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Imparting practical wisdom and resilience to our students

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Imparting practical wisdom and resilience to our students

Abstract

The powerful impact of communicating a teacher's belief in a student is presented. By sharing trade books and novels with metaphoric messages, teachers can impart practical wisdom and enable students to develop resilience when facing challenges.

Keywords

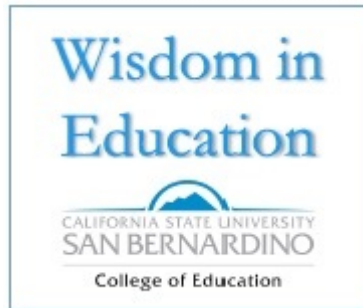
reading, elementary education, literacy

Author Statement

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Cover Page Footnote

A version of this paper was delivered as an address to an audience attending the California State University San Bernardino Palm Desert Campus 25th year celebration awards on June 2, 2011.



Our educators are among the most influential members of society and are the sculptors of each successive generation. This past year, I have had the opportunity to serve as a spokesman for public education in a number of settings. In preparing to speak for one such gathering, I reflected on my twenty-seven years as an educator in public schools. I thought about the students, families, and teachers on whom I have had the privilege to make a mark or impression. I thought about fellow educators who made tremendous impacts on the lives of students and families and I would like to tell you story about some exemplary teachers who left their mark.

It was late Fall, 1967, just after the implementation of the Elementary Secondary Education Act of 1965, spearheaded by the Johnson Administration. Mr. Anderson, the Assistant Superintendent, visited the schools after the district had become unified and he visited Jackson Elementary School. There was a book fair, and he came while Mrs. Mary Alice Winn's class was visiting the fair.

He told her kindergarten class of children, "Books are a powerful friend - you read them and you can go anywhere in your imagination, you can learn to be anything when you grow up."

One little child went to buy a special book. He wanted *Little Toot* (Gramatky, 1939), since Mrs. Winn had read that book to them. But he only had a quarter and the book was seventy-five cents. So, he bought *Curious George* (Rey & Rey, 1941) and left forlorn. At the request of the children, Mrs. Winn read that same *Little Toot* book almost every other week, until they had all memorized it. She

would tell them about the little tiny tugboat, who everyone thought was too little to do anything and too afraid. Well, a storm came up and, of course, it wasn't Big Toot or Grandfather Toot, but Little Toot that saved the day.

Mrs. Winn would tell the children, no matter how small they were, they could learn and be anything they wanted to be and she believed in them. Several weeks went by and the little boy and his family had to leave school for a week when a grandmother passed away. As he got his schoolwork for the week, Mrs. Winn came up and handed him a book. He looked at the cover and it was *Little Toot*.

She hugged him and said, "You can be whatever you dream to be."

Every year in June until he finished fifth grade and moved to the next school, she would remind him of that book.

In fifth grade he met another teacher named Miss Kellar, who would read to the class each day after lunch. She would select Caldecott and Newberry Award books and read with such flair and expression that it would whisk the students into the story itself. She read one book entitled *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950) and one young student was so taken with the story that he would walk to the city library on Saturdays and check out each of the other six books in the series.

That year was a very challenging year, with the temporary loss of the home, a move, and the family dissolving. At the end of the year, the class produced a literary yearbook and Miss Kellar wrote a special message to each student. After she wrote in his, she

handed him a small package and, to his surprise, he opened it to find the boxed set of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

She told him, “I know you have had a difficult year and I know how much you loved these books. When you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, you can escape to a safe place in your imagination, just like the story.”

He read them all over and over.

In middle school, he met another teacher named Mary O’Neill. They would read great stories and then produce them as small plays to perform for the next door elementary school. She introduced him to a series of abridged illustrated classics and inspired his love for books even more. On the last day of school, she took him and three other student directors to McDonald’s for a treat and gave each of them a book from the plays they had performed or had student-directed. She handed him a copy of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 1954) that he had directed. He had chosen those stories, because, no matter how impossible the odds, in every single story, the main character would always overcome and the antagonist always got his comeuppance.

She told him, “Read these and you will learn that, against impossible odds, you can aspire to anything you choose and anything great. I believe you will accomplish something great!”

She kept in touch and reminded him of her belief in him every year until her passing and he believed her.

Then, in high school, he met an English teacher, named Ray Hill, who looked out for him and advised him when he again had challenging life circumstances beyond his control that could have sent him in many adverse directions. Ray Hill, too, gave him a book at graduation, entitled *Narcissus and Goldmund* (Hesse, 1930).

As he gave the book, he said, “As you read about the fervent search these characters engage in to find the meaning of life and discover the meaning for their own lives, remember to look for meaning FOR your life

and search and find the perfect place for you. Remember that you have the best of both characters inside; you are a blend of the thinker and the artist and you can and will touch lives forever.”

He believed Ray Hill and pursued the dreams that these three and many more teachers had imparted to him and had impacted his life through books. He kept them all and pursued the dream to teach and touch lives forever.

The child was me and this was my educational journey. The books are worn with age, but I still have each one, and share them to this day with my students to inspire them. These teachers shared such practical wisdom regarding how to cope with the day-to-day challenges of life and how to develop personal resilience. The gift they gave me is one I receive daily as I continue to be inspired by what I read. In spite of the environmental adversities I encountered in my earlier years, I had great teachers who sought to impart educational resilience to me and set my path on a journey to success and accomplishment of my goals in life.

That is what we are all about as educators: to give our children a joy of learning, a love for reading, and a means to reach for their highest aspirations. To encourage them to dream and to be confident in themselves and to embrace all the possibilities that lie ahead of them in life. Teachers made a difference in my life and I am greatly honored to be able to reciprocate the appreciation of the power and impact of learning, of books, and of the influence each teacher has to build within each student the focus and resilience to persevere in pursuit of their goals and dreams. Doing this shapes one life, that then shapes another, and the effect multiplies geometrically. Each of these teachers touched a solitary life, mine. And in turn, their influence shaped the person and teacher I became, someone who subsequently has touched the hundreds I have taught and thousands I have impacted these twenty-nine years as a teacher and principal.

Never have we truly celebrated or honored teachers with the value that they merit. No amount of money or kindness can equal the lives saved, transformed, or changed, by their influence and impact. I have been truly blessed and inspired to aspire to greater heights by some very special teachers in my life, and hope that I have honored them by giving that same inspiration to some of the students I have known and taught.

Today, I encourage you, celebrate your profession, revere your impact, and cherish the gifts of time, belief, knowledge, and inspiration that you can give to others. Go and read to a child! Help them dream dreams, learn wisdom and knowledge, and let their imaginations take them to new places. Give a child a gift that will never be depleted and may be availed for a lifetime.

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