

Sometimes They Don't Need Yet Another Reprimand

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We all have them: the students who just cannot seem to bring their notebook or pen to class, and feel tired or sick every day. We all suspect we are being had by them – fooled into not pushing them to try. We are frustrated that these students are “being lazy” or “don’t want to learn.” This was my experience with “Su-min.”

Su-min was able to get herself to class, although that was about it for her. She never had her supplies and she was always tired. The excuse was always the same: “Teacher, sick.” It’s hard to remember these kids when we only see them once a week, but I was sure to make a note. The second time I told her she needed to bring her notebook and pen, and she needed to try her best. “That is my rule,” I said. “Try your best.” I spoke to my co-teacher and her homeroom teacher and was informed that she had a “very difficult home life”. Of course, she did or she most likely wouldn’t have problems in school. Her homeroom teacher offered to talk to the parents and I said I thought that was a good idea.

The next class there was no change. I kept Su-min after class, with another student, “Min-ah”, to help me translate. I told Su-min, “You are always tired. You never have your notebook or pen.” Su-min was quick to take a defensive posture. “Teacher, I am sick.” “I know,” I told her with a little more sarcasm than I had intended. “And I am worried about you.” Just as Min-ah was about to translate, she stopped and looked at me, “Teacher, really?” she asked. “Yes,” I replied, “I really am worried about her.” Min-ah translated. Su-min replied “Jinjja?” – Really? “Yes, I am,” I said again. “I want you to be able to do your best.” This expression of concern had clearly surprised both students, but I suspected little would change.

I decided that the usual outlets of going to the homeroom teacher and talking to the parents, though usually effective, would not be the solution this time. This student had problems in all of her classes and it seemed no one was getting anywhere with her. So, I made a note about the encounter after class and reflected on another solution.

The next class I presented Su-min with her own notebook and pen. I wrote a short note on the inside cover of the notebook: “I know you can do it! Try Your Best!” I also stamped the top of every page with a motivating expression: “You Can Do It!”; “A Home Run!”; “Awesome.” I told her to keep her notebook in the English room and she would always have it for class. That day, Su-min participated. I became her partner for practicing conversations and I was careful to check in on her each time I walked around the room. At the end of class, half of her first page was written on. Albeit, that was only about half the work I expected, but it was certainly more than she had accomplished to date.

The next time Su-min came to class I was sure to say “Hello,” to her when she walked in. I asked her how she was feeling and showed her where her notebook and pen were. She proceeded to collect her materials and went to her seat. For the first time, she didn’t feel tired and she wasn’t sick. She was ready to learn and to try.

It’s easy to be frustrated with students when they “can’t even bring a notebook and pen to class.” I have heard this complaint many times, and have expressed it myself. But we

have to remember to be patient, and appreciate that we don't know much about our students' lives outside of school. We don't know what their homes are like, if they are working, or even what their families' expectations are. But we can know one thing: if a student is having difficulty staying awake or bringing a notebook to class, then maybe the last thing that student needs is to be reprimanded or punished by yet another teacher. Maybe it's time that student was shown kindness and care, and reminded that school is a safe place where learning and development happen.

