

## Blurring Lines: Coaching or Friendly Encounters?\*

Ms. Marlo teaches three sections of 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA; all three sections have English Learners. She finds her first period class to be more challenging for a variety of ways. First, the class is quite full. While some of her colleagues at Newfeld Middle School have 15 or 20 students per class, her first period class has 30 students. Second, the district has no newcomer program, but half of the students in this class have recently arrived in the U.S. while the other half are students classified as Long Term English Learners (LTEL). Finally, Ms. Marlo does not have a newcomer curriculum for her 12 newly arrived students; instead, she takes the curriculum she is using with her other students and tries to include more scaffolds that might better support her newcomer students.

At the beginning of the year, Ms. Marlo arranged the desks in her room into rows, with the students classified as long term English Learners sitting in the front and the newcomer students sitting in the back rows of desks. Her rationale was that she could get the students sitting in the front few rows started on their work, and then direct her attention to the three rows of newcomers in the back.

Mid-way through the year, Ms. Rebec, the middle school instructional coach, encouraged Ms. Marlo to place students in small groups of four, with two LTEL and 2 newcomer students in each quad. Skeptical at first, Ms. Marlo was pleased to see that with students sitting in small groups, she could ask students to work in pairs, in groups of four, or individually, and found that students started talking more, were more focused, and could more easily support each other than they could when they were sitting in rows.

Ms. Marlo and Ms. Rebec have a collegial working relationship. Outside of school, they are friends, and attend each other's birthdays and family BBQs, go out to brunch or dinner on some weekends, and have even vacationed together. At school, they eat lunch together, and can often be heard making weekend or vacation plans.

Yesterday, the principal, Dr. Ajan, together with Ms. Rebec conducted a walk through in Ms. Marlo's classroom. They initially stood towards the back of the class, and when the class period started, Dr. Ajan joined a small group of students and sat next to them. It was the beginning of the day, and after the schoolwide announcements and the Pledge of Allegiance, the Word of the Day was shared over the intercom. The word was optimistic, and then the word was shared in a sentence: "Be optimistic! You never know what good things are about to happen!" Ms. Marlo wrote the word optimistic on the board and asked students if they knew what it meant. One boy

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raised his hand and explained that it means to have a positive attitude. Ms. Marlo agreed, and drew a glass on the board and added a water line in the middle of the glass. She told the class that in English, there is a classic question, “Is the glass half empty or half full?” She invited the students to share out how they see the glass (half empty or half full), and for the students who saw the glass half full, she commented, “You are optimistic!”

After spending ten minutes in conversation and elaboration on the notion of optimism, Ms. Marlo displayed the agenda for the day. She reminded the students of where they had left off the day before, and asked students to take out the graphic organizer they were working on with the text they were reading in class, “The Myth of Arachne.” She asked students to continue working with their partner to identify at least three characteristics for Athena and Arachne and provide evidence from the text to justify their choices. After another ten minutes, Ms. Rebec and Dr. Ajan stood and left the room.

The following day, just before school started, Ms. Rebec stopped by Ms. Marlo’s room. Ms. Marlo had picked up two lattes on her way to school, and gave Ms. Rebec hers. The two women chatted for a few minutes, and then Ms. Rebec announced, “Oh, Dr. Ajan said you wasted way too much time on the word of the day and went way too slow; just so you know, she’s probably going to talk to you about it.”

Holding back tears, Ms. Marlo, voice cracking, said, “I am not going to rush through things with my students. Part of my job is to make them feel seen and heard and comfortable. I do spend time connecting with them during class; I am going to do that!”

Ms. Rebec was taken aback by Ms. Marlo’s reaction. She later reflected that she and Ms. Marlo are friends, and she was surprised by her reaction. Her intention was to let Ms. Marlo know that the principal might stop by and what she might comment on, so she was not caught off guard. Now Ms. Rebec is noticing that in their debriefs, Ms. Marlo is more reserved, doesn’t share as much, and she feels she lost trust in the relationship.

## Questions

### What is going on in this vignette?

Ms. Rebec realizes that her approach was wrong but is unsure what the best way to share the principal’s response would have been. How can she mend the relationship and prevent this from happening in the future?