

Challenging Expectations of Failure

Engaging “Difficult” Students in the Creative Process

NURA ROSE SALA

Photograph by Ostill.

CHAMPAGNE SITS AT HER DESK in the middle of two rows of rambunctious third- and fourth-graders. A light-skinned gangly girl, with tight, short cornrows, she is squinting hard at her paper, gripping her pencil in an awkward fist, as if warding off attacks on her personal space. Her stance is defensive and tough. Yet her eyes are soft, like a little girl peeking out from the emotional fortress of her face. It’s hard to tell how old she is—nine years old, maybe ten?—since she’s half a foot taller than everyone else in the class. My intuition is that she has been left behind a grade, or possibly even two. We are preparing to write a poem employing the five senses and metaphors, using a simple three-sentence structure I have written on the white board.

This is the second week of my T&W poetry resi-

dency in a New York City public school, in a classroom with a mix of special needs and general education students, and sometimes it is a challenge to prioritize whose needs to address. Each student has his or her own unique challenges and gifts, and it is my job to help each one. I am watching Champagne in particular. A belligerent girl, she is often provoked by other students, who enjoy seeing her react to their jabbering insults.

I am bending over the desk of another student, my attention focused on helping him explore the possible colors to describe his cat, the adjectives that will bring his pet to life. Disrupting the relative quiet, Champagne shouts from the desk behind me. There is a shout back from another student, and just like that I am in the middle of a skirmish. Champagne jumps out of her seat, blushing red, with a hard, angry look on her face. It is obvious that the girl who yelled back was taunting her. The crux of the teasing seems to be a boy who is sitting nearby who is also being a provocateur. Their voices are escalating to the level of a brawl, and I quickly intervene.

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I go to the girl who is yelling at Champagne, and try to get her to be quiet, but she keeps dodging around my torso to yell back at Champagne. I try a different tactic and turn to Champagne, asking her to focus on writing her poem. She settles down, and the boy, left without an ally, also begins to write. Champagne is still testy, and definitely not writing. Her paper is blank except for her name. I realize that the main person to focus on is Champagne, as she is the locus of the teasing.

"I can't write," she says, peering sideways, on the lookout.

"Yes, you can," I say. "It's not that hard, let me help you. What about writing about something you love? What do you love more than anything else?"

As we talk, I am conscious of giving Champagne space and honoring her boundaries. I can sense her body's tension—she is ready to jump out of her skin. I coax her slowly, "What do you love to do the most?" Her glance suddenly shifts and she says, "I like go to the pool."

"What do you like about the pool?" I ask, "Can you describe it?"

Still looking sideways, she hesitates, then says, "The water is clean. I can go swimming." "Yay!" I say to myself, relieved to have gotten her focused on her work again. I see my opening and suggest, "So, this is where you can use a metaphor. Why don't you write 'the water is clean like..?' She slowly and laboriously writes the sentence, her cursive letters surprisingly clear and definite. "Clean like what?" I encourage, keeping my gentle tone. "Like a polished mirror, like a sparkling kitchen sink?" She sits scowling, her pen hovering above her paper.

Some of the other students are asking for help, so I begin to circulate and check on their work. With relief I see that the teacher's aide is on hand and helping as well. I walk around, reading the students' poems,

suggesting improvements and complimenting good use of metaphor and simile. I feel a sense of satisfaction that most of them have written at least three sentences, some five. Two enthusiastic students have written ten!

With a few minutes left of class time, I remember Champagne and go back to her desk feeling hopeful, inspired by the writing of the rest of the class. To my dismay, I see that she has not even written the end of the first sentence. I try the gentle approach again.

"Champagne, we are almost out of time. What about the clean water do you like?"

"I can swim in it," she says, curtly.

"Great," I say, taking a deep breath. "So the water is clean like..." Stubbornly refusing to answer, but seeing I am not going away, she puts her pencil to her paper and finishes the sentence. She writes, "The water is clean like swimming."

"Wow! Beautiful!" I say out loud, and touch her briefly on her back. It is always a delicate choice to touch students, even lightly, and I am mindful, yet I also feel a powerful, simple

message of assurance and care can be transmitted by human touch.

The next time I come to Champagne's desk, she has made a small addition to her line: "The water is clean like me swimming." I feel in her words both passion and power, qualities I decide I would like to draw out of her during my time with her class. Champagne ends up writing a powerful poem about swimming, and I praise her work to everyone and have her read it out loud, standing up proudly at her desk.

In that moment, I make a conscious decision to treat Champagne with love and gentle encouragement, rather than treating her as a challenge, a problem student. My sense is that she comes from a rough part of this already rough neighborhood of the South Bronx. A good number of the students in ps

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127 come from troubled family backgrounds. Why the other students choose her specifically as a target for their insults, I am not quite sure, but I think it is a combination of her light complexion, and her defiant, ready-to-fight stance. She strikes me as an emotionally precarious, insecure girl, on the verge of becoming a teen, and extremely sensitive. She reacts to the slightest provocation, and the other students rile her up to disrupt the class. And who gets blamed for the disruption? She does! I want to put my effort into supporting her expression, rather than helping her cope with expectations of failure.

A few weeks after she had written her triumphant first poem, I came to class and saw Champagne was absent. It turned out that she had just been thrown out of the class and sent down to the principal for starting a bad fight. The teacher suggested that she be sent home, and I quickly interjected, “No, let her come back to class—it will be okay.” A teacher’s aide was sent to get her, and Champagne was escorted back to the room, glowering and red-faced, in fighting stance. I waited until she took her seat and the rest of the students returned to their work, then quietly approached her. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, scowling and exchanging insults under her breath with the girl who usually started teasing her. The harried teacher asked if I wanted to send her back to the principal’s office, but I told her that if she would help me with the rest of the students for a while, I’d focus on Champagne.

I decided that instead of trying to help Champagne catch up with the rest of the class, it would be more beneficial for her to finish refining her poem, which described the powerful emotional

experience she felt when she went swimming at the public pool. I hoped that she could channel some of her ferocious energy into this work.

In the last two weeks of our residency, Champagne and I wrote more sentences together, and the rest of the class polished their poems. It slowly became clear was that she was very articulate when writing on a subject she was passionate about. To focus this passion positively, she needed the validation of a caring teacher, me in this situation, who would take the time and care to work with her. Her sentences were stun-

ning and clear, like beautiful bare bones. Each one was a simple, declarative sentence of life.

When it came time to practice for our upcoming presentation, I asked Champagne to stand up and read her poem in front of the class. She stood up abruptly, and with some bravado, now the center of attention in a positive way. As she read, she straightened her back, and her voice carried through the whole room like a punk rocker! I praised her work to the class. “I want you all to be proud of your work, be proud of who you are!” I

told them. Champagne’s example inspired them, though I could tell a few of her classmates were taken aback by the role reversal.

Over the course of the ten weeks I spent in her classroom, Champagne’s behavior and writing improved slowly, but steadily. Even more important, what first appeared to be stubbornness revealed itself to be a deep tenacity and courage. Using a positive rather than punitive approach was what allowed this to happen, and to plant in her a seed of hope and confidence. With students who are unable or unwilling to keep up with the class, I believe it is crucial to

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Whether or not our students remember it consciously, the caring and support we give them—the extra time we take with them—will help them go that extra mile. The deepest teaching is heart to heart, and can create miracles between you and a shy or challenging student. I always remember the teacher who told me I smiled more than anyone else in the class. I was a very shy girl, and this statement still surfaces in my memory to warm my heart, over and over. It is my honor to give back the energy of love and hope that I received.

The afternoon of our final performance, I was on stage, introducing each student. When it was Champagne's turn I said with a flourish, "And now for a young lady with a powerful voice: ladies and gentlemen, Champagne!" Champagne started slowly up the stairs, and took the mic, gripping it in her fist. After a moment's hesitation, she dove into her poem, reading it loudly and deliberately, one line after another without hesitating, pushing her voice out into the audience. She was doing it; she was swimming. 🐬

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