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Literacy: The Shape Of Something Possible

by Miles Caudesch

I walk in, Substitute Special Education Paraprofessional. Right away, #1 comes up to me, smiling, acting sweet, like something is wanted. #1 leans that friendly head against my ribs. I smile back, tousle #1's hair, measuring, wondering what this child is interested in.

A few weeks into the job, I'm getting used to #1's communication: biting, scratching, tugging, yanking, pinching, pulling, running away; it's normal for me to be sat upon, nuzzled, jumped with, held hands with, and fallen asleep next to. In my mind: "What does this child need? How can we communicate? This child has no voice. How can we make meaning of our time together?"

I discover that food is magical. And paper. Any kind of paper that crinkles, rips, resists, shreds, tears, piecemeals, falls apart, decomposes, hangs around, gets thrown away, is recycled, gets placed up high on shelves, or is hidden in cupboards. And hidden food, in the fridge with someone else's name on it. Anyone's drink, from across the room. Or at the lunch table. Another child's granola bar: crisp, unwrapped, then swiped. Someone's french fries smothered in ketchup. A hand dug into, a goal achieved. Ketchup, bbq sauce, pizza, tomato soup, potato chips, cookies.

I read #1's educational goals. By the end of the semester, we're supposed to be sitting still, for five minutes, at a desk. How can I make this happen? How do I calm #1's nervous system, when it is constantly firing back and forth, searching for sustenance, or wandering around and running away to find something neither of us has a name for?

I discover that few things in school interest #1. I can't find an external motivation other than food or paper—nothing digital, or cause-effect, or commanded. Warnings and sternness don't work. Kindness and gentleness are better, but inconsistent. Typical social interactions don't exist.

We try...blocks...felt...dolls...animals...bristles and cones...checkers...wheels...building...fashion...glitter and glue...trains...rice and barley...water balloons...stickers...shaving cream...cookie dough...crayons...markers...paint...play-dough...sand...manipulatives...stacking...falling...rolling...bouncing...standing...walking...playing...sitting...dressing up...napping...

One day, we happen upon a book about animals, with color and certain patterns: white and black stripes, polka dots, contrasting

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rainbows. There are ponies, zebras, monkeys, chickens, cows, kittens, orangutans, birds. And a new magic portal: Dogs. Dogs seem to capture #1's attention in such a way that the book floats, hanging open somewhere in this child's consciousness. The word *dog* feels like it's coming from somewhere, then going somewhere.

Out of nowhere, one morning, a true-to-life dog photograph almost gets touched by #1's fingertip. The image is barely engaged, then the moment is gone; the page is turned, the book is flipped; the image is dropped, it's almost obsolete. But then #1 comes back to look at the dog again. The pages get passed by till the dog is found. #1 stares at the dog. Flips the page back and forth, a hand and two fingers coming forward to pet the dog. I watch in alert slow motion, noticing that #1's attention has lasted more than two seconds. It has extended to maybe thirty seconds, maybe a minute. Inside, I celebrate that something important is happening right now. Something clicked somewhere inside #1's brain. *Dogs* connect with #1.

I hurry to the school library: Do we have any spare books about dogs? Dogs with live photos: not cartoons, no CGI, no drawings or illustrations? Just real dogs with real people, in nature, with other dogs, etc. The TL frees out a 1994 copy of *Dogs*, by Don Harper. I bring this book back to the resource room. I tell #1 that it's time to read. We set up a snack and commence, by looking at the cover.



We turn the pages, slowly, talking about how to care for the book, and how to care for dogs. The first day, we get to page twenty-three. I celebrate: We sit together, reading the photo captions, for three minutes. Amazing!!

The next day, I make sure to schedule in more reading time—after recess, and after physical needs are met. #1 and I set out the book, talking about caring for the book and caring for dogs (well, I am talking, and #1 is maybe listening, but I don't hear any words back). We read the photo captions again and get to page forty-six. Four minutes. The next day: same procedure, page fifty-eight, five minutes. By the end of the week, we've "read" the entire book: all eighty pages, meaning, the photo captions. We've managed to sit for almost ten minutes! And, all of the book's pages are still intact. I make a quizzical observation: Though #1 likes paper, not once has this book become vulnerable to ripping or shredding. I am mystified. Perhaps #1 perceives something special about books?

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research, or otherwise enhancing one's life with new tools and understanding for a specific purpose. And it's vastly improved with the social experience. That, too, might be the meaning behind "life" in the title of this article.

When thinking about what to call this article, I examined some of my final moments in Myanmar. I was visiting the University of Yangon, and was planning on visiting the library by meeting with its staff. It was in a tent under the sun outside of the library that Penhleak Chan and I met with Dr. Ni Ni Naing, the head Librarian, to discuss the world of libraries in Myanmar. Ko Maung Maung Soe of the Save the Libraries campaign was also in attendance to discuss his initiative to bring community libraries, funded by locals of Myanmar, to many different small communities throughout the poorest regions of the country. We discussed and discussed, and after meeting, we were set to go. But we weren't in the library. We hadn't seen it. It wasn't open on the day we were visiting. Dr. Naing expressed that we should see the library she was so proud of, and so we walked to the library and, nodding to my privilege and incredible opportunity, I joined the others in entering. A quiet, cool place greeted us. On display were antique rice leaf inscriptions from centuries past in glass cases. Jewel-encrusted antique cabinets were in corners with brief descriptions on where they came from. The library was here and it was present. It was present.

The emptiness felt alchemical, like a distilling tool allowing me to see within the folds of reality. It was empty, devoid of people, but symbolic of all that I had seen on the trip—that which I've shared in this writing and much more. In one year, this building would be knocked down and replaced with a bigger, taller library, Dr. Naing said. The country values its libraries and most of the funding is coming from the Ministry of Education. As she explained this, I could not believe it. In some parts of my own country, libraries are being shut down, opposed, even vehemently mocked by people who have become so isolated and disconnected through their personal devices that they have forgotten the historic relevance of the library. To those reading this, that might not be surprising—it might even be a common sentiment among people you interact with.

All libraries carry the potential to be symbols, and many people think of their library (or the universal library) as a symbol representing certain community and societal values. On this trip, that library served as a space documenting a certain literacy I had experienced during this journey of growth. All vacations come to an end. I had to say goodbye to Myanmar, to the new acquaintances, my friends, and the heat. And as I did, I humbly offered thanks for the opportunity to be reinvigorated with hope and reaffirmed with the How of what information can do, what writers can do, what activists can do, and what librarians can do in the present day. 📖

We continue in this pattern, daily. I begin incorporating other elements into the reading time, so it becomes interactive: "Show me the red bow," "Show me the big dog," "Where is the little dog?" "Show me green grass," "Show me yellow flowers," "Where is the man?" "Show me the man's beard," "Why does he wear gloves and boots?" "Show me cold snow," "Why is this dog jumping?" "Count the dogs," "Count the wolves...." I help #1 manipulate fingers to count one, two, three, etc.

We increase our time sitting and focusing, sharing words and concepts, and exploring photographs and eventually additional text. After three months of reading the same book every day, #1 sits still, follows my hand across a page, responds to my verbal cues, and listens if I fill the time with other snippets of the text. By now, I've stopped giving snacks or redirecting #1's attention if it strays. Reading seems to have become its own special activity with its own inherent reward.

We read for the pleasure of reading. We read to acquire new knowledge. We read to share a safe space together. We read to establish and maintain trust. We read to remind ourselves of what's important for that day's learning. We read, I hope, for the possibility of functional communication. #1 consistently comes over to the desk when I pull out this book. #1 does not run away, when *Dogs* shows up. We spend twenty-five to thirty beautiful minutes together each day, trying to find words for this something very important in #1's life—something I have no name for, and #1 can't tell me the meaning of.

I finish my assignment for that class, that semester. The lead teachers are pleased that #1 can sit and focus on a task, well beyond the educational goal. I tell them that this book needs to accompany #1 to whatever school or class comes next. I wasn't able to teach #1 to speak, but I was able to teach #1 that reading means something positive. It feels good. Reading is a way to order the day, rather than existing chaotically.

I hope that the reading experience #1 and I shared will grow into fruition. I hope an encounter with dogs in the future will bring to mind the hours we spent discussing *Dogs*, by Don Harper. I trust that the stability we found together means that #1 will be able to find stability, again, as childhood gives way to adulthood. I would love to walk into an animal facility some day (pet store, farm, vet clinic, shelter, therapy training, etc.), and see #1 there, all grown up, caring for dogs. Perhaps dogs speak a language that #1 understands already; the book was just a mechanism to allow this knowledge to come forth.

I send a follow-up note to the TL, expressing my gratitude for the gift of that book, which enabled a critical phase of success in #1's academic life. The TL responds: "That's what we're here for! To bridge the gap between what students already know, and what they can know, even if it's never spoken aloud!" 📖