

Kindness is Complicated

I shouldn't have bought him the gloves.

Scolding myself, I hurry down the city block away from Waring Elementary. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* The moment replays in my head: my proud presentation of the gift, Jerome's flash of shame, the timid thank you. *Never again*, I think.

Waring Elementary is squeezed between brownstones in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Next door is a new dog park—emerald green, pristine, and enclosed by a shiny black fence—yet 100% of Waring's families qualify for federally-subsidized meals, and many come from homeless shelters at the edge of the catchment zone. More affluent families in the neighborhood send their children elsewhere, and Waring is among the lowest-performing schools in the district.

When I learned about this disparity, I was shocked. My own school was just blocks away from Waring and had the resources to help—so why weren't we? Why were we regularly fundraising for children around the world, yet doing nothing for children around the corner?

Indignation led to action. In my freshman year, I organized over 60 of my peers to tutor first through fourth graders at Waring. I typed grant proposals, wrote meeting agendas and, several mornings a week, recruited students from every homeroom in the high school. During summer vacation, I planned for the school year with Waring's principal, and over winter break, I made prize boxes for the kids. In the years that followed, I became a sight words maestro, a bathroom "accident" authority, a tear-drying and handshake-making and storybook-reading virtuoso.

Some days, I returned home exhausted. But small affirmations—like Zenii finally learning the word *tractor* and Armani writing me daily thank you notes—gave the work purpose. I fell in love with children and with teaching and I realized, with some surprise, that I'd found my calling.

One day, Jerome and I sat in a hallway at Waring, a stack of picture books between us. "Are you excited for winter break?" I asked. He squeaked his sneakers on the floor and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "No," he finally replied. "It's cold, and my mom can't buy me gloves."

That weekend, I went to Target and purchased a pair I thought he'd like. I didn't think twice about it. Every childhood lesson had taught me this was the right thing to do, and I was certain that he'd be grateful.

But when I handed him the brightly colored gift bag on Monday, Jerome didn't smile. Instead, he looked embarrassed and confused and when he mumbled "thank you," it sounded forced. I felt my own cheeks flush with shame. *Why?* I wondered. *What did I do wrong?*

I wrestled with this question for months. And I came to realize that I'll never know what it's like to go without mittens in the winter—most of my fellow tutors won't. We attend the highest-ranked public school in the state, and from the moment we enter Waring's doors, we risk becoming benefactors to its beneficiaries.

So how do we avoid this power dynamic? How do we provide support without condescension? And if we can't, should we shrug our shoulders to society's injustices?

I know that apathy is not the answer. If I'd been put in the same situation three, four or five years ago, I would've bought the gloves every time. In truth, I still hesitate to condemn that decision. But kindness is complicated. The last thing I want is to be Jerome's "savior," to injure his pride, or to reinforce the inherently hurtful idea that he needs strangers to swoop in and solve problems.

Today, I don't buy things for my students if their families can't afford them. Not because it's wrong to be generous, but because in this case, material generosity undermines a relationship of equals. I will not stop pouring my heart into the classroom, but I will now strive to do so in a way that preserves my students' dignity.