

The Teacher Who Saw Beyond Grades

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Some classrooms are known for excellence. Their walls display certificates, medals, photographs of honor students, and lists of names that have become familiar to everyone who walks through their doors. Room 19 had none of those things. Its walls were faded, its chairs were uneven, and its bulletin board carried more reminders about missing requirements than announcements of achievements. Teachers knew the section for its low scores, frequent absences, unfinished activities, and students who seemed to have lost interest in school. To many, Room 19 was a class that needed fixing. To Mrs. Regina Delvo, it was a class that needed someone to believe in it.

Mrs. Delvo had been teaching for many years, but she never entered a classroom believing that a student's record told the whole story. When she was assigned to Room 19, she read the names on her class list one by one. Beside some names were notes about poor performance. Others had repeated absences or incomplete requirements. There were students described as slow learners, troublesome, unmotivated, or difficult to manage. She closed the folder and took a quiet breath. Before the first day ended, she had already decided that she would not allow those descriptions to become the identities of her students.

On her first morning, she stood by the doorway and watched them arrive. Sky entered quietly and chose a seat near the side of the room. She had once been an active student, but after her parents separated, something inside her seemed to change. Her grades gradually declined, her participation disappeared, and the girl who once volunteered answers now avoided being noticed. Teo arrived carrying a worn notebook and sat near the back. He was a slow learner who often needed lessons explained several times. Years of being called slow had made him hesitant to answer even when he knew part of the lesson. Marga usually came to school after working before or after classes. Her family depended on whatever she could earn, and exhaustion often followed her into the classroom. Yet despite the demands placed on her, she continued trying to keep up. MJ was different. He was loud, restless, and often involved in arguments. Teachers had already grown accustomed to calling him disruptive, but Nanay Ina noticed that beneath his difficult behavior was a young boy carrying frustrations he did not know how to express.

Nanay Ina did not begin the year by giving them a long lecture about responsibility. Instead, she gave them a piece of paper and asked them to write three things: something they were good at, something they struggled with, and something they hoped to become someday. The classroom became unusually quiet. Some students wrote quickly, while others stared at their blank papers. Teo struggled to think of anything he was good at. Sky left the last question unanswered. Marga wrote that she wanted to finish school and help her family live more comfortably. MJ initially wrote

nothing at all. Nanay Ina walked around the room without forcing anyone to share. When she reached Teo's desk, she saw his words: I am slow. I don't know what I am good at. She did not erase what he had written. Beneath it, she wrote a simple sentence: Then we will find out together.

From that day, Nanay Ina began teaching differently. She still expected her students to study, complete their work, and take responsibility for their education, but she no longer treated mistakes as evidence that they were incapable. She broke difficult lessons into smaller steps for Teo and gave him enough time to process each one. When Sky remained silent during discussions, Nanay Ina found other ways to let her participate without putting her on the spot. She gave Marga opportunities to catch up when work prevented her from completing an assignment on time, while still encouraging her to remain committed to her studies. With MJ, she learned that correcting behavior was not enough; he needed to know that he could be heard without having to make himself the loudest person in the room.

The changes were small at first. Teo began raising his hand occasionally, even when he was unsure of his answer. Sky started staying a few minutes after class to finish activities she had left incomplete. Marga stopped apologizing every time she submitted work late and instead began asking for help when she needed it. MJ still had difficult days, but he began thinking before turning every disagreement into an argument. Nanay Ina noticed each change. She never made a grand announcement about their progress. She simply reminded them that improvement did not have to be dramatic to matter.

One afternoon, an examination was returned to the class. The room quickly filled with the sound of papers being turned over and quiet reactions to scores. Teo looked at his paper and lowered his head. His score was still one of the lowest in the class. He had studied, but several questions remained beyond his understanding. For a moment, he looked ready to tear the paper apart. Nanay Ina sat beside him and went through the mistakes one by one. She did not tell him that he should have done better. Instead, she showed him the questions he had answered correctly and pointed out that his score had improved compared with the previous examination. It was only a small improvement, but she treated it as proof that progress was possible. Teo looked at his paper again, this time without hiding it.

For Sky, the hardest lesson was not found in any textbook. It was learning to believe that the problems at home did not have to determine the person she would become. Nanay Ina never asked her to forget what had happened to her family. She simply reminded her through small acts of encouragement that pain could be carried without allowing it to erase her future. Slowly, Sky began writing again. She eventually submitted a short piece for a classroom activity, and when Nanay Ina returned it with encouraging remarks, Sky smiled at her work as if seeing it for the first time.

Marga's progress looked different. Some mornings, exhaustion made it difficult for her to focus, and there were days when she came to school worried about what would happen at home. Nanay Ina understood that telling her to simply work harder

would never be enough. She helped Marga organize her schoolwork around her responsibilities and reminded her that supporting her family did not mean she had to abandon her own dreams. Marga began seeing education not as another burden she had to carry, but as one of the paths that could eventually lead her somewhere better.

MJ took the longest to change. There were still moments when his temper got ahead of him, but Nanay Ina refused to reduce him to his behavior. She began giving him responsibilities inside the classroom. He helped arrange materials, assisted classmates during activities, and became responsible for keeping the room organized after group work. At first, he complained about the tasks. Eventually, he began taking pride in them. For the first time, he was being trusted with something rather than simply being watched for the next mistake.

Months passed, and Room 19 slowly became different. The walls were still faded, the chairs were still old, and the students still had difficult days. But something had changed inside the room. Students began helping one another. They stayed longer to finish activities. They celebrated small achievements. More importantly, they stopped speaking about themselves as though their present circumstances were permanent. Teo no longer introduced himself as the slow student. Sky began raising her hand again. Marga started talking about finishing school and building a better future for her family. MJ discovered that being respected felt better than being feared.

When the school year finally came to an end, the students of Room 19 did not suddenly become the highest-performing class in the school. Their journey had never been about becoming perfect. What changed was more important. They had learned to try again after failure, to ask for help without shame, and to believe that their struggles were chapters of their lives rather than the ending of their stories.

On the final afternoon, Nanay Ina stood at the doorway of Room 19 and watched her four students gather their things. Sky looked through her old notebook before placing it carefully inside her bag. Teo checked his papers twice, proud of how much more complete his work had become. Marga hugged her books close to her chest, already thinking about the next school year. MJ stayed behind to straighten the chairs without being asked.

Nanay Ina smiled. She had entered Room 19 thinking she would teach them lessons from books. Instead, they had taught her lessons that no textbook could contain. She learned that a failing grade could hide a student who was exhausted from working, that silence could hide a heart struggling with pain, that slow progress could still be progress, and that difficult behavior could sometimes be a young person's way of asking to be understood.

Grades could measure answers, but they could not measure perseverance. Attendance could record presence, but it could not explain the reasons behind an absence. A report card could describe performance, but it could never capture the courage it took for a student to begin again. That was why Nanay Ina looked beyond grades.

She saw Sky's future beyond the pain of her family. She saw Teo's potential beyond the labels others had given him. She saw Marga's dreams beyond the responsibilities she carried. She saw MJ's kindness beyond the behavior that had once defined him.

That was Nanay Ina. And for her students, perhaps the greatest lesson she ever taught was not found in any textbook. It was the simple truth that they were more than their grades, more than their mistakes, and more than the circumstances they were born into. They were still becoming—and someone believed they could become something beautiful.

ARTICLE DETAILS

PG-0000033; Received: April 19, 2026; Accepted: April 22, 2026; Published: April 25, 2026

CITATION:

Dayan, Elma R. (2026). *The Teacher Who Saw Beyond Grades*. *Pinas Gazette: Essay, Stories, and Poetry*. DOI: 10.64591/tmxyrr44

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