

Reflections

Reflections, Relationships & Art Class

Rochelle St. Martin Pettenati

Abstract

My homeroom class was 8H. At that time the district grouped students homogeneously by rank or GPA. The “lowest” ranking class was 8H and they were mine. I remember the first day I met them, I was full of knowledge after completing my Master of Art Education just a few months before. I knew just what to do, just what to say. Undoubtedly, the students would love and respect me, and I would inspire them and teach them to love art. They would use art as another language for learning, I would differentiate to meet their needs and identify their “intelligence” based on Howard Gardner’s work (I had his book handy, just in case!). They would become lifelong learners--, after all this was all part of my newly developed teaching philosophy.

Students began filtering into the room. “Who the “f” are you?” some of them asked. Most of them ignored me. Some brought coffee and snacks, one sat under my back table, a couple on the window sills, and a few quietly sat at their desks. I introduced myself to the kids that were listening, I tried to engage with kids that weren’t and somehow, I got through it. It was the longest 15 minutes of my life.

I knew right away that I was completely unprepared for these circumstances. I felt like an impostor. Although I lived in the same city they did, I went to private schools. I was a 35-year-old white woman, in a racially and ethnically diverse school, with no, “street cred” as my students freely told me. I needed to figure out how to earn their trust and respect, and I needed to do it immediately.

I hate you. I love you.

You suck.

You are the best teacher.

I hope you die.

I wish you were my mom.

I don’t have to do anything, art doesn’t count.

This is my favorite class.

I wish I never met you. You changed my life. R.P.

Over twenty years ago I began teaching art in a large city in Massachusetts. I was hired to teach at what we referred to as, “The Academy,” the middle school, on the right side of the tracks. Where the lawyer’s, doctor’s and politician’s kids went to school. The fine arts director asked me to meet her at the office where I expected she would take me to meet the principal and show me my room.

Instead, she drove me to another middle school, the toughest school in the district, where teachers didn’t last a full day never mind a full year. I was completely speechless and told her there must be a mistake. She broke the news to me that someone with political connections got the other job, and if I wanted to get my foot in the door, this was the only job available.

I will never forget walking through those doors. The school was completely run down with broken windows, broken lockers, and no principal. But there was a whole group of dedicated teachers who inspire me to this day. I moved into the art room, put up posters, hung up some of my artwork, took a deep breath, and started my journey.

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I joined something called the Student Assistance Team (SAT). a group of teachers who meet regularly to discuss students having difficulty and how to mentor them. We had to give up two prep periods a week, but I was willing to try anything. We met as a team once a week. We would then meet with our mentees either before or after school, at the library, wherever and whenever we could. We were trained in grief counseling, drug abuse, neglect, and many other topics.

I thought I was beginning to get on the right track, a few students had come around and had begun to settle down and create some work. I wanted the students to create a mural for the new Student Assistance Center. Ironically, the title of the mural was “Increase the Peace.” One day, while some students were painting, a gang fight broke out. Colors were flashed, punches were thrown, and no one had ever told me not to jump in to stop a fight. I was injured and sent to the hospital.

My arm was severely sprained, and I needed an air cast. I was told to take some time out of work. I thought, no way! I will not allow these gang members to intimidate me. I went right back to homeroom the next day. Guess what? That day I started to earn “street cred.” The students began to see me as a person. I was vulnerable, breakable BUT I didn’t run. I stayed. I spoke to them about my life. I listened to their stories as they created their work. I realized my philosophy had changed; art was my vehicle, but fuel was relationships. I mistakenly thought I was the most important person in my classroom. I didn’t value my students’ stories. I realized I was the learner.

I stayed in that position for over 4 years. Throughout those years I built lasting relationships with students. During year two I became the facilitator of the Student Assistance Team. African American girls asked me if they could feel my “white girl hair,” of course I let them. Students shared with me how to hide so I wouldn’t get shot in a drive by. One student told me about her mother and her boyfriend prostituting her. Students came out to me, and I helped them tell their parents. I took students to meet with their parole officers. I created safe zones in individual teachers’ classrooms where students could take a break if they needed one. One of those years was extremely difficult with 36 students disclosing sexual abuse. I found a psychologist within walking distance of the school so I could cope with these and many other issues these young people had to deal with. And unfortunately, I had to learn that I couldn’t save them all.

A story that will stay with me forever is that of a young African American man that came to our school in seventh grade. He was referred to SAT because he was extremely quiet and didn’t mix in with the other students. I became his mentor. We talked about so many things, we created art together, we joked that our first names rhymed. One day he came to our meeting nearly in tears. He told me that everyone thought he was a criminal or that he was going to jump them or rob from them. I assured him this wasn’t true; he was one of the gentlest souls I had ever met. He explained that I didn’t know what it was like to be a young black man. He told me when he walked to school, people always cross the street before he passes them. He told me he was followed in stores and afraid to be accused of anything. I found it hard to breathe. I had never thought of what it was like to live in his skin. Although I tried to calm his fears, I knew he spoke the truth, and it broke my heart.

A large group of Cambodian families had emigrated to our city to escape the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. Many Cambodian students attended my school. Unfortunately, many of these students joined gangs, specifically the Bloods and Crips. I was asked to mentor a sixth grader named Rabi. Rabi was at the top of his class academically but always seemed sullen and sad. Initially, we developed a great relationship. I got encouraged him to create artwork based on his culture which he loved. He spoke about having to stay in the house after school because of drive by shootings in his neighborhood. He was worried about his younger sister and was responsible for her welfare as his father was absent and his mother worked nights. I got him a pet rat, which he loved, and he began to come out of his shell. He was so funny and confident at school and began to make friends.

I so wish this had a happier ending. In 8th grade Rabi joined a gang. I begged him not to, he was an honor student for God’s sake. He turned and began shouting at me, I was disrespecting his family, they were all in the gang and it was expected that he would represent. I felt like I had been stabbed straight through my heart.

He graduated and went to the high school. I prayed for him. I read that he had been arrested for a shooting and was incarcerated. I was inconsolable. I continued to pray.

A few years later I was at a restaurant and at the table next to me were 10 of my former Cambodian students. They invited my husband and I to their table. They recounted stories of their artwork and silly middle school antics. They spoke of me, trying my best to wrangle them and thanked me for never giving up on them. I burst into tears. Rabi weighed so heavy on my heart. I was afraid to ask them about him, I feared he might be dead. I finally asked them about him. They got him on the phone! He was in tears when he heard my voice. I was choking on my words. He had children, he got back on track! My prayers were answered! We have spoken periodically since that day, and I asked him why he felt as though he needed to join the gang. He stated that other kids would call them cat eaters and make fun of their looks and culture and he needed a group to feel part of, to protect him. I finally began to understand.

I realized how naïve I was. I believed my lessons based on the cultural heritage of my students and a once-a-year Cultural Night was enough. Once again, my lifelong learning journey continues.

From there I was transferred to two elementary schools that were feeder schools to the middle school. I was able to bridge the gap between elementary and middle by continuing to facilitate the SAT one afternoon a week. Helping students in both the schools was paramount, and I worked with School Adjustment counselors to ensure students had what they needed. You see, the elementary students were mostly the younger brothers and sisters of my former students. Their stories were the same and their needs were great.

One student that left a handprint on my heart was Ella. Ella is on the Autism Spectrum. I first met here when she was three years old. She was precocious and beautiful. She was also non-verbal. I usually begin my classes by gathering my students into a circle and sharing a book or a story. Oftentimes, Ella would sit on my lap during this time. When Ella was in kindergarten, she began writing streams of numbers into the thousands. Over and over again, she would write. She expanded into writing letters, but they were a jumble, and no words could be discerned.

One Friday, I was setting up and Ella came into the room in tears. She threw herself on the floor crying and screaming. I asked the paraprofessional what was wrong. It seemed she had scraped her knee at recess and needed a bandage but kept ripping it off. I tried consoling her without success. I decided to try giving her a paper and pencil. I asked her to try to write why she was so angry. She wrote, clear as day, I want a Hello Kitty Band-Aid. Needless to say, none of the adults in the room had dry eyes. I had Ella until 8th grade and keep in contact with her mom.

Unfortunately, every school I worked at was deemed under-performing by the department of education. We were told our students' social, emotional learning was unnecessary. School Adjustment Counselors were cut, Student Assistance Teams and Centers were disbanded, and the spaces were made into MCAS tutoring centers. It was a dark time.

Despite, the turn in education toward MCAS prep, teaching to the test and MCAS across the curriculum. I managed to write and receive a Creative Schools grant through the

Massachusetts Cultural Council. I was teaching at an elementary school that was considered a Gateway School. One third of our students were newcomers to the country. Children came from 27 different countries. Although I was not supported by my principal in regard to the grant, I was supported by my director and superintendent. The grant was for 4th & 5th grade students, and it lasted for two years. I partnered with a group from Boston called Tribal Rhythms. We met once a week for two hours (YES! I took two hours of "learning time" during MCAS!).

Teachers, students, and our partners became a tribe. We wrote multicultural, science, art and music-based plays. We made costumes, props, instruments, music, and art together. We performed our plays for the school and greater community. Our MCAS scores may not have gone up, but our students learned. They learned to work cooperatively using multiple intelligence. My non-native speakers felt that their voices were here. They all grew in ways not reflected in standardized tests.

Dedicated teachers continued to do the work to help our students. Clothing drives were still held, food pantries at the school level opened, and we continued to mentor and guide our students. I addressed the school committee many times to fight for arts education, social justice, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) centers and finally the pendulum has begun to swing back to PUT STUDENTS FIRST!

I was fortunate enough to win many teaching awards throughout my career at both the local and state level. The most precious award to me is my students. Currently, I am teaching at a community school in the same city my career began all those years ago. My students range from 3 years old to 14 years old, I am blessed to watch them grow up. I had many of their parents in school. I still participate in SEL activities and my students know I am there for them no matter what.

I want to share one last story. A story about Abby. I had Abby during one of the most difficult periods of her life. She was a middle school student placed in foster care due to parental substance use and mental illness. She referred to me as, "white bitch." Try as I might, Abby would not connect with me or any adult she was paired with. She graduated and went to high school. That Thanksgiving my niece Mary asked if she could invite a new friend to dinner. In walked Abby, and she has been a member of our family ever since. When Abby aged out of foster care, my father had recently died and she moved in with my mother for nearly ten years. Recently, she graduated from college and works for the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health giving back, mentoring, and helping others become independent and channel creativity.

I could write pages and pages of stories about the children I have had the honor to teach. But the honor is mine and I am their student.

Author Biography

I, Rochelle St. Martin Pettenati was born in Pawtucket, RI in 1963 and began my art journey three years later. I found expressing my self through visual arts was my true voice. Luckily, I had tremendous role models throughout my journey including my high school art teacher Sister Gertrude Gaudette, Thomas O'Hara at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where I earned my BFA 1985 and Virginia Freyermuth at the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth where I earned my MAE 2000. I consider myself a lifelong learner having earned a Graduate Certificate in Fine Arts Leadership from Fitchburg State University as well as 60 additional graduate credits in classes I have always been interested in!

My teaching career began with oil painting instruction at the local art association and community college. When my sons went to school, I quickly realized that all children don't learn in the same way and started doing some research. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory open my heart and eyes. I knew I needed to go back to school and become the art teacher I wish I had as a young child.

Currently, I teach over 500 students at a Pre-K through grade 8, Massachusetts Public School as well as Lead Art Teacher (grades Pre-K through 8) for the school district. I am lucky to see my students grow up both physically and artistically.

I am also a painter, exhibiting at local venues and galleries. I love creating art with my friend L.J. and my grandchildren as well as traveling the world with my husband.

