



Teach Kids, Not Content

“Every child deserves a champion – an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

–Rita Pierson

Mrs. Hansen asked all of us to sit on the reading rug. She sat down in front on the floor. “Come in close,” she said. We all scooted up. Mrs. Hansen leaned in. I can still picture her face that day . . . tears fighting hard to avoid rolling down her cheeks.

“Today is your very last day as a kindergartener at Franklin School. When you come back from summer break, you will all be first graders!” I remember how cool that sounded. I was finally going to get to be a “grader.”

“It’s also your last day with me as your teacher, and I have taught you everything I can think of.”

“It’s very important to always remember that *you* will always be one of Mrs. Hansen’s kids. I believe in you, and you will all live in my heart forever!”

“Today, I am going to give every one of you a very special gift . . . It’s a key to my heart.”

Mrs. Hansen took the lid off a fancy gift-wrapped box, and inside were old worn-out keys tied to beautiful silky ribbons. She handed out the key necklaces, and asked us to put them on.

“Now grab onto your key and look at me. If ever you find yourself in a tricky situation and you feel like there is a door in front of you that you can’t open, squeeze your key with your thumb and your finger, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and remember . . . I am one of Mrs. Hansen’s kids and she believes in me! I can figure this out! I can do it! Your special key will remind you to believe in yourself. It will help you open any door that is in your way.”

(Continued)



That was 55 years ago, and I still have the key to Mrs. Hansen's heart. I often tell this story and hold up my key, tattered ribbon and all, when I speak to educators. Many of you went into this field because you had a teacher like Mrs. Hansen.

A teacher who showed you how to believe in yourself.

A teacher who saw your gifts, encouraged you to share them, and rewarded you with appreciation for doing so.

A teacher who made a positive difference in your life.

Now it's your turn. Now YOU are supposed to be the difference maker.

Breaking Out of Survival Mode

The reality is that teaching is one of the most important professions on the planet, yet it can also be one of the most challenging. You're faced with repeated demands for expected test performance, overloaded content amount with limited delivery time, minimal financial resources for creative teaching materials, large classroom

sizes, and behavior challenges up the wazoo! Some of the systems currently in place don't appear to be effective. And to top it all off, there's a huge lack of authentic understanding of the obstacles that you are expected to overcome.

As a result of all this, you may feel overworked and undervalued.

Instead of focusing on your students, you are catapulted into survival mode. What was supposed to be rewarding, doable, and fun at times seems impossible and overwhelming.

So why do you do it? Possibly because you had a teacher like Mrs. Hansen who helped you realize your internal worth and taught you firsthand the importance of sharing it. Maybe because you believe first and foremost in helping the kids. I often say, "If you don't enjoy teaching, you might be working too hard in the wrong direction. If you can figure out how to redirect the energy in your classroom and make it work for you instead of against you, you'll get your joy back!"

Remember: The Kids Are Still Kids

Being "in the trenches" daily for nearly a quarter of a century, and experiencing kid interactions both pre-and post-COVID, has taught me a lot.

I often hear people say, "Kids have changed!" I disagree with parts of this statement. The immediate situations surrounding our children have indeed changed drastically over time, and will continue to change, but kids are still kids.

Child behaviors have evolved as a result of the new experiences, but again – *kids are still kids*. They will push button A to make B happen. If that doesn't work, they'll try pushing C, D, R, Y, and any other button they can reach to meet their basic needs.

SEE ME, HEAR ME, and VALIDATE ME.

It's important to always keep in mind that every student misbehavior you encounter results from an unmet need.

In this post-pandemic time, we all want to blame COVID.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning, challenged engagement, and reduced instructional time. According to the World Health Organization, the prevalence of anxiety and depression increased in both children and adults globally by 25%. Approximately 37% of US high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the pandemic. This was most likely a result of shifting to remote learning which caused kids to feel increasingly isolated, home-bound, tied to technology, and sedentary – all factors which contribute to increased anxiety and depression.¹

¹Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Impact of Covid-19 on Mental Health," The Annie E. Casey Foundation website, February 21, 2025, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/impact-of-covid-19-on-mental-health>.

So, yes, we all are desperately playing catch-up. I know firsthand when speaking to kids post-pandemic, I have to use 8× the amount of energy to keep my audience engaged and on target. It can be exhausting!

COVID can be one reason for why teaching has become more difficult—but we cannot continue to allow it to be an excuse for not untapping potential in our kids.

Engaging to Hold Their Attention

During my first year of teaching, I stood up in front of 38 middle schoolers to give what I thought would be an amazing lesson on the distributive property. This was my annual observation, and both my vice principal and principal were in the back of the room ready to watch.

I was so excited! I'd spent days memorizing the textbook examples, formatting my introduction and planning out my objectives. I loved teaching math, and I couldn't wait to show my admin what I could do.

This was going to be my *jam lesson*!

I started off with what I thought would be a creative and original bang, explaining the history and origin of how the distributive property came about. Then, I continued by perfectly regurgitating the examples from the textbook.

My lesson went from bad to worse.

It started off like a slow, leaking flat tire, and quickly spun itself into a shredded blowout.

We're talking *total bust*!

The more I talked and tried to explain the content, the less engaged and more out of touch my kids became. I wasn't connecting with any of them at all!

When I looked up and saw the expression of hopeless disappointment on my VP's chalky white face, my heart started pounding and my head started to spin. My principal was voraciously writing a novel of notes. "He's probably gathering any and all evidence he needs to terminate me," I thought. My anxiety went thru the roof, and a firestorm of bad thoughts rushed through my head.

I'm going to lose my job!

Why did I ever think I could be good at this?

How can I support my family with my husband in school full time if they don't renew my contract?

I don't feel safe here.

I want to go home right now.

I need to hug my kids.

And then, it hit me . . . right in the face like an ice-cold water balloon.

This morning before I left home, I hugged each one of my kids individually and distributed my love evenly to them.

That's it!

My students don't care about math theory, *but they do care about hugs!*

"OK, this lesson is obviously not going well. Let's try something different," I said. I slid my arm across my teaching table and everything that was on it crashed onto the floor, shocking everyone. Then I sat on top of the table.

My VP's mouth dropped open with concerned surprise and my principal's pen fell to the floor as he stood up out of his chair. (I bet they thought I was really losing it.)

"We all make mistakes and today with this lesson, I made a big one. I tried to teach you all about the distributive property the wrong way. I need you to give me a DO-OVER. Forget about everything I've told you so far and with your permission, I'd like to start over."

My kids looked at me like I was from outer space, but at least I had everyone's full attention.

I wrote this on the board:

$$ME(\text{Carson} + \text{Gates} + \text{Courtney})$$

"You all know that I have three kids. Every morning before I come to school, I hug each one of them individually, so they know how much I love them. I 'DISTRIBUTE' my love between the three of my kids equally, because if I only hugged one of them, the other two would get jealous. Like this:"

$$ME(\text{Carson}) + ME(\text{Gates}) + ME(\text{Courtney})$$

"That's just like the DISTRIBUTIVE PROPERTY in math."

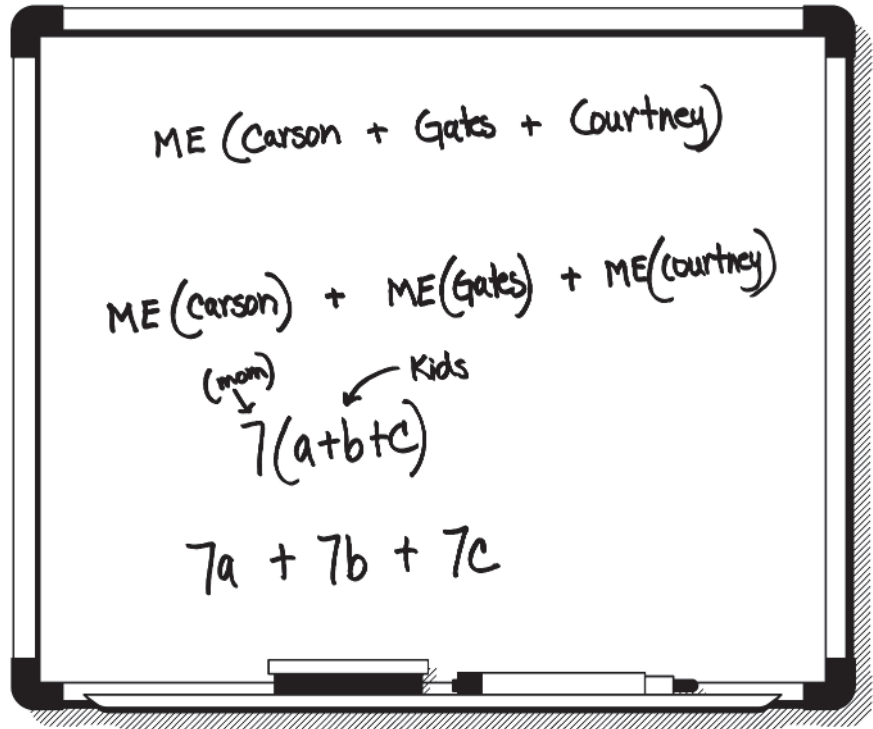
Then I wrote this equation on the board:

$$7(a + b + c)$$

"Seven is the mom and a, b, and c are her kids. If she wants her kids to be happy, she needs to distribute her love evenly and hug each one of them which looks like this:"

$$7a + 7b + 7c$$

My students immediately became engaged. They understood my story and all of the sudden, the distributive property started to make sense to them. We spent the rest of the period doing example problems as a group, and everyone was smiling at the end, including me!



"I'm not a math person at all. In fact, I hated math as a kid," my VP said after class. "But today, I learned something that I will never forget, and you made it fun. Well done!"

"Was this staged?" my principal asked me. "Did you start off doing poorly on purpose so your students would realize that everyone makes mistakes, even teachers?"

"Uh, yep! How'd I do?"

"It was an amazing lesson with two important messages. You did awesome!"
Whew! – a true bullet dodged.

I still feel a bit guilty lying to my boss, but boy did I learn big that day!

If you want to teach something to a kid and make it stick, find a way to relate your content to their view of the world.

Thanks to the use of technology, students today are inundated with information at their fingertips, and accessing it is almost effortless. However, convincing a child that the content you are teaching them is valuable and worth being internalized is a true art form.

For kids to effectively learn, they first must be willing to pay attention long enough to let new information enter their heads.

Then, they need to figure out ways to relate that information to *their own personal view of the world* by:

- Seeing it
- Hearing it
- Feeling it
- Doing it
- Demonstrating it to somebody else
- (And most important of all) Relating it to something they already know.

This learning process creates a tall order for teachers, but the payoff is immeasurable.

Building Relationships

Most students have two questions rolling around in their heads every time they step foot inside your classroom:

“Why should I do _____?”

and

“When I do _____, what do I get?” AKA “What’s in it for me?”

As shown and shared by Yale child psychologist James Comer, Missouri educator Justin Tarte, New Zealand academic John Hattie, and others, teaching success and effectiveness depends heavily on the relationships that you build with your students, and less upon how much subject knowledge you have.

You can be the most knowledgeable educator on the planet, but if your students can’t see worth in your words, they won’t make the effort to listen to what you are saying.

Think about it . . . Would you want to pay attention to someone you couldn’t relate to or somebody you didn’t like? If kids feel *seen*, *heard*, and *validated* when they are around you, they will want to stay in your classroom because YOU are meeting their basic needs!

If the “what” you are teaching holds a bigger place in your heart than the “who” you are teaching it to, the energy in your room will funnel against you, and your students will do whatever it takes to find ways to leave.

I found this out the hard way one year . . .

It was only week three with the most challenging group of 7th grade math students I had ever taught. I thought I was pretty good at making connections with kids, and making math relatable and fun, but with this group, I found myself at a

loss. Was I losing my touch? The class was overall pretty good, but one climate-changer in this group ate my joy for lunch on a daily basis and then threw it up in my face!

TJ talked when I talked, revolutionized class clowning, mastered the art of unkind eye rolling, and sucked up every molecule of oxygen in the room.

He had absolutely no interest in listening to anything I had to say. He just wanted everyone's undivided attention. When he was absent, my class was great, but every time he walked through my door, a dark cloud of "whatever" followed overhead. He made my 3rd-period class 49 minutes of living hell.

The easy thing to do would have been to kick TJ out of class.

That's what most teachers did.

But the last thing this kid needed was more detention and/or suspension. I had to do something, because TJ's dark cloud was unleashing an energetic torrential rainstorm on a daily basis, and I was drowning!

One day, I borrowed a student teacher and asked her to sit in on my class. As soon as TJ's cloud started to rain, I grabbed my backpack, emptied it out on my desk, and walked over by him.

"TJ, I whispered. Let's go on a walk,"

"You kickin' me out?" he asked.

"Not on your life! I need to take a walk, and I want you to go with me. Let's go!"

I walked outside through the front door and TJ followed.

We walked across the street and stood on the sidewalk next to a city owned, curb-lined rock garden. "You seem to be carrying around a lot of stuff," I said.

He looked at me with a questioning face. Then he tilted his head slightly and gave me a side eye: *Are you for real?*

I took his skepticism in stride.

"I have no idea what's going on in your life, TJ, but I can only imagine how hard things are for you. Can you trust me enough to try something?"

"I guess," he said, hesitantly.

"See this empty backpack? See these rocks? For everything that's bugging you today, I want you to pick up a rock, tell me what that rock stands for, and then put it in this backpack."



TJ shrugged his shoulders, reached for the backpack, and started grabbing rocks.

“My mom died last year. She did drugs. We couldn’t find her. The snow plow guy found her when he moved a bunch of snow.

“My dad’s in prison. He’s a druggie.

“I live with my grandma in her car. She’s too poor for a house.

“The judge makes me go to school and I hate it.”

My eyes filled with tears as he continued . . .

“I don’t have any friends,” TJ said. “I’m starving. My brother was in a gang – but he got shot . . . I miss him.”

Here stood this kid with a backpack full of rocks that was so heavy, Superman would have a tough time lifting it.

No wonder he doesn’t care about math!

When TJ finished, I zipped the backpack shut and had him put it on. Together, we slowly walked up to the front door of the school.

“I am so amazed by you, TJ. That’s a lot to haul around, and you do it every single day! You are a really strong kid.”

As I grabbed the door handle I said, “OK, I want you to take off the backpack and set it outside of this door and then walk inside.”

He did it, and I continued.

“TJ, hard things in our lives weigh us down like a backpack full of rocks. But did you know that when you enter this building, you can leave your rocks outside

by the door before you come in? You don't have to bring them in with you. Inside this school, and especially inside my classroom, you can just be a kid. Your rocks will be there waiting for you when you leave, but when you're here, you can just be TJ."

Then I grabbed a couple of granola bars out of the staff room.

"Eat these on the way back up to my room, and let's start today over."

After that, TJ was a different kid. He started to add to my class, as opposed to take from it. He still had his storms, and when he did, I would point to my backpack and he would ask to leave my room for a restroom break, and then reenter a few minutes later, *backpackless*.

Once TJ realized that he was more important to me than math, a human connection was made and a positive relationship flourished.

TJ felt seen, heard, and validated.

Instead of doing everything in his power to get kicked out of my class, he tried his best to stay in there. And it didn't take him long to discover that he was really good at math.

Your students are, and always will be, more important than anything you teach them.

From "Teaching" to "Learning"

In his book, *Activating the Desire to Learn*, Bob Sullo writes about a social studies teacher whose goals went from "covering" all the material, to then "teaching" the material to finally shifting her emphasis to her students "learning" the material, even if she covered less.

This teacher shifted the focus from her "teaching" to the students "learning."²

If you make the mistake of valuing your content over your kids, you'll drown.

To me, being a teacher is kinda like being a vacuum cleaner. Your power to be effective is based on the relationships you build with your students. You can be the best vacuum cleaner ever invented, and push yourself across the floor all day long . . . but without power, your effort becomes wasted energy, and you can't draw anyone in.

Instead of *teaching "great stuff" to our kids*, we need to refrain and start *teaching our kids "great stuff!"*

²Sullo, Bob, *Activating the Desire to Learn*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), Alexandria, VA, 2007, p. 79.

Worth Remembering

- If you don't enjoy your job as a teacher, you may be working too hard in the wrong direction. If you can figure out how to redirect the energy in your classroom and make it work for you as opposed to against you, you'll get your joy back!
- Typical teaching challenges include: repeated demands for expected test performance, overloaded content amount with limited delivery time, minimal financial resources for creative teaching materials, large classroom sizes, and numerous behavior challenges.
- Many people lack an authentic understanding of the obstacles teachers are expected to overcome.
- The COVID-19 epidemic heavily challenged student and teacher engagement, dramatically reduced instructional time, squelched student understanding, and made teaching even more difficult.
- COVID-19 can indeed be a reason for why things have changed, but it cannot continue to be an excuse for untapping potential in our kids.
- Every misbehavior is a result of an unmet need.
- Every child needs three things: To be *seen*. To be *heard*. To be *validated*.
- In order for today's kids to effectively learn new content, they first must be willing to:
 - Pay attention long enough to let the information enter their heads.
 - Figure out ways to relate that information to their own personal view of the world by seeing it, hearing it, feeling it, doing it, demonstrating it to somebody else, and most importantly, relating it to something they already know.
- Most kids have two questions every time they enter your classroom: "Why should I do _____?" and "When I do _____, what do I get?" AKA: "What's in it for me?"
- Teaching success and effectiveness depends heavily on the relationships that you build with your students, and less upon how much knowledge you have.
- Your students are, and always will be, more important than anything you teach them.

Instead of teaching content to your students . . . teach your students content. Kids come first. Content comes second. If you lead with heart, the learning will follow.

Worth Trying

- At the beginning of each day, or at the beginning of each class period, let your students unload and or share what is going on in their lives before you start to teach. This authentically shows your kids that you are putting who they are

above what you want them to learn, gives you more effective insight on your teaching audience, and allows them to free up brain space and reduce anxiety.

- Littles – HIGH, LOW, AND SPRINKLE! (5-10 minutes)
- Take turns (you included) sharing your:
 - HIGH – The best thing that happened to you since the last time we met.
 - LOW – The worst thing that happened to you since the last time we met.
 - SPRINKLE – How you showed kindness or received kindness since the last time we met.
- Bigs – WHAT'S IN *YOUR* BACKPACK? (10 minutes)
- Read or share parts of TJ's story and explain to your students that hard things weigh us down like a backpack full of rocks. Download the "What's In Your Backpack" activity sheet from the *Kids Before Content* section at the Cookie-bytes website or make copies of the illustration of TJ's backpack and allow kids to label the rocks with the things that are weighing them down.