

If You Can't Quantify It, It's Not Real (or Valuable):



How 'Proving Student Growth' Harms the Human Side of Our Students Written by Cat Weaver, CAP Coordinator

I often think about the purpose of education and what the real role of education is in our students' lives. As educators are we to help student become good little test takers? Compliant factory workers? Decent human beings? In the eyes of The State and Teacher Quality Institutes, a 'teacher's contribution' to student growth is proven through test scores, but taking a test is often bigger than the act of sitting down and answering questions correctly. A test is a form of judgment. Do you know the *right* answers? If you don't; you're a failure, your teachers are failures and your school is a failure. But what are the *right* answers and are we even asking the *right* questions? Everyone wants data to show what a student learns academically, but what about all the life lessons they are learning?

As an educator, I've learned that we have to pay attention to the human side of our students. We have to listen to their stories, consider the challenges they face and help them make healthy choices for their lives. Brene Brown contends that as humans we are hardwired for telling our stories. To find real meaning in our lives, we must have the courage to tell our stories, the compassion to listen to other's stories and make connections between those stories. If we are so busy teaching content so that students can pass the test, what happens to the core of who our students are?

Our students don't take tests well. Many of them have already 'failed' at the traditional school ideology. They wouldn't conform, they wouldn't sit down, shut up and learn something. They've struggled with the high standards and fallen behind academically, often because they don't fit the mold and they bring too much baggage with them to school.

We are all on a journey, every single soul on this planet is on a life path. We know that sometimes there are bumps and 'wrong ways' on that road. We make bad choices, we feel lost, we struggle. On that journey, although it is difficult and painful, we grow and become who we are meant to be. But we can only do that through the power of our stories. My ACT scores don't mean a thing in the big picture. What matters are the teachers who took the time to know and care for me.

So when I think about what is quantifiable and how one can contribute to a student's growth, I think about the student who after a year of being here, opened up to me and shared an identity shaping loss in his life and wanted my perspective on how to move forward. I think about his previous anger and silence and feel so proud to be able to be a part of his growth as a person. I think about the student who came to school once a month last year, but is now coming every day, even if it is only for 4 hours. I think about the student who finally stopped talking about other people and is working to be a more kind and caring individual. This is immense growth and should be celebrated. Truth is, this is more important than any test score. I can't put this 'qualitative' evidence into an excel spreadsheet and do a quantitative analysis of it. I can't prove to MDE that my students have grown because you can't standardize and test personal growth.

Our current system has created a culture of fear. We're afraid they won't do well on the tests. We're afraid we'll get fired because we can't prove growth. We're afraid to stand up for injustice. When my students leave our program, I don't want them to remember the tests they had to take, or the tests they failed. I want them to remember the quality of the relationships they had here. I want them to remember they were cared for. I want them to leave *NOT* hating school and believing they can be successful because of who they are as a whole person, not because of their ability to take a test.