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"Don't You Pick And Refuse Me"

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"The stone that the builder refuse
Will always be the head cornerstone-a;
The stone that the builder refuse
Will always be the head cornerstone."

– "Cornerstone," Bob Marley

This fall marks my tenth year at the Mission Hill School. I have taught five through nine year olds. Each year there have been students with special needs in my classroom. Sometimes they have IEPs, and sometimes they don't. To me, the work has always been about getting to know the students, getting to know them as individuals, getting to know what makes them rock and what makes them roll.

Spending time with them at the beginning of the year is my favorite part of teaching. So willing and wide-eyed, they share who they think they are as learners. One of many moments from my teaching career that has stayed with me is when, on the first day of school, an eight year old came up to me and said, "I just need to let you know that I can't read, and I don't read." I pointed to a word in the classroom and asked, "Oh, what does that say?" He read it. I pointed out ten different words. He read all of them. I said to him, "I thought you said you couldn't read. Do you mean that there are some words that are hard for you to read?" He said, "Yeah, that's what I mean."

For that whole year, we had an understanding that reading was something that was hard for him, and we would work though it together. I never tried to hide that reading was the area he needed to work on. In fact, he felt so comfortable; he didn't just rely on me for help. He sought out his classmates and other teachers as well.

I will never stop being surprised by the fact at such a young age; children begin to realize that there is something different about them. Or they start to think there are things they cannot do. This is what keeps me teaching, no matter how difficult the student's behavior, no matter how many children I work with, no matter what. I believe it is my job to help them see what they might not be able to see, or maybe even help them find the magic they forgot that is a part of who they are.

In 2006-7, I had the task of teaching the first substantially separate class at our school. Before this year, all of Mission Hill's students had been included in the classrooms. We have always had children with special needs, but before last year, we never had a classroom in which the students were told they had to be separate. Added because all Pilot Schools in Boston were assigned more students with special needs, the class is called a Primary Transitional Classroom, or PTC. It is designed in a way so that "hopefully" the children in my class will be transitioned into full-inclusion classrooms.

My class capacity is 12, but I had only five children assigned to my room. Me being me, I was confused about why three of the children were there. I really was unsure. I even thought there had been a mistake. And for the other two students, I understood how they would benefit from a smaller class size, but why not a smaller class that uses an inclusion model? I genuinely believe that all of the student in my class could have been in an inclusive setting.

I have never understood how someone looks at a five year old and says, "You don't fit." I mean, who does? Though I do support smaller class settings for children who need them, I took the role of being the teacher

of this class because I wanted to make sure that the children at Mission Hill would have classrooms that were as inclusive as possible. I also wanted to make sure the children who were coming into our school had a classroom that looked and felt like the sort of classrooms they would be moving onto, at our school and beyond. In other words, I wanted to create a kind of universal learning setting that would help them not just now, but in the future.

I had to be innovative if I was going to be able to do what I truly believed my job was, to help transition them into another classroom, not just at our school, but at any school they might attend. I worked with the other kindergarten/first grade teachers and introduced Racing Firecrackers drop-in (that's the name of our class, the Racing Firecrackers). Teachers sent children interested in spending time in my room to me. This was great; the students coming in were able to model behavior and provide opportunities for more conflict resolution strategies, and my students were able to act as leaders and feel successful in helping the other students navigate the space of our classroom.

I began to think about the PTC students who would be joining us over the course of the year. My biggest worry centered on how the incoming students would feel when they arrived. Would the current students make them feel welcome? Is there a strong sense of community? What happened was something I didn't expect at all. With every incoming student, it was like it was the first day of school all over again. Instead of my class holding their position, they regressed in their behavior and also, many times, took on the behaviors of the new students. While there was a big enough student body to maintain norms and say, "Hey, we don't do that here," the process of welcoming and integrating a new student still took up a lot of time and energy.

Often, the incoming students were angry. While they had been moved from an environment that they knew, that past environment had not worked for them. They came in feeling unsuccessful, and had made up their minds that they were different. At age five, they had made up their minds that they were not going to learn, and the move to my classroom intensified the power of that decision.

Close to March, another new student came into my class after enrolling at Mission Hill. He had torn through our building from his very first day. He was so sensitive and so misunderstood that the slightest look sent him into a rage. I will never forget the first time I restrained him. He fought and fought until I felt his body relax. I said, "Are you ready to hug me now?" His eyes got big and he looked at me with such surprise, threw his arms around me, and hugged me for longer than I had restrained him. I have never, ever in my life been hugged like that. Within a couple of days he had gone from yelling, running, and cursing to politely asking, "Excuse me, Miss Kathy, can I go to the bathroom?"

With that hug, that little boy transferred so much emotion. It was in that moment, one of many moments, that I am constantly reminded why I love to teach, and I why love to teach at Mission Hill. I am given time to make those connections with children and peel away the layers that make up their complexities. I feel lucky to have been able to teach that little boy; in just a couple of months, he taught me years' worth of lessons about how to make sure I take the time to see what is behind the actions of all children.

As for this year, 2007-8, the PTC class will be a part of Mission Hill again, but it will look different. We are lowering class sizes and making the setting inclusive. We are not close to finished with our work. Our work is just beginning.

The children I teach are the head cornerstones. They reminded me that anything is truly possible, and that no matter what, there is a cornerstone in all of us.

"Don't you pick and refuse me,
'Cause the things people refuse
Are the things they should choose.
Do you 'ear me? Hear what I say!"

Mission Hill is one of 20 Boston Pilot/Horace Mann Schools, a network of schools that began in 1995 as an innovative and unique partnership between the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union. The Pilot schools focus on creating communities of learners, providing rigorous and meaningful curriculum, and ensuring that all students are successful. Boston's Center for Collaborative Education, a CES Affiliate Center,

provides the Pilot schools with coordination support and assistance. Pilot Schools enjoy a high degree of autonomy and are accountable to high standards. For more on the Boston Pilot Schools, visit www.ccebos.org/pilotschools/bostonpilotschools.html.

In her tenth year at Mission Hill, Kathy Clunis says, "I love my job with its joys and challenges. Working at Mission Hill has allowed me to follow loves: to be with children, to travel to learn about the material, and to snowboard each season. Without those three things my life would be a mess!"

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