



When to Share the Bread

On reflecting on the American fable *The Little Red Hen*, storyteller Jamie Melton analyzes this idea of laziness as it applies to her classroom. The story teaches us that hard work is rewarded—a seemingly uncomplicated moral.

My one-year-old son and I read lots of books, and lately we've been reading *The Little Red Hen*. A lot. If you're not familiar, it's a lovely children's story about a little red hen who finds some wheat seeds and decides to plant them. She asks, "Who will help me plant these seeds?"

"Not I," replies each of her three friends—the pig, the cow, and the cat. And so the little red hen does it all by herself.

And so the story continues, through the many steps of growing, harvesting, and grinding the wheat. And at each step, the friends decline to help, leaving the little red hen to do it by herself, until finally the little red hen can make her flour into bread. And when she asks who will help her eat her bread, each of her three friends enthusiastically replies, "I will!" But the little red hen tells them no, and eats the bread all by herself.

So after my third reread today, I'm having lots of thoughts about the messaging in this book. I remember loving it as a kid. I think, like most little kids, I liked the repetition, but I also liked that the little red hen did all this hard work and she got to eat her yummy bread and that her friends who were lazy did not get to eat the bread. It was fair, which is a big deal when you're a toddler. So the story is a commentary on putting in the hard work and reaping the reward, and if you're lazy you don't get a reward. Good job, little red hen, holding your

friends accountable.

Which, to adult me, is . . . interesting. In the book, the illustrations depict the friends as playing and napping and stuff like that. So it's not like they're busy doing something else, it's not like they're unable to help for some reason, it's that they're choosing not to. So ok, that's fine. The story is pretty clearly making the point here about laziness.

But I'm also thinking about how the little red hen and, by extension the reader, is judging the three friends and saying, "ok, what you spent your time on is not worthy of eating my bread." And adult me knows that everything is more complicated and nuanced than that, and there are lots of reasons beyond just laziness that the friends might not have participated in making the bread. So despite the illustrations, this judgment feels really black-and-white.

And, like most children's books, the ideas of laziness, hard work, and our judgment of such applies way beyond the context of the little red hen making herself some bread. This conversation comes up all the time in teaching. I call it the narrative of the lazy student, and it sounds like, oh, kids are so lazy now-a-days, no one knows how to put in hard work, they just sit on their phones, they're so disrespectful. Sometimes it has the added layer of entitlement, especially when we start complaining about helicopter or lawnmower parents making everything easy for their kids.

I don't feel good about saying this, but I've thought these things about my students. It's really hard not to when I spent way too many hours on a lesson plan and they're not engaging, or when I burned through multiple pens giving feedback and then I watched them toss it in the trash can without looking at it. It's an easy narrative to get sucked into.

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I think there are students who can't engage in the work because they're lacking a skill set or context information and I haven't figured that out yet. Or because something big is going on in their lives outside of my classroom and they can't deal with everything at once. Or because they don't feel safe in a school setting. I think there are kids who are exhausted and kids who are tired of feeling like a failure. I think there are kids who struggle to see the long-term benefits of working hard over the immediacy of doing something more stimulating.

If nothing else? It's because that student is choosing to value something different than what I want them to at that moment. When I look at a kid on their phone and feel like they're sucked into silly drama and missing out on an opportunity to grow their brain, they might be looking at me and wondering how I could possibly expect them to focus on random biology trivia instead of their feeling of social belonging and acceptance.

Learning is hard work, and it's uncomfortable. There's uncertainty and intellectual risk involved, even for the most talented student. If a kid has never learned to tolerate that, or if they've learned that uncertainty is unsafe, or that the risk isn't worth it, they won't engage, and if I as the teacher can't figure out why they're not engaging, I'm going to (in my own personal desire for certainty) default to the narrative of the lazy student.

It's hard to figure out if a kid needs academic help or to feel safe or a granola bar or some grace to deal with being homeless that week or a cheerleader to push them into just the right amount of uncomfortable learning. Often I didn't have the information I needed to really thoughtfully make that kind of decision, and it feels sticky and weighty and like I have to get it right and sometimes I don't even know if I got it right afterwards and so sometimes I don't engage. And then I wonder if I look like a lazy teacher.

But my students and I all still exist in this framework



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of a school system and I still have to take attendance and put in grades. And hard work is something worth valuing. The well-meaning version of the lazy student narrative sounds like: "Oh, if you don't hold kids accountable, they'll never learn. And if you're constantly just giving away points or extra credit or redos, they'll never learn that hard work is really important."

There are flashes of truth in that. Hard work is really important. We can't just give away extra points. It is important to hold our students (and ourselves) accountable.

And . . . I think it's really hard to tell sometimes what we're holding them accountable for.

I got crap all the time from other teachers, and from kids too, for being "too nice." I always had extra pencils and paper because I was just like, "Not having your notebook at this point is just an excuse for you to not do anything. I would rather you do the work. So here's stuff to do the work." That seemed like holding them more accountable than being like "well you didn't bring a pencil, guess you're out of luck." Or my late work policy was that kids could turn in anything for full credit for almost the whole quarter. I wanted to hold them accountable for the learning, not the due date.

And I let kids redo stuff. Homework. Projects. Quizzes. Anything. I never wanted a student to be in a situation where they wanted to do the work and didn't have any options left. I never wanted a kid to feel stuck and unable to fix a mistake.

Did kids take advantage of me? I'm 100% sure of it. I even had students tell me they took advantage of my policies. But according to an article titled "What Would Motivate Teens to Work Harder in School?" by Arianna Prothero, the number one thing students thought would motivate them was the chance to redo work (2023). This reflects what I saw in my classroom. Giving my students another chance didn't enforce laziness; it generated motivation.

Do kids goof off and make bad choices? Of course. Is it important to hold them accountable for their choices? Absolutely. I didn't give extra credit. Ever. I've given zeros for cheating and not accepted late work after the quarter deadline. I've revoked the privilege to redo quizzes from students when they were blatantly taking advantage of the policy.

It's a hard balance to strike. Most of the time, I felt like I was wandering around my classroom asking myself constantly, when do I share the bread? When do I just share the bread? And when am I like, no way, you can't eat my bread. I think they can both be valid answers at

different moments. Ultimately it was my responsibility to judge each student and their situation and decide how I was holding them accountable that day and in that moment. And most of the time? I shared the bread.

Reference

Prothero, A. (2023, March 10). What would motivate teens to work harder in school? The chance to redo assignments. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-would-motivate-teens-to-workharder-in-school-the-chance-to-redoassignments/2023/02>



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