

## Loving and Teaching

KATIE JOHNSON

**I**n 1st grade one day last week, Sandra handed me a small, square pink paper. "This is for you," she said, her eyes crinkling with shy delight.

I took the pink square. In the upper left corner a many-rayed sun shone. Across the bottom, green grass spread from both sides of a small green flower, right in the center. In the sky, slightly to the right of center, were these words: *I love you.*

"Thank you, Sandra," I said. I am always moved by such a message, although I have received many in the course of my teaching life. "I love you too," I told her, and I fastened the pink paper to the middle button of my shirt,

**Every day, in every subject, with every bit of work the children do, every time I open my mouth or raise my eyebrows, I need to tell them all that this is a safe place to learn.**

to show off to the world.

These messages are nifty to receive, and are often the major reason I get up and come to school another day. As a human person I need love. So does Sandra; and from what I've seen this year, I'd say she gets quite a lot of it from her family—enough, in fact, that she can give me some.

We were working yesterday on collages of animals. Jamie's was a tiger, and Michael, who knows everything, informed him that one of his pictures

looked like a lion. Jamie screamed a wordless scream and ran at Michael with both fists. I pulled Jamie carefully away and told him calmly he'd have to sit alone for a few minutes. I put him gently in a chair facing the wall and took just one step back.

"I'm stupid, I know I'm stupid," he instantly began, pounding his head against the cinderblock for emphasis on the word stupid. "I can't do anything right; I know I'm stupid," he went on pounding rhythmically, beginning to cry.

As a display of zero self-esteem, this was a classic. I had thought of Jamie as an inherent whiner, but this was raw pain. I turned around and crouched next to his chair, enveloping him in my arms.

"You are not stupid," I said forcefully. "You are not stupid. You are a perfectly good little boy, and I love you. I like the way you read, and write, and work, and draw, and talk, and sing. I don't like the way you want to punch people, like just now. You are a perfectly good kid, I am glad you are in my class, and I love you."

By the time I finished this intense little litany, he was calmer. He leaned his head onto my arm for a minute.

"Now," I continued more briskly, "choices. Do you want to stay here or go to the timeout chair and work alone on your tigers?"

I like to weight choices.

Ten minutes later he was deep into tigers—or lions—and very content, working by himself.

What am I doing, you ask, loving 6-year-olds and concerning myself with how they accept themselves? Why don't I just sit them down and teach them reading and writing and arithmetic? All this emotion has no place in school! You think Jamie needs to be disciplined, not hugged? Get on with the three Rs!

There are moments, like with Jamie and his tigers, that it isn't possible to teach until I have loved. Every day, in every subject, with every bit of work the children do, every time I open my

mouth or raise my eyebrows, I need to tell them all that this is a safe place to learn. Now Sandra is probably fine, and Jamie will learn to accept himself—at least at school. Never mind how much extra energy it takes from both of us to help Jamie rebuild and maintain a precariously positive self-image at this early, early age. Never mind that there seem to be more Jamies than Sandras with every passing year.

Just as I have to teach them—all—to subtract big numbers and to write their *bs* frontwards, as teachers have always done, so too I now have to teach them to accept themselves. I know lots of ways to teach subtraction, lots of ways to help children improve their printing. I only know one way to convince Jamie and Sandra and all the others that they are loved. The way to do that, for me, is to love them. □

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