

The Third Way: A Concept of Mentorship¹

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MONDAY, October 14, 7:30 a.m.

As Janice Marks walked from the bus stop to her school, she thought of its early 1980's modernist architecture, the red and orange concrete halls that seemed to shout, "Caution," "Danger Ahead," with each step toward the classroom that she took. She had been teaching for two years and while she was becoming more confident, she still felt years away from being like the experienced veteran teachers that she remembered from her own high school in Michigan. Her current school, the Carter School for Peace and Diversity, in East New York, Brooklyn, was the veritable "ship in a tempest," weathering high teacher turnover and recurrent outbreaks of student violence while somehow still staying afloat.

"Good morning, Dulcinea," Ms. Marks said to Dulcinea Farmer, the pretty 15-year old from her second period English class.

"Good morning, Ms. Marks," said Dulcinea, who, Ms. Marks had learned, had already lived a life of vivid and dark changes that she could not match with her pale twenty-four years of dull and happy years of suburban life. Dulcinea was always here before the bell rang, sitting on the floor doing her homework from the previous day. She was an eager student who Ms. Marks loved as she thought she would her own if she had had any. As she walked into her classroom and set her books down, she saw the summons letter she had left on her desk Friday afternoon.

"You are summoned to my office at 9:00 A.M. Monday, October 14th to discuss charges of insubordination relating to your failure to follow a mandated Regents Prep curriculum for your 11th grade English class. Under Article 21C of the union contract you are advised to bring Union Representation."

¹ Inspiration for this case was found in two Teachers Network Action Research Studies: "Leadership by Design: How a Team Experience Shaped Teachers' Views of Themselves as Leaders," by Elizabeth Gil (TNLI New York) and "Mentoring to Save a Teacher" by Esther Roberts, (TNLI Delaware).

The ball of ice that had been melting in her stomach all weekend froze solid once again and she sat down heavily in her chair. She loved the school, she loved the students, but her principal, Mr. James Eisen, did not love her. "I'm a square peg in a deep, dark hole," she said aloud to herself. But Ms. Petradura, her chapter leader and also one of those veteran teachers she had come to admire, would be there and maybe she could shed some light on the situation. Now the students were coming in from the cafeteria. It was 8:05. Time to teach.

8:55 a.m. (Room 390)

Across the building, Mr. James Eisen sat behind his desk contemplating the scholarship report for the last grading cycle and humming along to The Stones. At the rate the students were currently passing their humanities courses, both English and social studies, only 50 percent would be graduating on time in cohort 2010. Even worse were the projected Regents passing rates. He had a relatively young, green but energetic staff with a core of experienced veterans who mentored the younger teachers and brought in the big numbers year after year that somehow had led to this school getting an A on its annual report card. Not a high A, but an A nonetheless.

"You can't always get what you want, you can't always get what you want," he hummed.

But success was what he deserved, good fruits after years of working hard to establish the school. He had suffered hundreds of sleepless nights and political battles the ugliness of which he could not have imagined when he set out to form a school based on those youthful ideas of peace and tolerance. A school was a school, and a school was a battleground, he thought to himself. He remembered the November night last year when he had gone out to the tool shed at home to get a hammer, brought it into the kitchen and calmly brought it down on the screen of his Department of Education-issue Blackberry. Once, twice, three times, until he was satisfied. He had offered the mangled carcass to Pete, his long-suffering partner, who, close to tears, had offered to leave to make more room in James's life for school. It had all been too much.

"But you can try sometime—"

A knock on the door and Eisen said, "Come in." Ms. Marks and Ms. Petradura walked in, shattering his reverie. Another problem to deal with, thought Mr. Eisen. This job sucked.

"Please have a seat," he said. Ms. Petradura opened her notebook to record the meeting. It was standard procedure of course, the chapter leader doing her job, but it still irked him, how rigid it made everything seem, like he was the one on trial.

"I've called you here today, Janice, because of concerns I have about your instruction. I came into your classroom the other day and you seemed to be teaching a lesson on jazz poetry. You were looking at "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday and listening to a recording of it."

"Yes," said Janice.

"I was a little confused," continued Mr. Eisen. "Didn't we discuss that the English Department would follow the scope and sequence set by the state for Regents preparation? My understanding is that you've been teaching jazz-age poetry for a month now. It's October and the scope and sequence clearly says that this is the time when you should be focusing on Task II of the English Regents examination, *Report of Information*."

There was a glance between Petradura and Marks and he noticed Marks's hands were tightened into a pale knot of apprehension. Not what he was aiming for exactly.

"Don't get me wrong, I don't want you to be teaching to the test," he said, offering a smile and what he hoped to be a look of empathy. "And I love your creativity, but these kids must pass this test or they don't graduate."

Janice sat up in her seat. "I was trying to incorporate this into Regents-style lessons. I worked on it all summer." Janice was no shrinking violet but appearing before Mr. Eisen was like being summoned to come before Henry VIII.

"A month on one topic? You can't just make your own curriculum out of what you care to teach. We have a responsibility."

Janice looked over at her representative who was impassively writing everything that was being said. Principal Eisen continued, “Now on Monday I’d like to see a set of lessons for the week that more clearly stick to the established scope and sequence.” He handed over a sheet of legal paper, a complex chart and table in three colors.

“And, you know, tell you what, I’m going to pull you out of the classroom on Friday so you can have all day to look over a model of lessons from the district which clearly teach Regents-prep lessons but are also creative and give freedom to the teacher.”

Ms. Marks said, “Thank you, but I think I can handle it over the weekend without missing my class.”

Eisen folded his arms on the desk. She could see his cufflinks and a brown watchband peeking from beneath his suit jacket.

“Listen. Only 45 percent of your students passed the English Regents last year and—.” His eyebrows raised into two pyramids to complete the thought.

“Oh, now, you’re just trying to make me feel bad!” Janice was nearly in tears. “I tried my best!” There was silence. Carmen Petradura had stopped writing.

“Where exactly is this going?” Carmen asked.

Eisen looked down at his desk and took a deep breath. “I haven’t decided, I haven’t decided yet.”

So this is where it is, Janice thought. Carmen looked at Janice. She felt as though she were standing at the edge of a cliff with the earth rushing up to meet her. The bell rang.

“You have a class,” said Eisen.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” he said, “to be continued.”

12:15 p.m., the same day (Room 265)

“Oh, I felt so bad for you when I realized you had a class to teach right after that,” Carmen Petradura said.

“Yeah, it was like ‘Good morning class, sniff, sniff, let’s get started on our class, sniff, sniff,’” said Janice, laughing wryly despite the situation.

Carmen thought, this is why I always have a box of tissue on my desk, not for the students, but the teachers. How many had come into this room over the years, men and women at the desperation point? There had been teachers who were in deep with the principal, with troublesome students, with themselves. More than Carmen could remember but she almost always brought them back from the brink.

“Listen,” Carmen said. “I don’t want to make this seem less serious than it is, because it is serious.” Carmen sat down on the edge of her desk. “You’re an untenured teacher with fewer protections than those given to tenured teachers. He’s also done his homework and could easily have you out of the building tomorrow morning.”

“What would that mean?”

“While the union appealed, you’d go to an offsite location, a so-called rubber room, for thirty days, and then—“

“And then I would be discontinued.”

“Probably,” said Carmen. She knew she was too honest but it was necessary. Her Sicilian grandmother had always said sometimes you had to call a spade a spade.

Carmen continued, “Listen I don’t think he’s there yet. Privately he’s considering it. He knows he’ll take a morale hit because of break-room gossip and people would be fearful but it depends on his mood of the day too. He may be farther down the path than we think.”

“So what should I do?”

“Take the Friday, no complaints. I’ll sit with you before school and during my planning periods and we’ll work to see if there’s a compromise where you’re hitting all of the Regents prep material and it’s also creative enough so that you have a passion for it.”

Janice sighed and slumped. “Do you even think it’s worth it? I don’t even think I want to teach here anymore.”

“Listen I know something about the English Regents and I know something about principals. What they really need to be assured of is that there is a team working well and getting the job done. They stand alone, ultimately accountable for 500 students’ lives. It’s a tough job.”

Janice said, “I think they forget how hard it is to be a teacher though.”

“True that,” said Carmen. “It’s our job to remind them.”

FRIDAY, October 18, 7:15 a.m.

Janice was glad to have a reason to come into school early. It was a time when she could center herself before the roar of the day began. The hiss of the radiator and the sun rising over the city set the scene and allowed her time to reflect on what had happened and what could happen in the day ahead. She pulled the unit planning notebook out of her bag and glanced over her notes.

“Good morning,” Carmen said as she came in.

“Good morning.”

“The BQE was so light this morning. It’s amazing the difference leaving 15 minutes earlier makes.”

“That’s an added benefit. Thanks again for coming in,” Janice said.

“Not a problem,” said Carmen. “Did you make any progress last night ?”

“Well you know, I was looking at the Poetry Foundation website and I found some great poems from the Harlem Renaissance that would work as half of a literary selection for a Task III.”

“And what kind of controlling idea can you bring that around to?”

SUNDAY, October 20, 1:06 p.m.

Carmen was on the way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on this sunny Sunday, when her phone rang.

“Hi Carmen, it’s James.”

“Hi James, how are you?”

“I’m okay, and you?”

“Fine. I’m fine.” Carmen waited for the pause to end.

“Listen. Tomorrow I’m asking Janice not to come in, to report to Court Street. I’m discontinuing her.”

Carmen stopped at the corner of Park and 86th to pace. She always paced during these conversations and was glad she was outside and had a place to go. “Okay,” she said.

“It was a tough decision and I’ve thought a lot about it. But we’re bringing in Gabe Thanatos from Central to write it up Monday.”

Thanatos was known as the Grim Reaper. Once he wrote a report it was a done deal.

“Okay,” said Carmen, “What about Friday? Wasn’t there anything there that you liked?”

“I mean she got some work done on Friday. It was okay, but she just doesn’t get it.”

Eisen took a deep breath, audible over the phone. “So I’m calling you to let you know and um, see how you felt about it.”

Carmen had reached a sunny bench outside of Central Park facing 5th Avenue. Such a beautiful day.

“How I feel about it?” Carmen asked.

“I meant what your take on it’s going to be.” Carmen could hear heavy breathing on the other end of the line. Jim was stressed, that was clear.

“Well, I disagree with it, as I’ve said because of the timing and the fact that she’s a new teacher still learning her trade and she obviously cares about the students.”

“So you’re going to fight me?”

“Fight isn’t exactly the word I’d use. I mean once a teacher is discontinued I’m not really representing her. The union at large is.”

“But what are you going to say to the staff, in the school?”

“Well,” Carmen said, “I have a union meeting Wednesday afternoon. And it’s going to come up, and I’ll address it by saying I disagree with the decision and that our member who is in trouble will receive all the representation from the union that she is entitled to.”

On the other end of the line Eisen inhaled slowly. Carmen could see in her mind’s eye his flaring nostrils.

“So you’re basically going to destroy the culture and community we’ve created at our school over the past ten years.”

Carmen exhaled sharply as if she'd been punched in the gut. Here was dangerous territory.

"No. I wouldn't say that's what I'm trying to do."

"Because when you say you disagree with this decision it really makes me think that you don't care about the kids in the school, their education, which is why the school was founded, to give them a chance.

Dangerous territory indeed, thought Carmen.

"Well," she said, "We built this culture over time, all of us. It's very important to me. I am proud of our school and proud of our teachers and the success that we've made. But I must say that I fundamentally disagree with this decision."

"Why? You know yourself the children aren't being served."

"I know," Carmen said, "it's not easy being a first-year or even a second-year teacher. I know it's not easy being a teacher at our school period. As a mentor I've seen teachers make substantial growth over time and I think Janice has potential."

"But she doesn't get it. Her kids are not passing the Regents."

Beside Carmen, an old man and his dog had stopped to rest. When they heard the conversation from her end they moved to a less stressful bench.

"She's a second-year teacher. Right out of college. She's got some rough edges, sure. But they can be worked out."

"I honestly don't see how," Eisen said.

"Okay, here's how. I have been mentoring teachers through the mentoring program for the past couple of years as you know. I would like to spend more time with Janice helping her in this second year of teaching. I know I'm a global teacher and she's

had her official year of mentoring but I know the English Regents backward and forward.” Carmen paused. “Are you there?”

“Yes. I’m here. There’s just so much and sometimes I don’t think she wants to try.”

“Well, I can help with that too. In no uncertain terms I’ve stressed how dire the situation is. Like you said, we haven’t had a discontinuance in two years. Maybe we can work out a compromise.”

“She has to prepare them for the Regents.”

“I know.” Carmen could sense a softening but she could not be sure.

“If they don’t pass the Regents, they won’t graduate, they won’t get their diploma and god knows what will happen with their lives.”

“I know,” Carmen said. “I’m offering to co-sign with Janice. I’m offering to take her through the lesson planning process and through the English Regents prep curriculum and show her what I know. I’m offering to be a critical friend. Someone who will tell her the truth but who isn’t an administrator.”

Co-signing, thought, Carmen. To her it meant supporting a teacher, making sure they didn’t fail, helping the teacher help the students. Getting through those first rough years and occasional tears to reveal the potential of a solid teacher.

“That’s an interesting way of putting it, co-signing. Your professional reputation is on the line. What if it doesn’t work?”

“I’m convinced she needs more mentoring. One year is not enough. You’ll see improvement. I can’t guarantee anything but I’ll work my hardest.”

“If there’s no improvement at the end of the semester I’m discontinuing her.”

“Right. And I can never make a similar proposition again.”

Eisen sighed, a little less heavily. "Okay.I'll let you know."

"Okay, bye."

MONDAY, October 21, 9:00 A.M.

Janice had arrived to another summons letter in her box. She'd taught her first period creative writing elective not sure if she'd be there after lunch. Carmen had called her the night before with hopeful news but nothing definite. Now they were waiting together outside the principal's office.

"Don't worry too much," Carmen said, trying to reassure her. "We'll deal with whatever comes. He doesn't want to discontinue you."

The door opened and Mr. Eisen beckoned from the door.

"Please come in. Take a seat."

On the round conference table was a small meditation fountain. It hummed and burbled quietly.

"This is new," said Carmen.

"Yeah, Pete bought it for me. So I brought it in to make things more peaceful."

"Very nice," said Carmen.

"Thanks." Eisen put a file into his outbox. "So, Janice, you know why we're here. I understand that Carmen has explained the seriousness of the situation to you."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What risks is the principal taking by trusting another teacher with the mentorship of a troubled teacher?
- 2) What obligation does a teacher have to prepare his/her students for mandatory graduation requirements?

- 3) What obligation does a teacher have to teach engaging material that he/she is passionate about?
- 4) How do you create a school culture that balances safety and community for teachers with accountability for student learning?