Hanging In

Strategies for Teaching the
Students Who Challenge Us Most

Introduction

I was chairing an hour-long meeting with school administrators, teachers, therapists, and support staff. The group had convened to deal with a single issue: how Dean, a volatile 4th grader, could more successfully transition from class to class. Dean insisted on being first in line, argued over every expectation, and swore at staff as he quickly lost his temper. He was exhausting his teachers, classmates, and everyone who was called in to de-escalate him and then assess his readiness for rejoining his class. We hypothesized what triggered Dean's reactions. We reviewed his complex family history, his ability to cognitively understand directions, and his ability to physically manage the passage from one room to another. We reviewed what staff had been saying to him, what rewards and punishments had been tried (all so far without lasting success), what the quality of his relationships was with peers and school staff, and what our over-lapping goals were for Dean and the school. By the end of the hour, we had synthesized our perspectives and developed a plan (the focus of Chapter 2 in this book). At that point, the principal turned to me and said, "That should do the trick." I sighed and responded, "There are no tricks."

There are no tricks to working with our most challenging students. If there were simple solutions to support their growth, the

students wouldn't be challenging. The professionals most responsible for dealing with these students—among many and most often, special education teachers, social workers, occupational therapists—do not have a secret cache of techniques. These professionals have received training in identifying disabilities and employing common interventions, but our most challenging students confound common solutions. These students crisscross categories of disabilities, challenging us to develop new and complex interventions, in combinations we have never tried before.

In examining the effect solely of trauma on students, Cole and colleagues (2005, p. 4) identify a long list of potential problems: decreased concentration, fragmented memory, poor organization, language deficits, perfectionism, depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior. It is reasonable to add to this list excessive absences, uneven skill development, and deficits in content knowledge. Now add a learning disability and all its possible presentations. There are no textbook cases that point to absolute interventions for students with such layered lists of issues. Each child is truly unique, and we can't "fix them" immediately.

The challenge for the staff is to hang in. Students like Dean can shed maladaptive behaviors for better ones, but not overnight. These students remind us that humans don't change as much as grow. We grow through support, useful feedback, trust, safety, and time. There is no guarantee that any intervention will work, and there are no guarantees that growth will happen within a given period of time. Hattie (2009), in summarizing his extensive studies on student learning, writes:

> Learning is spontaneous, individualistic, and often earned through effort. It is a timeworn, slow, gradual, fits-and-starts kind of process, which can have a flow of its own, but requires passion, patience, and attention to detail. (p. 2)

With no reliably predictable timetable for success, these students try our patience, arouse our emotions, and often bruise our professional pride as teachers, problem solvers, and caretakers. Dean's difficulty transitioning between classes triggered anger in some staff. For others he provoked sadness—"When Dean is like that, I'd rather be any other person in the world than that little guy." For many, Dean brought up feelings of incompetence and despair. They were professional helpers, and Dean would not let them help; his failure became their failure. We have been schooling children for many centuries, yet a 10-year-old was baffling the experts. Mary Haywood Metz (1993) notes that students "can confirm or destroy" a teacher's "pride in craft." She explains the students' power: "Because teachers' work consists of affecting their students, they are dependent on their students both for the actual success of their work and evidence of that success" (p. 130).

We are in the infancy of understanding what works for every child, at the beginning stage of identifying practices that can cut across community, cultural, and personal contexts. Dean has no researched cohort—in his case, an upbringing in poverty with a single mother, a disabled older sibling, attention deficit disorder (ADD), advanced language skills, and the experience of having switched schools three times. His case is unique. So we hang in, take actions, reflect on progress, recalibrate, take more actions, collect our stories, and recalibrate again. We hang in. We may have to hang in through as many as 100 repetitions for a student to grow into new skills and for us to learn what works (Benson, 2012).

Everyone who hung in with Dean learned a lot, and we are all better at what we do because of that work. A challenging student provides one of the best means of reaching mastery in our field—but only when teachers themselves get support and safety, and when they are not dealing with many such students in isolation. Hanging in with challenging students can be so meaningful and reveal to us the richness and novelty of human relationships. What we experience in schools reinforces our uniquely human capacities to accommodate, synthesize, learn, and grow.

Storytelling

As I chaired the meeting about Dean, I knew we could not pull a manual off a shelf to find step-by-step directions to solve his problems. Instead, I combed through my years of teaching experience, looking for a student and set of conditions that resembled, in some key components, what was happening with Dean. I knew I would not find an exact match with his environment, *and* with his cognitive abilities, *and* with his chaotic life, *and* with his age. But I did find a promising story.

I said to the team, "I once worked with a student named Charlie, and we. . . ." With my storytelling, I was inviting the others to find similarities and differences, or as we might say in a basic English class, to compare and contrast the setting, the characters, and the primary conflict in Dean's story with the one I was telling about Charlie. The story about Charlie—who was 10 years older and of a different race, economic class, and cognitive ability—did spark our creative solutions for Dean. Buried within all those differences were important, but not so obvious, parallels. My expertise, born of experience and theory, was in identifying the parallels, the most salient aspects of one context with another. The group's collective wisdom pulled the relevant elements from Charlie's story into a useful intervention for Dean.

What I offer in this book are stories of hanging in, the practice-based evidence from working with our most challenging students, and the wisdom I have gleaned from each. Many of my experiences come from working in special education settings. The intimacy of small classes (8 students with one teacher) and of small schools (100 students) provides the opportunity to drill deeply into the complex layers of social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, economic, and environmental factors that make each student who he or she is. There is never one thing that defines a challenging student, never one cause, never one life event, never one disability. As noted above, if it were one thing, the solutions would be simple. One of my own teachers confronted me with this important and demanding advice: "Keep the complexity as long as you can." My stories invite you to hang in with the complexities of our challenging students and to take action with no guarantees of immediately observable success. The only guarantee is more evidence that you can use with the next challenging student—because I can guarantee you, there will be another one who challenges your capacity to hang in.

With that evidence, we must work together along the path from stories to informed practice. Just as two people can have a different interpretation of the motives of Rick Blaine, Humphrey Bogart's character in *Casablanca*, team professionals will have many analyses of the root causes of a child's behavior and of what is to be learned from our interventions. The important work is to discuss and synthesize those perspectives while interactions with the student are still fresh. Once, in a meeting convened to develop an intervention with a particularly idiosyncratic student, I said, "This is a lot like our work with Harry a few years back." No sooner did I offer that bit of wisdom than hands shot up around the room with a chorus of, "No, this is not like Harry at all." We had never shared our various conclusions about what had caused Harry to be so challenging; with the passage of time, the team was unable to reconstruct the events in Harry's story in order to craft a shared understanding. Our stories are valuable only inasmuch as we collectively construct their meaning and articulate a shared wisdom. Set time aside to tell stories. The learning must be made explicit; we hang in collectively.

I have learned so much from working with our traumatized, neglected, and remarkably alive students and with their teachers. I want to distinguish that sentiment from the idea that, when I am teaching a core curriculum subject, my students are also teaching me. I come to them with an expertise in teaching theory and content knowledge that is beyond their years. I have no doubt who the teacher of the class is. What I learn, the gift to me, is how *this* student and *this* student and *this* student are coming to understand *this* lesson in the varied and unpredictable ways the human mind can work.

To be fascinated with the thinking and growth of each student is a formula for lifelong learning as an educator. Small classes are prime real estate for such adult education.

The teachers in our schools who embody this accumulated education should be treasured and exalted, but too often they work without the resources and support their challenges demand. The admiration they get is often in the form of "I don't know how you do your work," but rarely are these teachers asked to say how they actually do their work, as if the teachers of our most challenging students are in a different profession or possess superhuman qualities. This is a loss for us all, because the accumulated stories of hanging in with our most challenging students are vital to maintaining a diverse and just society. There will be other students like Dean and Charlie in our schools, and for now what works is less a step-by-step program in a box than a sharing of the learned wisdom from hanging in.

How This Book Is Organized

Each chapter of the book explores pedagogical issues through my work with one or two particular students. A couple of the students are composites. All of the students' names have been changed, and some identifying characteristics altered, out of respect for their privacy and their struggles, from which they have not always emerged with the hoped-for success. Those struggles underscore an important lesson: however hard challenging students have been to teach, their lives have been exponentially more difficult to live. I spent many an hour pondering what my schools could do for these students, but then I turned off my computer and rejoined my loving family, in my safe home where the bills had been paid. Many of our students did not have such luxuries.

Each chapter opens with a short summary of the issues that emerged from the work with the given students. The ensuing portraits of the students and description of the evolution of their growth are designed to embed those issues in the complexity of the daily labor of schools. As you read, if you are wondering how the lessons from each story apply to the students in your school, you are on the right path. Interventions that travel unaltered from one challenging student to another are a fool's gold. Please pan for the nuggets that fit your setting.

If it takes a village to raise typical children, challenging children in our villages need their schools to provide critical attention and some very unique structures. Thomas Armstrong (2012) urges us to make schools "positive niches—advantageous environments that minimize weaknesses and maximize strengths and thereby help students flourish" (p. 13). At the end of each chapter in this book, I will suggest approaches for "hanging in" that provide the most consistency and flexibility in developing those positive niches. The approaches are divided into three categories:

1. *For individual students:* Here you will find a variety of suggestions for students who may present similar challenges, and some warnings about the limitations of any given intervention.
2. *For the adult team:* Hanging in with challenging students is an ongoing curriculum for the adults in a school. Here you will find recommendations for the team to develop skills, obtain support, and not lose hope through the ups and downs of the work. You will also find prompts for storytelling.
3. *For administrators:* Administrators have their hands on the gears of a school and exert the most structural, political, and symbolic pressure on the program as a whole. Here you will find recommendations for constructing systems and procedures that give our most challenging students the best chance for success.

Throughout the book are figures offering advice, charts, and forms that I have come back to repeatedly when puzzling over what approaches might be adapted to the challenging student currently stretching our creativity.

I hope this book helps your school team hang in, learn, grow, and appreciate the hard work they do. I also hope for

- An increase in support and funding for the staff and programs that hang in with our most challenging students.
- An appreciation of the potential that rests within each student and the capacity to hold onto the hope when they can't.
- A realization that the expectation to educate every child is a monumental task, the complexity of which we do not understand.
- A commitment to storytelling and to constructing a shared meaning from those stories.
- An invitation to all educators to work with our most challenging students so that you can add your stories to our growing body of knowledge and practice.

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Toni

Absolutes and Teachable Moments

Schools embody particular minicultures. That is a good thing—when we enter a school, we want to feel that we are in a special place, that we have stepped from the street into an environment that offers students opportunities that they don't experience elsewhere. The confluence of the staff, the community, the history of the program, the physical characteristics of the building and grounds, and the regulations from the government create a unique school culture. That culture and the special opportunities that it generates are secured by the school having predictable rules and expectations, and the adults having predictable emotional responses to student activity. This story centers on a student, Toni, whose needs bring into question which elements of the school's culture are absolute and which can bend.

Challenges for Toni:

- Trauma history
- Substance use
- Learning disabilities and diminished skill set
- History of school failure
- Lack of trust

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