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J-Lo's Story: Can the Diva and the Genius Co-Exist?

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It was an average March day in Arizona. J-Lo sat in Algebra class, wearing her favorite Baby Girl t-shirt and a pair of jeans. She and her friend Clara were tipsy from sipping on a Gatorade bottle filled with a clever mix of Lemon-Lime tastiness and vodka. But J-Lo's behavior wasn't so clever. She decided to interject her daily commentary on the day's lesson. "Mr. A, this class is so boring!" He noticed that she slurred her speech and seemed more disconnected than usual. One whiff of her potent concoction, and the teacher knew right away why J-Lo seemed to be on another planet. The teacher quickly called security and passed over the incriminating Gatorade bottle. But the next day to the disdain of her teacher, J-Lo loudly bounced into class with a wicked smile, boldly declaring a moral victory over an inferior administration. J-Lo was a smooth talker.

Despite the fact that this incident really did happen, I can't say that J-Lo is unintelligent. In fact, Jennifer "J-Lo" Lorenzo is an Honors student in my Geometry class at North High School and happens to be of Mexican descent. Fortunately, she wasn't my student when her notorious foray into drinking at school occurred, because I would have been so utterly disappointed in her that I would've probably acted irrationally. Because of this incident, her name hopped on the radar screens of every teacher and student at North and put her in a precarious position both socially and academically. Decidedly mischievous, but in no way rude or malevolent, she is a challenging but exceptionally bright 15-year old student,

very much gifted and full of potential. Given the obstacles that she has had in life, she is both a survivor and a success story.

I remember first meeting her during my student teaching at North as I observed her one day in the aforementioned Algebra class. I empathized strongly with the permanent substitute, Mr. A., who took over the class mid-semester. He wasn't ready to handle the clever balancing act that is teaching—having the role of the mind shaper, the bellyacher, the heartbreaker, and the lawmaker. It was clear to see who was in control of the classroom (J-Lo), and it felt like he had to call on her for misbehaving nearly twenty times in the span of fifty minutes. Her drinking misadventure became the stuff of legend across the school, because she had nearly gotten away with it scot-free. Other teachers complained to the administration that not levying serious consequences would send the wrong message to students, and J-Lo was suspended. This was not before the young substitute was forced to apologize to her for "humiliating" her in front of her peers.

This is the context in which J-Lo became my student. I remember running around my room the Friday before school began, putting up tacky math posters in anticipation of meeting eager parents and students, desperately wanting to make a good impression. J-Lo was the first student who came in, alone, and boldly walked up and startled me, "Hi, are you Miss Blank?" "Sure am. And you're J-Lo, right?" I asked warily. "Yep, how'd you know?" she asked. I mentioned that I remembered her from watching Mr. A's class. "Oh, yeah," she

said, “a lot of teachers know me from that class!”

I felt bad that I had even mentioned her Algebra class, because every student deserves to start a new semester with a clean slate. The more I learned about J-Lo’s incredible story, the more I began to sympathize with her. She is, in many ways, a cat that is living out her ninth life. She has witnessed her parents’ battles with drug addiction and often had to be the adult in situations no child should have to experience, but is finding her way and is on the road to success. Through my teacher-research, I intend to tell J-Lo’s story to assist other teachers in helping to guide gifted students from troubled backgrounds fulfill their potential. Learning about her, not only as a student but as a person, has helped me immensely in understanding the best ways to structure my classroom and to make math class a rewarding experience for everyone involved.

North High School is located in the heart of central Phoenix and serves a population of over 2,500 students. The population is approximately seventy percent Hispanic students, with this representation mirrored in my Honors classes (PUHSD website, 2006). The school also houses an International Baccalaureate program, a prestigious course of study that enrolls most of the White students in the school and can often be a source for discussions about the differing expectations for Hispanic students and their White peers. My classroom is modeled around a philosophy that knowledge is socially constructed, and I encourage students to work cooperatively, helping one another and sharing ideas, much like classrooms in Mexico, where many of my students began their educational experiences (Espinoza-Herald, 2003, p. 75). However, students like J-Lo can often make the process of building a classroom that is conducive to learning a challenge.

I grew up in a midsize city in South Carolina, a state that typically ranks at the bottom nationally in educational expenditures and student test scores in math, science, reading, and writing, much like the state of Arizona. However, I was raised in one of the best school

districts in the state and felt that I received a quality education in my primarily Black high school. My own background differed significantly from those around me. I was adopted when I was two months old from Bogotá, Colombia, and was raised in a Jewish family from New York that flocked to the South in the late seventies. I grew up with questions about my own identity and was often the subject of inquiries from my classmates who were curious to know if I was “mixed” because of my dark curly hair and darker features. My friends would always be surprised to meet my mother, standing much taller than me at 5 feet 9 inches, with blond hair and bright blue eyes. I even recall a discussion with my mother about my identity when I was sixteen and beginning to fill out college applications and questioning what to put down for race. My mom would say to me, “You’re a White girl, Melissa,” but I begged to differ. I may have been a product of a White Jewish society, but one glance in the mirror could reveal that I had differing roots. I marked “Hispanic” from that point on for college applications. But regardless of my own struggles with my identity, one facet of it was always clearly laid out for me: I was going to college. Education was the primary value my parents had instilled in me, and I juggled AP classes with swimming, theater, soccer, volunteering with my youth group, and basketball in order to make myself the “well-rounded specimen” I thought every college wanted. I was a born learner, a National Merit Semifinalist, and a classic overachiever.

Walking down the halls of North on my first day of student teaching, I realized I was in way over my head. These students’ educational experiences looked very different from my own, their clothing looking different from those of my peers in high school, and their stories were often rich, but largely sadder than the kids I had grown up with. I quickly learned that I couldn’t teach them the way that I had been taught when in my first week, I turned an entire classroom of sixteen-year-olds against me with heavy-handedness and an inability to recognize that I shouldn’t take things personally. It wasn’t necessarily my fault when a student didn’t do homework, take notes, or

sit in his or her assigned seat. I hadn't quite learned when to pick my battles, and the students made me a target, at least for the first month. At the end of the semester, I had won most of them over, and I was grateful that my mentor teacher essentially threw me in with the lions right away. It was hard, but I was convinced that I could make my first complete year of teaching a success and that I could handle the difficult task of classroom management, even if I sometimes was mistaken for a student myself. And then J-Lo walked into my classroom and made me realize I still had much to learn.

Starting Class with J-Lo

The bell rings at 12:40. J-Lo and her buddy Monique run into class abruptly, seconds before the tardy bell echoes down the hallway. "Hi Miss!" they scream in unison as loudly as they possibly can. J-Lo walks immediately to the whiteboard nearest my desk and begins writing "J-Lo is so cool" in big purple letters.

J-Lo: "Oh my god, Miss, I totally have to pee and like my teacher wouldn't let me out last period! Can I go to the bathroom? I'm going to wet my pants, Miss."

Me: "You've asked to go to the bathroom the past three days in a row. You need to go in between classes. And you know the drill; you have to wait ten minutes. Sit down and begin your bell work, ok?"

J-Lo (continuing to doodle): "Miss, can I go to the bathroom yet?"

Me: "Sit down, J-Lo, you've got to get your bell work done before you go anywhere."

J-Lo (walks to her desk and fumbles in her book bag, not producing a pencil, but instead a photograph): "Miss, come look at this picture, do I look pregnant? That's what Monique told me. Oh, and look at this paper cut I got in English class. Do you have a band-aid? Can I go to the bathroom yet? Where's the pass?"

Me: (sigh)

This routine played out for about the first month of my teaching in some form or another. Everyday, I had to deal with some "crisis". During teaching, J-Lo would interject some inappropriate comment, perhaps a loud curse word, or tell someone to shut up, or throw a ball of paper at the nearest boy who said something silly to her. I felt like she was dominating my classroom. And I had no idea what to do. Then, suddenly, her attitude changed. Instead of the hyperactive mischief-maker who did anything possible to distract the class from learning, I had a sobbing, miserable mess on my hands. After instruction, she moved to the back corner of the room, alone, and worked quietly. What had happened to the colorful, albeit obnoxious, student who had tormented me during the first weeks of class? What was she crying about? Was it the boy Jaime whose name dotted her notebook, her homework, and any other piece of paper she wrote on? Was it the boy in class that liked to tease her and call her an airhead? Was it one of the girls who whispered to me after class to make sure that when I made the new seating chart she didn't have to sit with J-Lo? Again, I found myself not knowing what to do.

Before receiving my Masters degree in Curriculum and Instruction, I had to take one final class called Teacher Research, where I was to learn the process of studying the classroom dynamics I orchestrated around me. I observed my students during lecture, working in groups, working alone, and at the board completing problems. I studied their tests, their homework, their interactions with one another, and their interactions with me. I took notes and wrote journal articles in diary form on my day-to-day happenings and assessed fundamental topics of exploration for a culminating paper about something or someone unknown. I did this for a period of two months before I figured out what I had to write. Reading back through my journals and observations, I realized that I spent an extraordinary amount of time focusing on the classroom dynamics in J-Lo's sixth period and, specifically, on what behaviors she exhibited. So it only made sense for me to attempt to figure out this enigma of a student. I continued the process of observing,

journaling, interviewing, and emailing for the next two months with J-Lo as my sole focus. To organize and assess my data, I participated in frequent peer reviews with my professor and several classmates where we reprocessed and coded our information around assertions and underlying themes. The entire process of collecting data and writing the paper took a semester's time. As a requirement of the class, I set up an interview with J-Lo, with no expectations and a prescribed line of questioning. At the start of our first interview, I realized I was dealing with an entirely different person than the one I had witnessed in my classroom. What I sought to determine was, who is J-Lo as a student in my math class?

J-Lo's Turbulent Past

As I learned from the interviews, J-Lo's personal story is filled with a lot of pain and disappointment in the very people who were supposed to shape and support her—her parents. J-Lo was born into a family addled by drug addiction, crack cocaine specifically, and has a younger sister who was born with the drug in her system. When she was seven, her mother left the family, and J-Lo has not spoken with her since. Her father has been in and out of prison throughout her life and is currently in prison for possession of crack with the intent to distribute and check forgery. J-Lo says her relationship with her father is still very strong and that she loves him very much even though “he's bad”. She can recall instances when he would spend the family's money on drugs so that they wouldn't have money for food or rent. J-Lo's grandmother, “Nana”, adopted the two sisters in order to keep the family together, and J-Lo lived with her until eighth grade. J-Lo states that she and her sister both have problems with staying focused and had behavior problems in school growing up. In fact, J-Lo was kicked out of the primary school she was in because she used to “pop” at her teachers, because she didn't feel like she had to listen to them. Her Nana sent her to live with her aunt, whom she calls Tia, because she felt the two sisters were simply too much to handle. J-Lo gave me an example of this, telling me about a time she got sent to her room for punishment and then snuck out of her window

and didn't come home for several days, worrying her Nana terribly. Living with her aunt, J-Lo has found a strict authority, but someone she is growing to respect and listen to. She cites this move as a reason she has begun to mature and respect authority.

In studies of children of drug addicts, the literature is filled with references to the behavior problems these children often exhibit, specifically in relation to obedience and control issues (Kandel, 1990). I feel that in the first few months of class, J-Lo tried to manipulate my classroom in much the same way she has been able to work over and manipulate the adult members of her family, her previous teachers, and the school administration. She subdued these behaviors significantly as she began to trust me. But in many ways, the incident in which she got drunk at school almost validated her autonomy, as she almost got away with it, and even received a formal apology from the authority in that classroom, her teacher. But the incident had significant effects on her reputation both socially and academically, which J-Lo continues to deal with several months later.

Throughout my research, several themes continued to repeat themselves over and over again. I was able to make several assertions about who J-Lo was as a student in my class including the following:

- 1) Gaining and maintaining social status takes precedence over all other aspects of J-Lo's life.
- 2) J-Lo's differing social identities are in a constant state of conflict and contradiction.
- 3) In the absence of a consistent parental figure throughout her life, J-Lo believes that she is the only authority that matters and craves autonomy.

Gaining and Maintaining Social Status

After the “J-Lo Juice” incident (as she commonly refers to it), J-Lo's name was well-known across campus among both teachers and students alike. Her peers began to expect certain behaviors from her, and she became known not only as a “wild student” but as a

wild partier. Her reputation has become larger than life. She can be seen in the hallway outside of class goofing around with the boys, screaming, hitting, yelling, and acting childish. In the classroom, she diverts attention to herself constantly. She seeks the approval of her peers and often takes on the role of the class clown. She enjoys being the center of attention, probably in an attempt to feel the acceptance and warmth that she didn't necessarily receive from her parents, who instead gave comfort and warmth to their unfortunate addictions. The whirling cyclone that is J-Lo seems to be limitless, but multi-faceted.

J-Lo's life seems to revolve around the constant maintenance of her social status. She is willing to accept social challenges, such as being the class clown, because it builds social capital and collateral. But she is unwilling to take risks academically, perhaps because she feels that it will diminish her reputation. Throughout my research, I have constantly sought to determine what J-Lo defines as success. I am often bothered by behaviors in my classroom that seem to show that "being smart isn't being cool". J-Lo buys into this all too often. If she decides to answer a question in class and is correct, her peers condemn her or demand to know how she knew this. If I attempt to stifle her peers, she will sometimes rebuff me, "No, Miss, I really am dumb," but sometimes go with it, "See, I am smart." I never know which J-Lo she wants me to pretend I teach, the airhead or the genius.

Academically, J-Lo could be one of the top students in my class, if only she would invest the time and inquiry into the subject. In a discussion, unfortunately in the context of discussing J-Lo's misconduct with her Tia, who also happens to be a math teacher, she related to me that J-Lo does not know how to study, meaning that she doesn't use her books or notes efficiently. I see this reflected in her test grades, as she completes all of her homework, but has a D average on tests and quizzes. This insight was helpful to me as I recognize that my role as a teacher during the fifty-five minutes I have with each student is not only to disseminate knowledge of parallel lines and the

Pythagorean Theorem, but also to help students to structure information in a meaningful and useful manner. J-Lo's feelings of herself as a math student are also socially constructed as she related to me in an e-mail, "I hate that some students sit there hardly paying attention and they still pass with good grades...GRR!!!" She doesn't like math, although she loves the Sudoku and logic puzzles I distribute weekly, because she thinks they are difficult, but when I emailed her and asked what her favorite class was, she told me, "I use (sic) to like English until this year....now I hate it, I have a D." She related that this was because she doesn't get along with the teacher. According to her aunt, this is an issue that pops up in other classes where she is not successful. In this respect, one can discuss the idea of learning in a social context, with J-Lo perceiving a good student-teacher relationship as a condition for her to actively put forth any effort. She also states that "if I really focus myself, I can get the material", but seems unwilling to give up precious social time to make this a reality.

The largest piece of J-Lo's social collateral is her boyfriend, Jaime, whom she describes as "the most popular boy at school". Her relationship with Jaime often makes her both an object of gossip and envy, as the teenage girls on campus vilify her and undermine her, even those who don't know her. During our interviews, J-Lo explained it to me,

Like a lot of girls don't like me because of him. Like they hate me. They be like, "Look at that ho with him. She looks like a ho." Like I'll be standing right there when they're talking all off to the side. I hear them, but like, they don't even know me.

J-Lo calls these girls "haters". But these "haters" help build the reputation of the legend that is J-Lo. It is for this reason that J-Lo seems to maintain her often troubled relationship with Jaime.

The influence of peers seems to be a constant force in J-Lo's decision-making process. She is a "good-time girl", meaning that she likes to drink, and enjoys socializing with the few girls who understand her and she can trust. It is

interesting to note J-Lo's absolute condemnation of drug use and drug users, while at the same time engaging herself in the socially acceptable, if not "cool", hobby of drinking that most of her peers and friends have gotten caught up in at the tender age of fifteen. Obviously, she does not give weight to the potential destructiveness of alcoholism in contrast to the drug use she witnessed in her own home as a child. This disconnect can be seen in other facets of J-Lo's life.

J-Lo's peers at school are empowering her to not be academically successful by assisting her in the process of neglecting her innate abilities. She understands too much, but is not yet willing to buy into the academic path at the expense of her social mountaineering. Acting like the consummate extrovert is a defense postured to hide the mature and intelligent person nestled somewhere inside of the whirling cyclone that she has created.

The Role of Discourse in the Shaping of Identity

Adolescence is marked by a period of rapid physical, emotional, and social changes. Cognitively, adolescents begin the process of assessing who they are in the context of the world around them and are able to reflect on their past, present, and future within this enlarged framework (Aries, 2001). Socially, adolescents take on a new set of roles in society as they transition towards adulthood and actively search for a sense of identity, typically in opposition to their family and in the context of their peers and community (vii). I believe James Gee's research towards an understanding of identity in the educational setting is a useful tool for delineating the differing identities I have seen within J-Lo. Gee (2000) believes that people have multiple but entwined identities that depend on people's role in society and on the social context. These identities, or subjectivities, are socially constructed and ever-evolving. He delineates these multiple identities into four cluster-groups for simplification, which include Nature-identity, or N-identity, Institution-identity, or I-identity, Discourse-identity, or D-identity, and Affinity-identity, or A-identity

(Gee, 2000). Using this framework as a compass for better understanding J-Lo, we can map out these interdependent subjectivities and how they come together to form the person I interact with on a daily basis in my classroom.

Nature-identity refers to one's natural and unchangeable state. In J-Lo's case, she is the product of a family struggling with drug addiction. Although some would say this refers to the environment that she was born into, Gee describes uncontrollable facets of one's life, such as being a sister or having a congenital disorder, as part of the Nature-identity. J-Lo could not select at birth what family would raise her. However, her personal value system has been shaped in opposition to her upbringing, although her behavior often reflects some of the turmoil of her past. Institution-identity stems from one's delegated position in society by some authority. J-Lo has been thrust into the role of honors student by educational authorities based on previous high achievement and perceived capabilities, whether she accepts and lives up to this label or not. Discourse-identity refers to one's individual characteristics, which can be expressed and quelled by the individual at will. These characteristics are recognized by others through interactions with the person. J-Lo, through her discourses with others, is perceived as high-maintenance, diva-like, and outspoken by her peers and teachers alike. Affinity-identity explains one's social leanings and group affiliations and the behaviors, beliefs, and practices that unite such a group. J-Lo, in her personal life, aligns herself with those who like to "have a good time". In the context of her peer group, the first ingredient for having fun is drinking, with hanging out with popular boys running a close second. It is these last two facets of her identity that puts her into conflict with academic norms and creates barriers to her school achievement.

Identities in a State of Conflict and Contradiction

J-Lo quells her Institution-identity, ignores her Nature-identity, and expresses only her Discourse- and Affinity-identities. This leads to a dichotomy that reveals itself in the contrast

between her stated values and her demonstrated actions. Somewhere, J-Lo has received a message about the value of education, as she expressed hopes, in our interviews of continuing her schooling after high school to become a counselor. She feels that she has the ability to talk with anyone, often saying, "I could make a hobo talk to me." Judging from my experiences in the classroom where she talks to everyone, I believe her. Using her personal experiences as a vessel of understanding and compassion, J-Lo is able to empathize with pain and suffering and can be seen comforting and assisting other students when they have bad days. Additionally, J-Lo seems to have a healthy understanding of the lifecycle and the dangers of becoming a teenage mother in relation to achieving one's educational goals. When asked where she sees herself in ten years, she replies that she will definitely get at least a four-year education, will have married her "hubby" Jaime, and possibly have made a little Jaime. When others have read through my data, they are impressed by the hope and clarity J-Lo expresses for her future and note that she seems much older than fifteen. This is in absolute contrast to the girl that demonstrates attention-seeking behavior inside of my classroom.

This led me to wonder whether J-Lo's classroom behavior is real or a façade. She is living a contradictory life; how she understands herself and how school society views her are two separate things. Downplaying her intelligence is part of the game. When sending J-Lo an e-mail about not showing her intelligence and allowing people to underestimate her, I received an overwhelming answer, written mostly in street-speak.

People are stupid, they don't need to know anything about me. I hate North and mostly everyone in it. There's too many damn haters. People that don't even know me judge me. They just hating on me. I got my friends, they up on the south side, so I don't care what no bitch thinks. Sometimes I try to be smart, and they just act dumb, so I don't care.

Again, the evidence of the defensive posture, peer torment, and misunderstanding came pouring through the page. Hiding her true self allows J-Lo the opportunity to be touched only at the surface level. Her peers can judge and dislike the cyclone, but they can't hurt the real J-Lo. Imparting her life story to me took a lot of courage, mutual respect, and vulnerability. At this age, J-Lo recognizes that her peers don't have the maturity she possesses to handle the emotional complexities of others and can be cruel and caustic, but entrusted me with her fragility. This is a relationship that I do not want to undermine, because I understand the innate need that J-Lo has to be understood and respected and accept the notion that she has probably been misunderstood and has felt disrespected throughout her young life. It is only through support and understanding, especially from adults and emotionally competent peers, that J-Lo will have the strength to fight for herself and begin to give her own values more credence.

Obviously J-Lo is an emotionally complex person. Though she claims she is frequently misunderstood, this often seems to be her intention, whether she is conscious of this or not. She expresses that when she is her real self, no one gets her. But when she acts like the cyclone, she ostracizes herself from her peers. It is seemingly a lose-lose situation. J-Lo clearly has an innate desire to be heard, no matter what the actual message she conveys is. I think the biggest issue she faces is in her inter-personal relationships with her peers. In moving towards being true to herself, she will have to admit that the persona she reveals in my classroom is fraudulent. After so many years of carrying on this lie, J-Lo might find this task to be too difficult.

J-Lo has often talked about her Tia's wish for her to go to a different school. In some ways, I think this may be a good thing, as it could be the catalyst for change that will allow J-Lo to start anew and to express herself honestly. I am curious to understand how fully developed the relationships with her closest friends really are. In my classroom, J-Lo's interactions with her best friend, Monique, seem shallow and built on a shared foundation of anti-school behavior.

If J-Lo doesn't have intimate relationships built on her true value system, she may find the process of conforming to these values to be isolating, at least in the current peer structure that encapsulates her.

I am encouraged by signs that J-Lo is taking herself seriously. In class today, she expressed to me that she had taken an IQ test that revealed that she is actually a genius. My response was that I knew that already and that I was just waiting for her to figure that out. I am simply happy that an IQ test could help her conceive of herself as possessing some larger ability. If J-Lo is able to see the spark of potential burning within herself and can channel it appropriately, she will be able to achieve anything she wants in life. Again, I see the inherent need she has for affirmation to assist her in empowering herself through positive means. Peer pressure plays an overly significant role in J-Lo's life at this time, potentially because it is the only consistent influence she has ever had.

Craving Autonomy

J-Lo has demonstrated a powerful ability to control and manipulate those around her. Reading through mountains of data, I hear her voice screaming to me, "I have lived a lifetime already; I have been to hell and back. I know what sex is. I know what drugs are. I understand power. And I am an adult." I think in the context of North High or maybe in the Mexican culture, as I work primarily with Mexicans, this is typical. I have met far too many kids who are sixteen and living with their boyfriends or girlfriends and doing drugs, drinking alcohol, or engaging in other destructive behaviors. The lifecycle is extremely fast-paced. Since J-Lo is so heavily influenced by her peers, she tends to fall into this same category. She empowers herself by exerting control over what she wears, her alcohol usage, deciding to turn school on, deciding to turn it off. The problem with this is that J-Lo is not an adult. Her brain and her body are not yet fully developed, nor are her reasoning and her identity (which will never fully develop because it is ever-changing). All of her life, she has viewed herself as the only

authority that really matters, acting like a parent when her parents were unable to take care of themselves and her sister, standing up to teachers and administrators who stood in her way and even to her own boyfriend and guardians. Over the months as I have conducted my research, I have fortunately seen in J-Lo a tremendous amount of restraint and maturity and a release of some of this internal need for control and autonomy, showing again that identity is an ever-changing construct.

Jaime is an interesting player in J-Lo's life because he considers himself to be a much-needed father figure to her while her father is in prison. He seeks to make her more respectful to others and herself in many ways, such as those related to behavior and dress. He appears to be an upstanding citizen at North and as well-respected as J-Lo has explained him to be, participating in student government and recently winning the title of Homecoming King at North. During our first interview, J-Lo recanted an argument they had about the micro-skirt she had worn to school the previous day.

Like yesterday, he asked me on the phone if I was going to wear clothes today, and I said yeah. But I wanted to wear a skirt that was so short. I was going to, but like I can't even walk up the stairs with that shit, like I'd have to get a key to the elevator. I mean like, he can't tell me what to do. Like I told him that, "You're dumb if you thinking you can tell me what to do." And he's all like, "Jennifer, I run this shit." My family tries to tell me what to do too, and that doesn't work. So I'm like, "You think what you wanna think, but it's not true, you ain't my dad." And he's like, "Jennifer, I am your dad until your dad gets out. You're out of control." And I'm all like, "You're dismissed." And he's like, "You love me." And I said, "No, I don't, not right now." So yeah, he's retarded. He thinks we're going to get married and I'm like, "Whatever, we'll see."

This exchange seems humorous to me, because a month later, J-Lo admits that she is extremely emotionally attached to him, maybe

excessively so, and that he is her best friend and she wants to marry him. She has given into him and allows him to make decisions for her. Her family is not happy with how enamored she seems to be; in fact, her Tia is worried. From my discussions with the two women, I see that J-Lo is also beginning to respect their relationship, as she sees a woman who is successful while also going through her own hardships.

Juanita, J-Lo's Tia, while going through a divorce herself, took on the difficult task of raising J-Lo two years ago after her Nana decided she'd had enough. Juanita expresses concern about J-Lo's welfare, recognizing that her bright niece has the potential to rise above the chaos that ran through her childhood. She is strict with J-Lo, taking away privileges such as using the phone and going out, and exhibits morals in-line with her own religious upbringing. While J-Lo expresses that she thinks her thirty-something aunt is old-fashioned, she says that living with her keeps her out of serious trouble. However, both admit that lassoing a cyclone is no easy task.

This brings me to my own classroom, where during sixth period, which is after lunch, I must keep twenty-six fifteen-year olds amused, engaged, and learning. I am happy to note that J-Lo has begun to exhibit behaviors in line with her mainly academic-minded peers, although we have had a few relapses here and there. She is no longer running around the classroom, calls out less frequently, and can be oddly protective of me when a student is acting out. This was one of the less anticipated benefits of my research, though I have gained immensely from undertaking this project. I felt like over the course of the time that I spent listening to her discuss her life outside of the classroom, we gained a trust that most teachers don't have with their students. If I had a problem with her, I could talk to her on her level and could levy consequences that I knew would actually be powerful, like calling her aunt. I shared personal experiences in my own life that mirrored J-Lo's, like my brother's heroin

addiction and difficult recovery from a drug overdose. Being able to talk candidly and have someone listen appears to have been therapeutic for J-Lo and possibly for me too, and I hope she finds the strength to do this with everyone in her life.

Time is the largest constraint for me at North. With a load of one-hundred thirty students, I can't attend each student's volleyball games, swim meets, poetry readings, and other extracurricular pursuits, although I am encouraged that many of my students feel the need to participate and be part of the community at North. I rarely have time to answer every question they may have about my content area in the span of a single class time, let alone to ask them how their lives are going and what they want out of their education. Keeping our students focused can be difficult with the often tumultuous lives our students lead. Some must work to help support their families or watch younger siblings. Some witness gang violence in their neighborhoods, and many may even be a part of a gang. Some are homeless and have nowhere to go and no one to talk to. I wish that I had time in my busy schedule to get to know my students the way I have gotten to know J-Lo. I am learning that being energetic and excited about my kids, as well as my content area, are almost as important as the actual knowledge I convey. It seems that all too often teachers forget why they became teachers and forget that their work should be dynamic. If teachers are bored with teaching, they will convey little reason for a student to ever take up interest in that particular subject. As a math teacher, as I watch surveys about US students falling further behind their peers around the world in math and science, I believe that I have an important mission, if only to be orchestrated on a small scale. But the most important thing I have learned is that student-teacher relationships are at the core of the learning process and that without strong relationships, you cannot force learning to happen any more than you can stop a cyclone from destroying a village or, in my case, a classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

Clearly J-Lo is at a critical juncture in her fifteen-year-old life. She has a significant question that lies ahead of her, one whose answer has the potential to impact her life in the most profound way. She must assess which part of her social identity is most important. Either she will continue maintaining the façade of the diva that is J-Lo, the larger-than-life persona that demands authority and attention and thrives on behaviors that undermine the likelihood of achieving her stated goals, or she will begin to align her behavior with the set of values that she shields from her peers. This may mean that she must give up some of the autonomy and social collateral she has and craves. I fear that finding a happy medium for J-Lo will be a large task, as she has overloaded one side of the balance, and it is slipping quickly. She must begin to trust her inner voice, the one that craves stability, but must take giant steps in the process of obtaining it. Seeking out others who are like-minded is crucial, as social discourses define and shape identity in a powerful manner.

J-Lo is clearly capable of goal-setting and seeing the bigger picture and understands from the example of her own parents the possible consequences of getting caught up in illicit behaviors. It is my hope that as her teacher, I can continue to foster trust, respect, and strength in my young student, so that she can connect her intertwined identities and build faith in herself to have the best of both worlds.

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