Introduction

The Power of Story

The idea for this book began in . . .

No, allow me to begin again—the compelling need for this collection of stories from the classroom began knocking on my soul in the late 1990s, shortly after I was touched by the names on the AIDS quilt circulating throughout the nation. The power of those names and dates embroidered and painted on the quilt brought life to the statistics announcing the number of lives cut short by AIDS. If names and dates had the power to transform flat statistics to lives touched, then imagine the power that would flow from stories behind each of those names.

In the fall of 2002 an exhibit of life-size photos of people associated with the 9/11 attack on New York's World Trade Center toured the country. I viewed the exhibit at the Skirball Center in Los Angeles. The curators had left boxes of facial tissues strewn generously beneath and beside the photos. Accompanying each photo was a short paragraph, words from the firefighters and nurses, the police officers, and corporate executives. Men and women, young and old were touched by the stories more deeply than we had been impressed by the numbers totaling the dead and missing. The power of stories again.

In December 2002, I visited Ellis Island in New York. That exhibit in its entirety tells the story of tens of thousands of hopeful immigrants coming to America, and the wall of memory where my grandparents' names are etched brought them to life for me; nothing was more memorable than the individual stories told on audiotapes and film. The power of stories.

Every culture in every time has used story to record its history, to memorialize heroes, to eternalize events, to reinforce roles, and to

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aid understanding. Stories teach our children about our morals and our traditions. Teachers, secular and religious, in formal and informal settings, tell stories. Perhaps it is because we have moved away from storytelling that we've become more disconnected from our children. Yet, you need only begin a conversation with, "Let me tell you a story," to have everyone's attention.

This book is about our stories, stories told by classroom teachers, stories that reach behind and around and under the statistics to bring the art and craft of teaching to life. These stories breathe life into the children and teachers who fill our classrooms. These stories must be told.

Charles Dickens began one of his most famous and important stories with the seemingly contradictory line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Bear with me while I join the hundreds who have borrowed this line. It is the best of times in education—never before has education been of such high priority at every government level, local to international. Never before has the stated intention in the United States been to educate every child, black, brown, and white, rich or poor, to the highest level of which they are capable.

It is also the worst of times in education. Every day, it seems, policymakers at the national, state, district, or school level issue edicts declaring what curriculum should be taught, to whom it will be taught, and how it will be taught. There's been an increased call for *standardization,* for *teacher-proof* scripted lessons, for lock-step scope and sequences, and for pacing plans. Equal opportunity is equated to *sameness* of input, as if putting the same thing into each child will result in getting the same thing out—higher test scores. The policymakers act as if children are the tabula rasas teachers are mandated to fill up so they can regurgitate the stipulated facts on state achievement tests so the school and district in turn look good and property values rise and the mandates of the federal No Child Left Behind Act leave the schools alone. But there's a disconnection here. Socioeconomics aren't children, data about years of teaching don't reflect effectiveness, and test scores represent only a small piece of what children learn in schools.

While the debates about testing, which tests, how often, and how many, circulate, accomplished teachers moan to themselves and to like-minded colleagues. They quietly close their classroom doors and continue to teach groups of children, respectfully treating each

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child as if he or she were their only charge. They employ effective teaching strategies they know from experience and from continuous observation result in powerful learning. But they perform their artistry in private, much like Emily Dickinson wrote her poetry. Art needs audience. In order to impact education policy, we need to open those doors so that those who make the external decisions can see the children and the teachers, in Grades pre-K through 12, across all content areas, throughout the nation, who make magical things happen. Stories are deliciously rich in bringing the abstract to life, of changing the nameless, faceless children into precious beings filled with potential.

All of our lives have been touched by the teachers who have taught us. I've been fortunate to have had some wonderful teachers whose lessons continue to influence my life. While I can't remember any of the questions, and would probably have difficulty recalling many of the facts that appeared on the required New York State Regents exams I had to pass before graduating from Jamaica High School in 1960, I do remember what I learned in sixth grade:

- How to get along with others
- Respect my classmates
- Kindness is powerful
- How to sew using the combination stitch
- What a hair looks like under a microscope
- And I learned not to sing

Now let me tell you a story about sixth grade . . .

It's Okay Not to Be Perfect

Adrienne Mack-Kirschner

Sixth-grade lessons come in many guises. I went to school during the 1950s when girls wore full skirts and crinolines to class. One day when walking to the front of the room to deliver some papers to the teacher sitting at her desk, my crinoline slipped from under my skirt and fell in folds around my ankles—the victim of a missing button. While I stood

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there frozen, Mrs. Mecklenberg told me to step out of the slip, pick it up, and go to the restroom. She sent another student after me with buttons and safety pins. I made the repair, but feared returning to class. After lingering as long as I could in the girl's room, I ventured timidly into the classroom. To my astonishment, not one child said anything. There was no laughter or teasing, not in class and not in the playground or after school. Not one child ever mentioned the mishap. You can't measure what I learned in Mrs. Mecklenberg's class on a standardized test, but you can see the lessons playing out in my life every day. In sixth grade I learned about the importance of a safe learning environment and how safety means much more than just freedom from physical violence. Today I look a lot more like Mrs. Mecklenberg than like the 11-year-old with the fallen crinoline I once was, but she's still my teacher. I remember that little girl and the teacher who made it okay not to be perfect but to be a continuous work in progress.

Unfortunately, not all teachers were like Mrs. Mecklenberg. During the same year a visiting music teacher came one Friday morning and instructed the sixth graders to sing rounds of *Three Blind Mice.* We sang round after round while she circulated, her ear close to our open mouths, listening to the sounds coming out. When she tapped me on the shoulder, one of the few chosen ones, I sang even louder. I loved to sing, as did my father. Singing was joyous and filled with possibilities—both especially important to a child growing up in a government housing project. When she had completed evaluating all of the students she returned to the front of the room. *Will those students whom I tapped,* I held my breath self-consciously expecting praise, *not sing. You're off key and you ruin the songs for everyone else.* I can recall the exact moment when I stopped singing. Nearly four decades passed before I found my voice again. It was still off-key, but perfect pitch is not what singing is all about. I take the lessons I learned in school and carry them to my own classrooms where I attempt to transform them for my own students. That is the power of story.

In seventh grade at Parsons Junior High School our New Age English teacher wore beads and let her hair hang loose. She sat cross-legged dangerously close to the edge of her desk; our attention was

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riveted probably as much by her pose as by her words. In our class we didn't just read books, our teacher taught us to talk with the authors. *If you have something to say to the authors, if you want to tell them how their words touched or surprised or angered you, then tell them.* We filled the margins of the books we read with penciled-in commentary. We read our classmates' marginalia and wrote back. Discussions were rich and deep and meaningful. We were part of a learning community of readers and writers, conspiring together to make meaning from the texts we read. My conversations with authors didn't end in seventh grade. I prowled used bookstores in Greenwich Village so I could purchase and own books that I could continue to write in. My home bookshelves are filled with thousands of volumes, all friends of mine. They're combination books and journals at the same time. I'm 12 years old, or 20, or 43 again when I reread the marginalia and comment on my own comments. My life as a writer began in seventh grade.

I can change modes here and tell you about my teaching theory. I can stress the importance of standards, of high expectations for all students, of holding everyone accountable, or I can tell you another story, a story about one of my students, whose name was Maria.

As Loud as Thunder

Adrienne Mack-Kirschner

From the first day of school, my high school freshmen English students know that by the end of the year they each will need to demonstrate proficiency in the domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. My mission during the first weeks of school includes uncovering students' strengths as well as the areas where they will benefit from more focused assistance. Some students are challenged by writing effectively; others by comprehending the texts they encounter in core classes. All of them have difficulty applying active listening skills. And then there are those students, like Maria, who have progressed satisfactorily by completing homework and passing tests, but whose voices remain silent. Because the ability to work collaboratively and to present one's ideas is increasingly valued in the workplace, helping students to

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find their voices is critically important, even though verbal skills are not measured on conventional tests.

Fifteen-year-old Maria was a master at avoiding attention in class. She never raised her hand. Even when I knew from reading her essays and journals that she had valuable insights to contribute to class discussions, she chose silence. In groups, she volunteered to record rather than to present. I thought of the itinerant music teacher who had stolen my voice and vowed to assist Maria in finding hers. We began by preparing and rehearsing answers in advance, which she delivered, still seated, at a prearranged signal. Slowly she progressed to joining in group presentations in which she would not have to face the class alone. During her first group presentation, she knew she'd disappointed her teammates when the other students couldn't hear her report due to the softness of her voice. Her frustration doubled her determination to be heard. Throughout the semester we worked on speaking publicly, progressing from responding when called upon to raising her hand and offering an opinion. However, it wasn't until nearly the end of the spring term that Maria gave the performance neither she nor I would ever forget.

The assignment was to memorize a poem and present it to the class the way a poet might. It wasn't until I read her year-end portfolio that I understood how important Maria's presentation was to her. She wrote about how nervous she was standing alone in front of the class and how suddenly, as she was reciting the poem, she realized that she didn't care about anything except pronouncing the words correctly. Her voice was, according to Maria, *as loud as thunder.* She forgot three lines, but she vowed to herself then that even though she was nervous, she would still let herself be heard. *Never again,* Maria continued in her reflection, *will I talk to an audience like a little mouse, but like a big thunderstorm that nobody will want to ignore.*

I watch for students like Maria; students who silently walk the halls of our large urban schools; students who become invisible mice behind the walls. Maria trusted me and her classmates. She knew we were her partners in our classroom learning community. As her teacher I had worked first to make the classroom a safe place to take risks, something I had learned from my sixth-grade teacher. Only because she felt safe was she able to grow. When she finished

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reciting her poem—the title of which escapes me—there were tears rolling down my cheeks. Her classmates cheered while Maria remained standing behind the podium, smiling. That morning I remembered why I had chosen teaching as a profession.

What follows in these pages are stories from teachers who raise their students, like Maria, to higher levels, adding value to their lives, not just in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but as citizens of the world.

For this first collection of stories, we've chosen to call upon National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) and candidates for certification because as an NBCT myself I knew that they had spent months reflecting on their teaching in preparation for completing the portfolio entries required by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). If you are not already familiar with the NBPTS, I encourage you to go to their Web site and learn about National Board Certification and what it might hold for you and for the teachers you know and work with. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, calling upon the best teachers, researchers, educators, and community members from around the nation, identified the five essential ingredients found in the most effective classrooms. I used these principles to organize the stories that follow:

- Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects so students can learn.
- Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
- Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
- Teachers are members of learning communities.

But in reality, once the call for stories had gone out through all the e-mails and listservs I belonged to, and once the stories began to arrive, we realized that they are deeply complex and defy rigid categorization. Just like good lessons, they don't address just one standard, but weave their way throughout the propositions and could just as easily fit in one chapter as in another. Therefore, I ask you to be flexible and to consider the big picture, not just the specific proposition that heads each chapter.

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This collection is offered to inspire you, to remind you why you chose to become a teacher and why you remain one. It is my hope that policymakers at every level will learn from these pages what powerful teaching and learning are all about. The stories will move you beyond the data analysis and beyond the published test scores that affect real estate prices without regard to the lives of children and their teachers. I read the stories as they arrived, frequently reading them aloud to my husband. Some drew tears, others laughter, until my husband jokingly complained that there weren't enough tissues in the house for me to write this book. I ignored him, grabbed another box of tissues, and kept reading. I hope you will also.

Take the stories to the faculty lounge or the legislative analyst's office, read them to one another, or in book clubs, or at PTA meetings. Remember that the students we're collectively responsible for are first children, not receptacles into which we dump information. These are young people needing to learn respect, self-confidence, the habits of learning and thinking and compassion. The future is sitting in today's classrooms. Our students are the hope for the world, and you, as teachers and supporters of teachers, are charged with growing compassionate world citizens capable of fostering and continuing democracy.

Resource

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. http://www.nbpts.org