acts of bold confidence, I learned that standing firmly is necessary in my own life, both at work and in my personal life. For example, I have learned to stand firmly and boldly in IEP meetings and

other meetings regarding my students' needs, without fear of losing my job. Through trial and error, I have learned that if I can cite research-based evidence to support my proposals, I can usually get the other team members to understand and often agree with what I am proposing. In my personal life, MG's example has taught me to stand firmly in my personal beliefs without compromise, which has helped me be a better wife and mother. This is because I have come to realize that standing firmly without compromising my beliefs has greatly decreased my anxiety in social situations, which has often spilled over into my family life in the form of arguments.

Based on my conversations with colleagues, many teachers struggle with standing firmly and boldly in their careers or personal lives. I have often heard them express the same types of fears that I had to work to overcome. Taking the time to truly get to know our students and conduct research on their needs can have a positive impact on our ability to advocate for them. This can relieve the stress that fear and frustration can cause, benefiting both our professional and personal lives.

Lesson Two: Empathy and Compassion

Beyond her boldness, MG also taught me a profound lesson about empathy. For as long as I have known her, MG has demonstrated a love for the people around her. From the first time I met her, I noticed she has the ability to empathize with and show compassion for others. In middle school, I often observed MG helping her classmates without being asked. She would comfort students who were upset and seemed genuinely concerned for their well-being. As she progressed through school, I observed MG greeting everyone she encountered and inquiring about their well-being. If she saw that someone had dropped their things, MG would stop and help the person pick them up without being prompted.

My interactions with and observations of MG have taught me to lean into empathy and compassion for others and to respond more deeply with intentionality. As I observed her helping others, I realized that I need to be more aware of the needs of those around me and assist them, whether their needs are physical or emotional. Through her interactions, MG showed me that I need to approach my students and colleagues with understanding and love.

In conversations with colleagues, I have come to understand that it is hard for teachers to lean into empathy and compassion for others, especially our students. The reason is that doing so requires us to be vulnerable. Demonstrating this vulnerability is difficult for teachers because we often feel judged for everything we do. We also tend to work many hours outside of the school day, which interferes with our time with family and friends. We show our vulnerability by leaning into empathy and compassion with our family and friends in these relaxing, judgment-free interactions. However, if we are always working, we do not allow ourselves time to engage in these interactions, and this makes it more challenging to be vulnerable in the often-stressful school setting. To be teachers who are vulnerable enough to lean into empathy and compassion, we need to take time away from schoolwork to be with our family and friends. This allows us to practice being vulnerable enough to lean into empathy and compassion, whether at home or in the school setting.

Lesson Three: Enjoy Every Minute of Life

Most importantly, MG taught me a lesson about the sheer joy of living. As I have watched MG grow up, she has taught me to enjoy every minute of life, whether experiencing highs or lows. I have rarely seen her without a smile on her face. During her first year of middle school, MG wore a brace for hip dysplasia, but she smiled through it every day. She has consistently demonstrated enthusiasm

and determination for every challenge she has faced. MG loves to laugh, meet new people, and learn new things.

MG's demonstration of her love for life through her smiles, enthusiasm, determination, and laughter has taught me to look for a reason to smile through every season of life. She has helped me to understand that I need to let go of being too serious too often and allow myself to bask in the smiles and laughter that enjoying life brings—whether I have just heard a good joke, found forgotten money, my car breaks down, or I am just having a bad day.

I believe that we, as teachers, often become so engrossed in our jobs—even outside of the school day—that we forget to engage in activities that bring us joy and fulfillment. We become so focused on seeking perfection in our lesson planning, instructional processes, and grading that we forget to smile, laugh, and engage in activities with our loved ones or alone that bring us joy. As my colleagues and I have often discussed, we must take the time to enjoy life because teachers who smile, laugh, and engage in relaxing and fulfilling activities

outside of school appear to facilitate these same traits in their students, who typically demonstrate a greater love for learning than those students whose teacher is constantly focused on perfecting every lesson.

Conclusion

I believe my time with MG—from the beginning of her middle school years through her high school years and graduation—has helped me become a better teacher and a better person. She has taught me to stand firm in my beliefs, helped me lean into my ability to show empathy and compassion, and taught me to smile and laugh more often, enjoying life. As teachers, we need to seek ways to identify and develop skills related to standing firmly and with boldness, leaning into empathy and compassion, and living a fulfilling and joyful life. We also need to teach these skills along with academics to our students so that they can learn how to truly enjoy learning and live their lives to the fullest extent possible.

Susan Furr is an accomplished educator with more than twenty-six years of experience spanning elementary, high school, and middle school classrooms. After beginning her career in South Carolina, she continued her professional journey in Union County, North Carolina, where she brings dedication and leadership to her work with students. In addition, she has also contributed to the field of higher education as an adjunct professor at Gardner-Webb University, where she helps prepare future teachers to serve diverse learners.

Susan holds a degree in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Curriculum and Instruction as an Education Specialist, a Master of Education in Special Education, and a Bachelor of Science in Special Education.

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