

# Intense moral purpose

Having left the classroom to become a principal, an educator reflects on how to create positive, healthy learning environments for all students.

by Jill Jensen

“Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side ... These are the answers to what is most important in this world.”

Jon J. Muth, *The Three Questions* (2002)

As a principal, one of my greatest challenges is staying focused on what is most important and eliminating, or at least limiting, distracters. At any given moment there are a plethora of items on which I could focus my attention — a meager budget, a broken window, writing a message for the newsletter, figuring out what to do with 25 full sets of hockey gear that are sitting in the office, checking up on a report of vandalism in a bathroom, making sure all of our classrooms have working technolo-

gy, job action issues and responding to email. My to-do list is endless, but it is the least important part of my work.

The reason I agreed, ten years ago, to leave my classroom and “enter the office” was a belief that I could improve learning opportunities and life chances for more students than I could as a teacher. I believed that I could do more to create positive, healthy learning environments for all students, especially those who are disadvantaged. I still believe that I can make a difference, but my

perspective has changed. I know that the choices I make for our school are important. The choices I make for individual students are crucial.

I would like to tell you about Linda\*, a student who teaches me daily about the value of intense moral purpose, trust, and relationships (*\*details have been changed for privacy*). She also keeps me constantly reconsidering effective student discipline! Linda is not appreciated by many adults and is often the scapegoat when trouble occurs. She is being raised, with her siblings, by her grandparents. She is one of the most intelligent people I know,

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but neither Linda nor many adults believe this. Linda is often bored in school, does little work, and hands in nothing. She is intimidating to other students because of her dark, brooding demeanor. She has suffered abuse and generally feels that life is futile. She is quick-witted, artistic and fiercely loyal to her family and her culture.


Last year, Linda's mother, who hadn't been part of her life for several years, returned. Understandably, there were adjustments and uneasiness; Linda did not know if her mother would stay around for long. We had the opportunity to talk often as Linda was a regular (daily) visitor to the office for a variety of reasons. Sometimes she just needed a few minutes of quiet in her day. One morning after she had been sent in for throwing snowballs, we were talking and I asked her what her world would be like if she were

able to control everything, if she had that power. Her response was, "My mom would get up on her own." I suddenly realized how little I understood about her life. I thought I knew Linda because we had spent time together and talked daily.

I learned from this experience with Linda that there are many things I take for granted and that the "little" things are not little, but significant. I appreciate the time Linda and I spent together in the office talking, eating, playing chess, drawing, carving or just sitting. I am not her

family, but I can give her my time and my attention. She is a student we could easily lose, in many ways. She is the most important reason I am an educator.

I am passionate about my work as a principal because I know that teachers and schools make a difference. We change lives and give life chances to children who might otherwise be lost. At the heart of all we do are the learners in our care. We have a responsibility to each of them.

"Those in positions of responsibility – educational leaders – have to carry the burdens of being proactively responsible for changing those things which they have some control over in order to alleviate disadvantage and promote the deeply human fulfillment of young people." (Starratt, 2004, cited in Kaser and Halbert, 2009, p.22). 

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## Know More

Kaser, L. & Halbert, J. (2009). *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and Learning in the Transformation of Schools*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Muth, J. (2002). *The Three Questions*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

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