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64 Words

I cried the night that Takeyta showed me the 64 words she had learned to read.

We had been working together as tutor and student for about six weeks. She knew that she was learning a lot, so she decided to make a list of all of the new words she had learned. Sixty-four down, only 1,278 to go.

To you and me, these are simple words like *clean*, *home*, *make*, *place*, and *between*. But to a 34-year-old woman who was functionally illiterate, they're a bridge to her future.

She claims that she enrolled at Dominican Literacy Center in Detroit because she wants to learn to read well enough to go to college. She certainly deserves that opportunity. But I believe the truth is that her pride and sense of responsibility about being a good mother to her son trumped everything, including the embarrassment of admitting she couldn't read.

Honestly, I have been completely charmed by this young woman and her dedication to her learning. She has taken her lessons with her to a Florida vacation and to a family reunion out of state. When a work commitment prevents me from making it to one of our weekly sessions, she arrives anyway and works on lessons in the computer lab. She has never come to our class with incomplete homework.

One night, she arrived weary after being on her feet all day at work. She was clearly very tired, and I told her that we could end early so she could get home. She refused. "No, I just want more," she said. "I'm hungry for this."

Forget everything you think you know about adult illiterates in the United States. Yes, some are certainly convicted criminals and longtime drug users trying to make new starts, many dropped out of school, and many receive welfare and food stamps. But some, like Takeyta, are the polar opposite. She graduated from a Detroit high school. She and her husband are both employed full time and own two cars and their own home in a Detroit suburb. They attend church faithfully and have one son who is the focus of their time and resources. In other words, she could be my neighbor.

She can't explain how she graduated from a Detroit public high school without learning to read. But anyone who spent time in those

schools as I did in the 1990s doesn't require much explanation. Teachers often didn't distribute textbooks even when they had them because they knew that students couldn't read the text and feared they would just destroy the books. Instead, many teachers read lessons aloud, both wasting precious class time and perpetuating students' low reading skills. In her rough Detroit high school, quiet, soft-spoken females like Takeyta learned to keep their heads down and not attract attention.

The reality is that the system failed her. Somewhere during her 13 years of public school education, someone should have ensured that she knew how to read. She never had a special education placement because she has no disabilities. And that means that she never got individual attention to her needs. Instead, she was passed along from grade to grade to grade, finally earning a diploma just for sitting at a desk for enough days every year.

The subtle message that comes with this is that you don't really matter enough for any teacher to ensure that you learn. You aren't worth the investment.

Because of this, tutoring becomes so much more than merely helping someone decode the words on a page. The relationship between a tutor and a student, especially an adult student, is about boosting a student's self-confidence. That's essential if the adult is to continue learning on his or her own after tutoring ends.

When we sit down to work each week, I always insist that Takeyta use a sharpened pencil, something that quickly became a running joke between us. One night, she laughed and said, "Why does it matter so much to you that I use a sharp pencil?"

"Because you deserve the best," I said.

Last month, she arrived with a mechanical pencil that she had purchased. "Now," she laughed, "I will always have a sharp pencil."

"What made you decide to buy that?" I asked.

"Because I deserve the best," she said.

Yes, you and all children deserve the best education that we can provide, and the least part of that is ensuring that every child knows how to read. — JR