

insincere. What I ended up actually doing is providing an overview for the week, addressing what skills would likely be addressed, which resources could possibly be used by students, and other general allotments for what that week might entail. That ended up being enough because nobody ever asked for anything more once they what really ended up happening on any given day which was far from what any lesson plan could include.

I eventually figured out how to develop a digital classroom environment where my lesson plans could be shared with students which set certain standards-based goals, by which they would decide how to work together to discover resources available both in the room and online in order to create products that celebrated the expected skills and knowledge to be mastered.

The time I spent standing in front of the room became less and less. I eventually got to the point where I would hand a stopwatch to a student so they could stop me after a certain number of minutes because if I couldn't get my point across in so many minutes, I would just have to rethink my explanation to the students in this class and just try it again another day. See, over the years I began to realize that I'm not the master of all knowledge in the world and my ability to communicate one particular idea, one skill, on concept, might make sense to some students but not all, so my view of my responsibilities changed to address my own ability to connect with students in ways that met them where they were, cognitively, emotionally, psychosocially, and otherwise.

What I had come to realize is that the reason this whole idea of self-directed learning seems so overwhelming is that the current systems are not created to place ownership of learning on the students. It's the teacher that is held accountable and I have begun to see how much of that responsibility teachers have accepted from a system that is built on that belief that teachers are solely responsible for all student learning.

With such large systems relying on such a misguided belief, I began thinking what would happen when teachers begin shifting away from that belief. What would happen if teachers taught students not only what they need to learn but *how* they need to learn regardless of the content being memorized? What if the memorization of procedures wasn't what was defined as learning but the process of applying knowledge and skill with an awareness of where knowledge could be found and how knowledge could be applied? If I were to change that belief, I felt one of two things would have to happen - either the weight of the system would cause those teachers to regress back to traditional practices to meet the needs of the system, or those teachers would need to *manage up* to address the parts of that system that had to adapt to this new belief that students are responsible for their own learning and that teachers are responsible solely for the environment in which individuals students may take ownership of their responsibilities for learning.

The last several years in the classroom for me have been really fun. Don't get me wrong, there were rough days and that's to be expected when you have so many humans in one room, in one building, and going through the same routines every day with each other. But my shift

towards a standards-based grading philosophy allowed my students to see with concrete evidence of how skills connect across grade levels that they can track their own learning with a standards-based system for learning. Once that happened, I found myself with a lot more time on my hands to observe and reflect on *how* my students were interacting with each other and with the materials. I eventually ended up spending as much instructional time helping students develop emotional and social competencies, learning to set goals, track progress, cope with anxieties, manage stress, and learn how to resolve conflicts - I spent as much time on that as I spent on math, reading, science, and writing. Once I came to grips with the idea that students actually *want* to learn things because it makes them feel good about themselves, and that it's normal for them to *not* want to do things that make them feel bad about themselves, the source of motivation no longer revolved around what rules and consequences either I set or have them set, but in developing a belief in their own developmental needs, cognitively, psychosocially, physically, socially, emotionally; there's so much about what students need to learn how to do that is equally important if not moreso than figuring out how to get an 68% to be a 71% in order to "pass". The focus on a score or ranking is negating the actual percentage that matters - celebrating that bump up to a 71% can overshadow the 29% of the material that was never mastered and is going to impact their success in the next grade level.

The biggest takeaway from my entire teaching career was from my most recent classroom teaching experience, where I taught fifth grade math and science next to a colleague who taught fifth grade ELA and social science - it was a departmentalized system. Up until this particular year, I had always had the same group of students in one room all day at schools where my classroom philosophy was either matched or was given the freedom to implement my own philosophy and framework in my classroom - always with evidence-based academic success. That last year, splitting students between two classrooms was the first time I saw results less than stellar and it wasn't because of poor instruction or assessment. In one of my class discussions, one student summed it up exactly what the problem was and it wasn't only something I hadn't considered but was something I was actually betting wouldn't be the case. See, I had these students two years prior in third grade all day every day and saw incredible academic growth that year. I was excited to have them again. I was betting on my same philosophy and approach to have a similar impact regardless of the fact that I'd only have them half of every day. When it became evident at some point through the year that the same motivation was not observed (both by the students as much as by myself), it was one student that summed up nicely what the largest obstacle was: students didn't have all day to get around to engaging and exploring in the learning that they knew they had to achieve in a standards-based approach. They'd spend an hour being self-directed before having to line up and switch to another classroom where a more traditional approach to learning was taking place, and then come back to a self-directed environment where they'd need to re-engage in a drastically different philosophy for learning. It was this takeaway that made me realize I needed to take a break from classroom teaching and find a school with a philosophy that aligned more closely with my own and that this pursuit would be more likely if more schools recognized the impact on students a self-directed learning environment can have.

It's been a long journey for me and I am hoping that this episode highlights the importance of shifting not only the practices and methods in schools today but, more importantly, in shifting the philosophies and visions of how we approach the education system not just for teachers and admin in the schools, but for teacher candidates, teacher mentors, instructional coaches, and even families, students, and communities.

What I hope listeners get out of this podcast is a series of windows into topics we have learned so much about in recent years and how aspects of our system need to adjust. There are so many experts and so much literature available that my hope is that my book will be only one of many you decide to explore in order to develop this awareness, this belief, that our system for educating humans in their developing years is in need of adjustment, and it is us that need to begin adjusting it. We are not alone in recognizing this need to shift the system, every expert I interview has a shared vision from a subtly different perspective, but as I detail in a prior episode on changing systems, the best chance we have is from a bottom-up implementation by staff and communities with top-down support of the leadership in education.

This is probably a good time to share now with you a phone interview I had with an author and excellent educator, Starr Sackstein, on a very similar set of topics. I do hope you are able to get a lot out of our chat and pick up at least one of her books, and I thank you again for listening to this podcast.

[Interview: Starr Sackstein]

Mullen: My interview today is with Starr Sackstein, classroom teacher for nearly two decades, became national board certified in 2012, a TedX speaker on throwing out grades, and an author of many popular books on education. Ms Sackstein, thank you for taking time to speak with me today.

Starr: Thanks so much, Greg. Starr, definitely always Starr, not Ms Sackstein. Only my kids and even then I wish they would have been able to call me by my first name.

Mullen: [laughter] I love that - first name basis. It's like I've known you for years.

Starr: Yes, I like it like that.

Mullen: Fantastic! I'm excited to speak with you about a few key posts from your popular blog and your "Throwing Out Grades" movement, but I'd first like to briefly talk to you about the books you've published. I'd like to begin with your first book from 2011 called "Simply May". It's a historical-fiction set in 1960's Shanghai during the Chinese Revolution under Chairman Mao. Is that right?

Starr: That is correct!

Mullen: Ok, now this setting you chose for the book - it's a devastating time for the Chinese people. But your focus is on the development of the main character and her friend, two

teenagers, who work through the social issues of their time to learn about themselves in search of a better life outside of the life she's been raised to know.

Starr: Yes.

Mullen: Do you feel there is a particular significance for creating and developing these characters in that particular societal context, especially now looking back with the perspective toward education that you have today?

Starr: So, it's interesting because I've never actually that about it, um, like that in retrospect but at the time I was working with inner-city kids and we were reading *The Red Scarf Girl* and while we were reading it the students had to write a short historical fiction story and I started modeling by writing my story along with what we were reading; and essentially what ended up happening is the students really got into what I was writing and when we were done with the project they said, "Ms Sackstein you have to finish this story." So with their encouragement I kind of stuck it out a little bit and finished. It took me a long time because up to that point I hadn't written anything beyond, y'know, a few articles. I was much more a poet in my youth than a writer of any kind of length because I bore easily so committing to things that last more than a few pages was never really my speed and the characters, thinking about the kids in my class, I was writing about, you know, writing for, with the fiction that we were using in class, you know, I wanted it to be appealing to them and also somewhat true albeit... I don't know how a chinese reader would feel about what I wrote because once the characters kind of migrate to the United States things kind of get a little unbelievable in my opinion, but that's...

Mullen: And the listeners are going to have to read the book to find out...

Starr: Ya! Well, you know, it's the first time anyone's really shined a light on that project.

Mullen: [Laughter] Well, I like to do my research and find out who I'm talking about so, actually, since that book came out - and I love, I love that you wrote that book with your students, I think that in itself is enough reason for people to want to read it - I think it's fantastic and I may try that myself.

Starr: It has always been my belief that you should do the projects that you expect your students to do and I think when you're working with a group of kids like I was at the beginning of my career who have particular challenges and wouldn't call themselves readers and writers, um, I think it's really important to humble yourself to experience and just sort of jump in it with them, showing them your own insecurities about writing and sharing what you write and showing them that it takes drafts and drafts and drafts before it gets to finished and even when it gets to finished, you might not be super excited about it; but the experience of seeing it through to the end is one that is worthwhile. So, I mean, it was a good experience in that I probably would have been happy leaving May as a short story one chapter in and never doing anything with it, but, you know, they were excited about it and it sort of became like a whole class thing. Then when I finished it, they weren't my students anymore so it was sort of like I finished it for them but never expected much from it beyond that.

Mullen: Well, since then you finished quite a few books. You wrote *The Power of Questioning*. You've written *Teaching Students to Self-Assess*, one of my favorites, and *Peer Feedback in*

the Classroom: empowering students to be the experts. They all seem to focus on helping teachers consider a unique perspective that does challenge some of the traditional practices. I'm wondering, could you describe what you're trying to do in these books that you feel addresses some of the more general concerns that teachers have in education.

Starr: So, starting with *Hacking Assessment* and all the ones that you described thereafter, I think that teachers are always concerned that students are getting what they need, that they're getting through their content, particularly secondary teachers to have state assessments that they need to be making sure students are ready for and also, hopefully, giving students a love of whatever content area you're teaching. At the time I was a Journalism and English teacher so, for me, I really do have a passion for the written word. I also have a passion for storytelling and to helping students find their own stories. And although assessments, and I know a lot of people would say how does assessment and those two things sort of connect even though that's mostly what I write about now, I believe that reflection and self-assessment is a sort of story-telling about what kids know and can do and the more we involve their voice in that practice, the more we're better able to address their needs and concerns. And at the end of the day although there is curriculum that needs to be covered and students do need to be college and career ready when they leave, more important than anything is meeting them where they are and helping them develop a voice that could advocate for their own needs and their own progress. So my work largely centers around ways to get kids more involved in the learning that they're doing so it's not being done to them but rather for them.

Mullen: and by them, I imagine.

Starr: Especially by them, you know, there's a lot of co-construction.

Mullen: Yes, the idea of co-construction is definitely where I was going, we are on the same page, because your blog shares even more of your perspective with an incredibly organized set of topics related to helping teachers in different ways - classroom culture, work-life balance, leadership, technology, student-centered learning. On a post you wrote on October 27th called systemic standards-based curriculum. I feel this quote stands on its own out of context: "for standards-based curriculum to really work, the folks who write the curriculum must have control over the assessment so the curriculum is appropriately aligned. Could you tell me what you meant by this?"

Starr: So, I have a real problem with standardized testing, like testing created by companies who just make tests, whether it be the state regents in New York, or the SAT, or the college AT exam, or any exam that's created outside of the classroom, because really once it leaves that space we have a real equity challenge because although we know the set of standards kids need to be proficient on, the way... there are so many biases that turn up on them so if we were really going to create an atmosphere that was going to give students their best chance, the best person to be creating the test are the people who are doing the teaching, so we, you know, we know what we taught, we know what students were supposed to have learned and what they should be able to do, and since all of our curriculum isn't aligned nationally like from room to room it's not often exactly the same...

Mullen: Even with the Common Core State Standards, which were intended to help with that, it's still being interpreted differently from region to region...

Starr: Right, well, I know there's a lot of issues with the Common Core, I don't necessarily have issues with the standards themselves. I have issues with the way they've been used to assess kids and the very poor implementation and rollout of those assessments, and how some of those standards got pushed lower and lower down in the grades robbing younger kids of needed opportunities to be ready to learn the information that they were getting younger and younger and younger, knocking play and other unstructured sort of learning times out of the way because we needed to get them ready for the test kids weren't doing so well on.

Mullen: I'd like to build on that idea, if you don't mind, because on October 29th, you wrote a post called "Let Go of the Reigns to Allow for Student Self-Advocacy". And I think the best quote so far, and I still have so many of your posts to read, you say in that post: "the best gift we can offer students is the ability to know what they need, to articulate what they know and how best to ask for help. As they acquire these skills, a careful coupling with the standards can empower students to chart and create a path for their own learning."

Starr: Yes [Laughter].

Mullen: I love that quote. It's likely not a surprise how much I love what you are saying here and I'm curious, for our listeners, could you elaborate on this idea of teachers and students sharing that responsibility of learning.

Starr: So, by the time I was getting ready to leave the classroom, I had really truly devoted myself to co-construction with my students. I was teaching mostly eleventh and twelfth graders, just to be clear, these are older students who definitely are readying themselves for what comes next, and I can give you the best example. My hamlet unit, for example, I always did it a certain way and by the last couple of years I sort of abandoned the way I did it, I provided all the materials to the students, and I asked them to create their own project that would essentially meet all of the objectives that my prior unit had met and also provide them with different choice to how they could explore those topics in a way that made sense and of the most interest to them. And honestly what they came up with was so much better than what I did and, you know, it was a delight to see what every group was able to submit for that project and the depth of their understanding of the play by the time it was done, specifically the characters in the play. Although, ten or maybe fifteen years ago I may have thought that I was sacrificing going over Shakespeare's language and, you know, gotten a little sad about not really parsing it out scene by scene. I think what they were able to take away from Hamlet was far more valuable than what I would have been able to offer them otherwise.

Mullen: That example is - there's so much to unpack there - there's the idea of understanding, and interpreting, and assessing, and reflecting on the actual learning; there seems to be a balance of all of those aspects between the teacher and the student as you start to shift that student learning from yourself, like you're saying the Hamlet you, taking ownership and sharing it with them and instead shifting that balance so that the students are taking ownership of what they're learning from Hamlet, I feel like that actually sort of redefines the role of you as the teacher in way where you now have time not just grading papers and giving feedback and telling them whether or not they have learned and spending more time observing and reflecting with them in ways that are very individualized.

Starr: Absolutely, and it probably wouldn't surprise you to know that, through reviewing their projects and being a part of their learning experience, I saw a lot of the characters in a play that I have read at least a dozen times differently through their eyes and through their contexts. And I'm a strong believer that literature needs to be experienced by the reader and this idea that there's only one right way to read literature is really not the fact. I mean, if we're going to keep reading stuff that's hundreds of years old, we're going to need to see it through our lens today or why do we bother to continue to read it, you know, what makes it universal? And the students that are in our schools now really do have rich contexts that they can draw on to connect to different themes and ideas and characters that are happening in literature, and we have to give them the space to ask those questions, dig into those topics that they think are important and kind of pull away from the standard of, you know, "we're going to be studying the Great Gatsby and we read the Great Gatsby we're going to talk about the green light and we're going to talk about color symbolism" and all these things that really at the end of the day Fitzgerald is a beautiful writer, there's music in the way that he writes, um, and if we can get them to appreciate language while exploring topics and triangles that they think are interesting and still be able to pull a good lesson about syntax out of it, you know, stuff you wouldn't normally go down a path teaching with literature and let them lead the discussion because that's really where you're going to get the best buy-in to what's going on; especially if you're asking them to read things that aren't contemporary.

Mullen: Sparking that love of learning in students - it's a really difficult thing to do that curriculum, as we as teachers, trust the curriculum to know what tasks and directions to give to spark that but I feel like teachers are relying too heavily on that curriculum for various reasons that I would love to get into [laughter] but I know that teachers that pick up your books, and they go to your blog, and they go to hear and see you speak, are going to take from you that awareness and that value and that importance in doing that. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. I have one last question: are there any upcoming events or publications in the works that people should know about? Where can we find more about you and your work?

Starr: So, yes, I am finishing up a project right now with a teacher from my team at my last school district, Karen Terwilliger, *Hacking Learning Centers*, for Secondary, and hopefully that will come out mid-year next year [2020]. I also have a chapter for a book for higher ed about getting rid of grades which will also hopefully be coming out some time next year [2020]. Um, there's a bunch of speaking engagements, you can see those all on my blog, it's just mssackstein dot com. Everything's pretty branded mssackstein whether it's my twitter handle, my email, or the website, so that's the best place to look.

Mullen: That's fantastic. Starr, thank you again for being on the program.

Starr: Thanks so much, Greg!