During a lunch break for a workshop I facilitated, I sat at a table between two teachers who taught the same secondary-school student. The first teacher commented on her frustrations with him, "How can I get this student to pass the course, when he is absent once or twice a week?" The other teacher responded, "Given what he has to deal with in his life, I am impressed that he is able to come to school three or four times a week." It was the same information, same student, but they offered different interpretations of the "data." I didn't say anything in response but thought about which teacher would be more likely to help the student succeed in school. It was a no-brainer: It would be the one who viewed him as a hero and not as a deadbeat.

Although some people might criticize the first teacher, I am reluctant to do so. It is hard to blame her given all the pressures to raise test scores. This student's absenteeism appeared to her as something she had little control over and had the potential for negatively affecting her professional evaluation. Like the second teacher, the first teacher cared about the student, wanted him to succeed and probably worked hard to help him, yet none of that would really matter in the end. The student's "story" of school -- his success or failure -- depended on how each teacher viewed him. What became clear to me at that moment at the lunch table was how a simple set of words in the mind of a teacher can outweigh the best intentions, the hard work and even the expertise of the best teacher.

Let's look at the stories that could emerge from the frames through which they viewed the student:

"Deadbeat" student story:

- The primary goal would be to stop his absenteeism.
- The student is viewed as unmotivated and at risk of failing.
- The school must change his behavior to help him pass tests and graduate.
- He could receive incentives to come to school and consequences for not doing so.
- An attendance/resource officer could periodically check in with him and his family.
- He might have to attend remedial classes designed to help him make up the work he has missed.
- At best, he could increase his attendance by doing what the school wanted him to do without any assurance that he had developed any skills for dealing with other problems in his life.

"Hero" student story:

- The primary goal would be to affirm him and help him recognize his strengths and assets.
- The student would be viewed as motivated to learn and in need of support for navigating the circumstances of his life that prevent him from achieving his goals.
• A teacher helps him understand and analyze the differences between the days when he attends and the days when he doesn’t.
• The teacher might share the difficulties that he/she has encountered in life.
• The student could develop a plan that would work for him and could choose a trusted adult to check in with.
• The student could also be asked to share his thoughts and feelings about how the school could “change” to better meet his needs.
• As the student succeeds, he is asked to share his story to help other students who are having trouble attending school on a regular basis.

The reframing of student identity and its subsequent story as outlined above is an essential step for improving education that is too often overlooked or not even considered. Simply charging ahead with a plan, or a program to change students, who aren’t succeeding in the first place, fails to work, because such efforts only reinforce the identity of students, as being people who need to be changed. Students, just like the rest of us, do not like to be viewed as problems, nor do they like being manipulated even in a positive way by those in authority. Conversely, students, just like the rest of us, are open to changing, when people they trust affirm and support them.

Fortunately, educators do not have to be stuck in one frame for viewing their students. They can realize that the “story” of school can change for them and for their students if they can step outside the pressures and the stress of imposed upon them by policies and mandates. They need to see how their frame is not “reality” and therefore is not fixed in placed. They can change the frame, change the story and change the reality of school for themselves and their students. Here is the choice educators have:

• Education can be the process of telling students who they are based on whether or not they meet the expectations placed on them by the school; or
• Education can be the process of helping students discover who they are and supporting them in becoming who they want to be.

Rather than passing on and getting them to follow the same old story of school that they were told, educators must empower students to realize that they can write their own stories of success in school and life.

Taken from and modified: [http://www.smartbrief.com/original/2016/06/tale-two-stories](http://www.smartbrief.com/original/2016/06/tale-two-stories)

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