

# **From Seed to Apple**

*From Seed to Apple* is a project of the Washington State Teacher of the Year program which is administered by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. The collection is edited by Tom Robinson.

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The names of all students featured in this volume have been changed unless permission for their use has been obtained.

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For the great teachers who helped make us great teachers.

**A mind once stretched by a new idea  
never regains its original dimensions.**

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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## Foreward

The assignment is on the board and the directions are clear. And yet, one of my precious students sitting toward the back of the classroom instead will be drawing in his notebook. Or maybe she's talking about the basketball game. Or last night's episode of *Glee*. The topic or activity that distracts has changed over the years, but my response has remained the same since day one:

"Is this the best use of your time?"

The rhetorical question causes an ashamed head to droop. Eyes fail to meet my stare. This implicit "No, it's not" answer is followed by a regretful and soft, "Sorry, Mr. Maebori." I smile to say all is forgiven as I walk away, and my precious student gets to work.

Occasionally, on my roughest days, I wonder, "Why am I a teacher?" The answer resounds: Because it is absolutely, inexorably, and positively the best possible use of my time each day. There is nothing I would rather do, and few things are as important. It's rarely easy, but should the job of preparing our country's future generations be *easy*?

Each day in Washington State and all over America, school bells ring and classroom doors close. In between the first kids piling in for first period and everyone shuffling out at last bell, there's potential for something remarkable. Stories happen. Words of wisdom are imparted. Lives change.

Here is a collection of these life-changing stories. And if you've been around young people for any length of time, you know for certain students are not the only ones whose lives are different. As teachers, the investment we make in the lives of children also yield the kind of gold money can't buy. In many cases, we'll never know the impact we made on students entrusted into our care. We live a certain amount on faith that the things we said and the time we invested instilled hope in someone, inspired someone to take a risk, or prepared someone to be amazing.

That's what this collection of stories is about. That's what these authors are about. They are teachers.

And that *is* the best use of their time.

Jay Maebori, NBCT  
2011 Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Kentwood High School  
Covington, WA





# **The Things That We Remember**

*Sometimes it is the unintended lesson  
that has the most lasting impact on students*

By Mark Ray, 2012 Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Skyview High School, Vancouver Public Schools

I have forgotten almost every lesson I learned in school.

Lost are the drills, the formulas and the capitals that consumed my life from the morning I walked to kindergarten in a red windbreaker to the night I walked in a black robe across the commencement stage. The lessons that led to glowing mimeographed elementary report cards and congratulatory trips to Baskin and Robbins--gone. Absent too are the answers to hard-won story problems on Mr. Robb's honors math homework, crafted from a TI-30 calculator in a faux-denim case. Long forgotten are the difficult musical passages that required bleary early morning sectionals, the sentences containing "Words for Champions" spelling terms and the prosaic details of Great Decisions and Cold War geopolitics that consumed Sunday evenings at the public library. And yet I do not begrudge the fine teachers of Ben Franklin Elementary, Shumway Junior High and Hudson's Bay High Schools. They taught me well. Lessons were learned, even if they may not be the lessons they intended.

From second grade, I remember Mrs. Carson not for what she labored to teach me but for square dancing in Room 2. I recall the sensation of clasping the dry hands of Charlene Downey as we danced the Virginia Reel on rainy days at recess. Over the course of that year, I learned to read, to spell, to multiply. But I will remember Mrs. Carson because she loved square dancing.

From sixth grade, I remember the projects of Mr. Peterson--the model rockets, the survival kits for outdoor school and the map of the island of Hispaniola crafted of flour, water and salt. And camping on the Oregon Coast. And singing goofy folk songs. Over the course of that year, I learned about physics, geography and became a master speller. But I will remember Mr. Peterson because he loved rockets, camping and goofy folk songs.

From high school, I remember Ms. Greene. I remember the moment she placed a copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Christ Climbed Down" in front of me when I was an angry young man and re-convincing me that literature could speak to me. I also recall the time that she returned a writing assignment telling me pointedly that I had talent and that I should stop fooling around and take writing seriously. In the two years I had Ms. Greene,

I learned about great literature and the English language. But I remember Ms. Greene because she loved writing.

To be fair, the varied unit plans and lessons of these teachers and others have woven themselves into something resembling a well-studied and hopefully well-learned life. But as a teacher in mid-career now reflecting on my lives both as a student and educator, my memories are hung not on instructional objectives, but on people and the persistence of my teachers' words and actions. And as an educator, it forces me to think about the things that we believe important in our classrooms and schools.

In this age of outcomes, we may dwell more on the *effect* rather than *affect* of our teaching. What I remember and what still resonates is not long division but the persistence of the unintended lessons that date to 1972. I don't recall loving Mrs. Carson, but the fact that she loved square dancing made that experience stick. Mr. Peterson didn't design all of his project- and problem-based units just for me, but his passion for rockets and the outdoors made them and him compelling. Ms. Greene was in fact one of my favorite and most influential teachers and her love of writing and literature helped me to love writing and literature. That's why I remember these and other teachers. While I appreciate what they did to make me educationally whole, they helped teach me, a fellow teacher, far more important lessons.

I envy artists, writers and songwriters for the immortality of their work. Their ability to create something with persistence beyond the moment which can inform and inspire even beyond that artist's lifetime approaches the divine. I have often dreamed of writing a poem or essay that might be read ages hence that would not merely reflect well on my life's work but also live on in some way in the lives of others. I now know that beyond the craft of teaching, we forge experiences with students that can be as powerfully personal and resonant as any song or painting. Like artists, teaching is defined by a lifetime of such experiences with a canon of work that can change lives in ways that are both unpredictable and marvelous.

Recently, an article appeared in the alumni newsletter for the International School of Brussels where I taught for two years. It was written by a former student to whom I gave my personal copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* twelve years ago upon his graduation from elementary school and my return to the United States. Paris Gourtsoyannis is now a journalist in Edinburgh, Scotland. He shared the fact that he still has the book at his bedside along with the *Bible* and a copy of Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism*. As he writes,

"...what a way to challenge a child: to give him the poetry of one of the most difficult yet rewarding Beat poets, well before I was ready for it, knowing that I would come back to it again and again. And I have. I've read it to flatmates, girlfriends, strangers – but mostly to myself. It sits on my bedside table between the *Bible* and Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism*, meaning it's at least the third most important book in my life. That's a 13 year return on two years' work – not bad, especially when you consider that

I was one of hundreds of students he taught at ISB, one of thousands in his career.”

At about the same time, I received an unexpected email from a former student of my father, Chuck, who retired in 1982 and died in 2005. This district colleague recalled her time as a student in my father’s block and journalism classes decades ago. She wrote, “I was very small and didn’t have a lot of confidence. What I lacked in confidence, I made up for by being a smart aleck. Mr. Ray (showed) me that I didn’t need to mask my lack of confidence with smart remarks. He helped me to know that I could talk to people in a clear way without feeling less than them. I loved to write and he helped me to put a voice to that. I wanted to tell you the impact that he had on my life.”

These are not unique stories. Like artists and songwriters, teachers leave behind things that have a resonance and permanence that we cannot know when they are created. A gift, a kind word, a relationship, a lifelong skill--these are things that persist in the lifetimes of those we work with as teachers. I may never again see Paris. And yet we are forever linked by a poet that was first introduced to me by one of my teachers when I too was a young man. Far more profoundly, my father's work has a life that has outlasted his own.

As teachers, we may choose our lesson plans. But we cannot choose those lessons that our students will remember. And we cannot know what lessons will be learned.

## Dear Cassi

*A young teacher sees herself in a student  
and becomes a life-long mentor*

by Lynne Olmos, 2012 ESD 113 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Mossyrock Junior/Senior High School, Mossyrock School District

Dear Cassi,

Did you know that that day, the first day I saw you, that day so long ago, when you were beginning junior high, and I was beginning my first day as a teacher, that I saw my younger self in you? You with your long blonde hair, lanky and tan, wearing boots and drawing horses on your binder - that was me, a blast from the past, twenty-five years earlier. I remember my first one-on-one conversation with you. You had qualified for the fair in Puyallup with your horse, Copy, and were going to be absent for several days. You were sure I would be as grim and disapproving about your absence as the other teachers, but instead I was so happy for you. I wanted to know all about Copy and the events in which you would be competing. Cassi, you were so passionate and so purely joyful when it came to horses. I was on your side from the very start. As a new teacher, I was learning how to connect with my students. And just like that, you were in my heart.

Later that year, you came in and told me that something terrible had happened. Copy had been trapped in a barbed wire fence and she had torn her leg up very badly. You were devastated. I commiserated with you and followed your daily updates as you nursed her back to health. During this time, you were not my best student, let's admit it. However, despite the fact that you were plagued by severe attention deficit issues and spelling was always an adventure, you created some amazing products for me. Do you remember the stories you wrote back then in your spare time? You shared the book you were writing with me, and again I saw myself in you. I, too, wrote "books" when I was in junior high, my own version of *The Black Stallion* or *Misty*. Even today, the picture of your cowgirl superhero resides on my classroom wall and reminds me of those days. I learned from you that a passion for writing can be born where you might least expect it, a valuable lesson for an English teacher.

In ninth grade, you were in my class again, now a freshman and a growing young lady, too tall to be an accurate picture of my former self. You joined our high school equestrian team, and I was privileged to be your advisor and one of your coaches. Your horse Copy was back to her old self, or nearly. She was aging, but still lightning fast, and I loved to watch the two of you race across the arena, she with her powerful strides and you with your ponytail bouncing along behind you. You were an average student in my English class, kept up with the work, but struggled still with comprehension. I realized

then that you worked for me in class more because I was involved with you through horses than any other reason. However, when I could engage your imagination and hook you into assignments where your interests could be tapped, you excelled. You helped me understand that a teacher's knowledge of her students gives her the keys to unlock learning.

As high school progressed for you, you moved on to other teachers, and I only saw you at equestrian practices and meets. My son was your teammate and partner in crime. You dubbed yourselves the "A" team, and were partnered together successfully in many events. I took so much joy in your growth as a horsewoman, as you trained Copy's replacement yourself, and turned Bo into an amazing and versatile partner by your senior year. I was so proud of you and the beautiful, responsible, funny and kind woman you were becoming. I was starting to truly see how a teacher and a coach can touch the lives of her students. It's not all about the classroom; there's a whole person to know and value.

During your senior year, a crisis was brought to my attention. You had not passed the state assessment in reading. You would not graduate unless you passed it on your next and final attempt. Alternatively, you could create a Collection of Evidence to submit to the state. I was recruited by the counselor and your mother to mentor you through the creation of the collection. Knowing you, and the collection process, I knew that we would have to approach this project in a creative way.

In the two years that you had been out of my classroom, you had struggled in courses that required you to read then be tested on what you had read. Retaining what you read has always been a struggle. You tended to lose interest in anything that was not relevant to you. Why work so hard to read something you would never choose on your own? Your history classes, in particular, were a struggle. Some of your high school teachers had come to see you as lazy and disinterested in school. They thought you didn't care if you graduated or not. I *knew* you, and I knew that you did care.

To inspire you to work on the collection, I chose reading selections that were specifically interesting to you. There were stories of Christian missionaries, something dear to your heart. I even found you a teen science fiction series with which you were obsessed. And, of course, there were horses. I rifled through horse magazines for articles that would be challenging and engaging enough for you to read. Then I spent time coaching you on how to approach and respond to a text as a reader, something I know I did not have enough time to do back in seventh grade when it would have had a much greater impact on your life. I am so sorry that I was a new and overwhelmed teacher then, Cassi. I wish I had been able to see the future a bit more back then, but at least I can tell you now that my current seventh graders get much more active reading strategy instruction thanks to you.

Time passed, and you were sometimes frustrated, or, as you would say, bored, by the process. Oh Cassi, those days you spent at my laptop, writing your reading responses during my prep period may have been frustrating for us both at times, but they were

worth it. Not only did you submit a successful collection, but you also took the regular assessment that spring and passed it, too. I could not be more proud of a student!

You graduated the same day as my son. Of course, watching him get his diploma was a great source of pride and joy, but your hug and your smile were so precious to me. That day I watched my first group of seventh graders step forth into adulthood as high school graduates. I am so glad, so very glad, that you were with them. Cassi, these days you are still an amazing horsewoman, and now a great mom, and dare I say it, a friend. You may still struggle with spelling, as evidenced by our correspondence on Facebook, but your heart and spirit are what matters. I am glad I saw myself in you, and you taught me not to fear that act, the act of attaching myself to my students. I know that the relationships I build are what matters.

Thank you, Cassi, for the lessons you taught to me.

Your teacher,

Lynne

# **Making Something Out of Nothing**

*We all come from places that shape us into who we are today*

by Julie Trout, 2012 ESD 121 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Gatewood Elementary School, Seattle School District

I am from making something out of nothing

From a history of one room schools with tadpoles in the water

and switches reluctantly gathered by students and handed to teachers that liked to make something out of nothing.

Endless, rolling, green hills, mountains without tops all vibrating

with the loud rumble of empty bellies.

I am from a SPARK that ignited and grew into a flame

by Mrs. Adeline Pence in a fourth grade classroom full of fabric, barn wood,  
and the smell of Mod Podge.

She transformed a dilapidated run down boarded up downtown into a place

where Jesse James once stayed and taught us the old broken down bridge was  
once the inspiration for naming an entire town.

I am from the flame that grew into a fire

and spread across the country and landed in my own classroom.

Filled with African masks, the piercing and pain-filled gaze of Frida,

the beauty and wonder that shines in the black, brown, blue, and green eyes that  
sparkle when they are asked to show how they feel.

Students are making something out of nothing.

Using broken pencils that magically turn lines

into mythical creatures, three dimensional orbs, buildings with slides, and knowing that in this classroom, composition applies to pictures.

Making something out of nothing when imaginations

are given free reign and children are elevated as individuals.

Encouraged to lead with their hearts.

Feeling not just good, but GREAT, when they learn to make something out of nothing.

I am from the nearly five hundred students

that flow in and out of a broken down portable classroom without water.

Floating on a playground that has hoops without nets,

four square games without lines, and lost swings without sets.

This classroom transforms them into artists,

all in the same stream, at the same time, no matter where they started or where they are going.

Making something out of nothing with their own hands and their own minds.

I am from brilliant minds that can't always be measured

by numbers, graphs, scores, race, gender, or religion.

These minds KNOW that art is not a luxury but a necessity.

We all are from the possibility of turning what is inside, outside,

trusting that experience will be honored and respected by those who are leading

and from those who are following.

We are from making something out of nothing,

dreaming someday we can start with something.



# A Teacher's Dictionary

*When the very definition of a powerful word  
is right in front of you every day*

By Brad Soliday, 2012 ESD 171 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Manson High School, Manson School District

Character: See Valeria B

Valeria was not a good student. As a freshman in my World Geography course, her focus was on everything but her school work. Valeria seemed a bit boy crazy and a little party crazy and her work reflected these distractions. I was frustrated with her lack of academic performance and casual attitude toward school. But it would get worse. During her sophomore year Valeria continued to struggle in school, flunking classes as frequently as she passed them. Then she got pregnant. Any real hope I had clung to that Valeria would turn around her academic trajectory quickly fled. From past experience with young ladies in similar circumstances, I was less than hopeful for Valeria. She would drop out of school, or perhaps squeak through high school with a diploma, but would have little hope for the future. Her junior year, her challenges mounted as she carried the pregnancy and delivered the baby. Frequent absences and missed assignments or tests showed that she was living up to my limited expectations. I understand well the challenges of caring for an infant and did not expect her to be able to balance being a teen mom with being a student at the same time.

By the end of the school year, however, things began to change... even before I really noticed they were changing. The next year, I marveled at the new Valeria I saw in the classroom. Her academic focus and determination had done a 180 degree turnaround. Every assignment was turned in. She was prepared for every test. I marveled at the change in Valeria's attitude and focus. She took extra classes and supplemented her school work with online courses to complete her degree on time.

At the end of the year during senior presentations, Valeria shared with the audience her personal and academic journey over the previous 6 years. I learned that her dad and older brother had returned to Mexico when she was in junior high, leaving her mom and her to fend for themselves in the U.S. She spoke of her loneliness and academic malaise during those difficult years. Then she showed a picture of her child and her emotions overwhelmed her. Valeria shared that after having her child she had made a commitment to provide for and protect him. And she has. Valeria finished high school a great student. She is currently enrolled at Wenatchee Valley College and is working hard to develop her skills so that she can provide for her child. She has a plan for a career in dentistry. For **Character**, ask me about Valeria.

Leadership: See Martin G.

Martin was voted ASB President at the end of his junior year, and rightfully so. He was natural leader: funny, charismatic and confident. He wasn't a great student, but he was serviceable. On the football field, however, he became a force. At 142 lbs he wasn't very big, but the intensity in his eyes during games threatened of potential danger. Playing defensive cornerback, he liked to proclaim that he was "a Hispanic causing panic!" And he did, becoming a 1<sup>st</sup> team all-league cornerback his senior year. Martin's humor was evident everywhere he went. Our team football shirt that year had on it the acronym "SFG," which was meant to stand for, "Strive For Greatness." Martin would loudly proclaim that it stood for "Straight From the Ghetto," or "Super Frickin' Good."

One day in the spring of his senior year our school had a guest speaker who addressed a high school assembly during the last period of the day. Unbeknownst to the staff, two students were being disrespectful, and were goofing off during the presentation, close to the front of the audience. After the assembly, as the student body headed to the busses and the parking lot, our principal visited with the guest speaker, complimenting him and thanking him for taking his time to visit our school. In the meantime, Martin, on his own initiative, caught up to the disruptive students in the parking lot, and convinced them in very clear terms that they needed to apologize for their behavior. Before our principal could finish visiting with the speaker, the two disruptive students presented themselves and respectfully apologized for their behavior during the assembly.... their ferocious ASB president, close behind.

Five years later, Martin was back in my classroom, presenting a slide show to my Current World Problems classes about his experiences leading a marine platoon in Ramadi, Iraq, during the worst years of that war. On my knees, I had prayed for Martin when he went to war. Now, Martin shared how he had had two Humvees blown up underneath him by IEDs. By the grace of God he had walked away from both explosions, and I bowed my head in thanks. He shared how he and his men had interrogated Iraqi civilians in the moments after other IED attacks that desperately injured his men, knowing full well that the Iraqis knew exactly who was responsible for the attack even while they proclaimed ignorance. In those terrible minutes, he had the power of judge, jury and executioner... but his noble character had won over rage and frustration. He swallowed his anger and drove on. For **leadership**, ask me about Stg. Martin.

Love: See Mrs. LaMar

Sheri LaMar taught Kindergarten at Manson Elementary School for 20 years. She was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer in 2007. During the next four years, Mrs. LaMar continued to teach Kindergarten even while battling through various rounds of intensive chemotherapy. My own daughter, Lauren, was part of Mrs. LaMar's class three years ago. One day, she asked my wife why her teacher had a boy's haircut. My wife explained as best she could about the effects of chemotherapy and why Mrs. LaMar's hair had

fallen out and was now just beginning to grow back. Mrs. LaMar would later explain it better. She scooped up Lauren in her lap at her desk and showed her pictures of herself when she had more hair. Mrs. LaMar told Lauren about the great wig she got to wear, and about how she planned to grow her hair out over the next months. Her only thought was to make Lauren feel comfortable and secure.

As the effects of the cancer and intensive chemo continued to take its toll, colleagues and friends marveled at her spirit and joy. Mrs. Lamar had always been a ray of sunshine, filled with smiles and kind words. Now as her body struggled, the joy and love she naturally shared with everyone around her only became more remarkable. Mrs. Lamar insisted on teaching until her body absolutely failed, and even after she left the classroom, she would visit her students for short times to read them a story or help with a lesson. Sheri Lamar died only a few days before the end of the 2011 school year. Among the things she had prepared was a box of assignments the Manson graduating class of 2011 had completed when they were kindergartners 12 years earlier in her class. Attached to each of the "What do I want to be when I grow up" assignments that those seniors had completed years earlier was a hand written note of love and encouragement from their former Kindergarten teacher. The assignments and notes of love were presented to those seniors during the senior awards banquet. The senior banquet was the same day as Mrs. LaMar's funeral. For **love**.... Ask me about Sheri LaMar.

# **The Ripple Effect**

*How small investments compound into life-long returns*

by Mindy Eisele, 2012 ESD 114 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Olympic High School, Central Kitsap School District

"I ready to my kid every night because I can." ~ Charlie Patterson

His armor of anger clanked when he walked, much like the fake gold chains around his skinny white neck; chains anchored by a large, glittering dollar symbol. So heavy was his armor of anger that it turned his ball cap sideways and sagged his jeans.

The Patterson family moved into the area at the end of October during Charlie's senior year of high school. This was his seventh school transfer. I began to suspect his economic poverty when, on his fourth day in journalism, he wore the same outfit he had worn the previous three days. His clothes were white and clean, including his designer tennis shoes, and his bling was polished. But his appearance had not varied. No, his economic poverty wasn't in question. It was his educational poverty that took me a bit longer to diagnose.

The journalism students had raised so much advertising money that they were able to pay for the next publication and still have enough left over to buy a brand new camera. Following a hunch, I tossed Charlie the still-boxed camera and asked him to take it home that evening so he could decipher the manual and teach the class all about it the following day. I half expected him to balk at the prospect of leading his peers, but I was not at all prepared for his reaction to being entrusted with a costly camera. He reminded me that the camera cost \$700 and that I really should give it to someone else to take home. No, I said. I felt that he was the best one for the job and asked him to please not drop it.

He came in early the next morning before anyone was around and I asked him if he had been able to get through the owner's manual. He said that he had but that it had taken him five tries. While shuffling papers, I quipped back that those technical writers sometimes make understanding simple directions rather difficult. He told me, no, Miss E., I can't read. Something in his confessional tone and soft eyes made me stop shuffling papers and truly listen to him.

He explained that over the years he had created many ways to cope. Mostly he watched other people and learned from what they did. In the fourth grade he was sick and missed a lot of school. Then his folks moved and he went to a new school. He looked at the ground as he told me of his embarrassment over being put into a special class for low readers. He thought there was something wrong with him. His family moved a few more times and in each new classroom, Charlie perfected his ability to fool everyone to avoid

being lumped back in with the slower kids. He said that hiding his inability to read actually became easier as he got older. Teachers, he said, just assumed that he could read. His manner turned boastful, taking pride in fooling the "smart" teachers. He had turned his ignorance into a badge that covered up his feelings of incompetence. This fear festered into anger and aggression that further distanced teachers. I realized just then that he was entrusting me with his secret and it was my moment to act.

It took a week of cajoling to get him to agree to be tested and another week to agree to see a tutor. Three days a week, we agreed, he would work on improving his reading skills. The two remaining days he would be a newspaper photographer with the journalism class. Charlie couldn't read the November issue but he did see his pictures published. His armor of anger and shame was slowly being replaced by a camera strap. Instead, it was my outrage that boiled.

Charlie had enough credits to graduate with his class yet he could not read beyond the fourth grade level. The reading tutor and I had to work fast. I fought the urge to contact his former teachers and scream my frustration. How could they not see that Charlie's angry exterior was only a ruse that poorly hid his fear and frustration? He had been cheated. He had been allowed to not learn. Charlie's mother seemed genuinely saddened by his school performance but was uneducated herself and fed up with his attitude. She felt that the school of hard knocks was his most likely future.

As word spread about Charlie's goal, a school reporter interviewed him for a story about the learning environment in high school. Other students began helping and supporting his effort to read. As his sense of competence grew stronger, so did his confidence and attitude. By graduation, Charlie could read at the tenth grade level; he was officially literate in America. His reading tutor and I cried when he walked across that stage and out of our lives. We had done it!

Five years later I received a call from Charlie asking if I'd meet him for coffee. I watched Charlie walk in. His swagger suggested that he retained some of his former attitude but I couldn't spot any armor. We sipped our coffee and chatted a while about his adventures since graduating and then he turned serious. He wanted to tell me that I was the best teacher he had ever had. He thanked me for believing in him and helping him to value reading. As usual, I shrugged off the compliment to refocus the conversation on him. In frustration he said, "Miss E. you don't understand, I'm a father now. I read to my son every night because I can."

My jaw dropped. His armor had been completely replaced by the pride of responsible fatherhood. In that moment, I understood the economics of investing in education. The return on the investment might take a few years to realize but the ripple effect cannot be ignored.

# Laughing Out Loud

*When seeing a child for who he really is  
means more than a test score ever will*

by Beth Mahugh, 2012 ESD 105 Regional Teacher of the Year  
John Campbell Elementary School, Selah School District

We were reaching the end of another grueling before-school meeting where we had been banging our heads together over how to get more students to pass the WASL. Our scores were low and our students' failures felt like our own failures as teachers. As the bell rang, I forced myself to put all my stress aside, placed a smile on my face and greeted my fourth grade students as they walked in the door. Or bounded in, as was the case with Bryan. Immediately, he was full of "I'm sorry"s over the morning mishaps that had already taken place. Bryan was constantly involved in mishaps! He was impulsive, often blurted out in class, fidgety, and was able to focus about 2 minutes at a time on any one thing. And yet, he was quite smart.

After our morning routines, we all settled in for reading time. I handed out a favorite story, "The Golden Fish" and explained my expectations for how the reading session would proceed. Some students would read in partners, some (the struggling readers) would read with me and some would work independently. I placed Bryan in this independent group because partnering him with another student inevitably ended in disaster. Everyone settled in their places around the room and started reveling in the tale - that is, everyone except Bryan.

The story is about a poor old man and woman who live in a shack by the sea. One day the old man catches a golden fish which grants wishes but he wishes for nothing and releases the fish. Upon hearing of her husband's actions, his wife becomes angry and demands he catch the fish again and wish for a loaf of bread as they were hungry and didn't have money to buy food. So the husband does as his wife demanded, and magically, they get a loaf of bread. The next day she demands that he catch the fish and wish for a washtub, so they can have clean clothes. Again the husband obeys and the wish is granted. The story continues as the wife becomes more and more selfish and demands that her husband wish for more and more - even that she become queen of the land. And still the husband obeys. At last, the still unhappy queen demands that her husband catch the golden fish and wish her ruler of all the land and sea. The husband obeys. The golden fish upon hearing the wish, tells the husband to return home and that his wife will get what she deserves. Upon returning home, the husband finds the wife dressed in rags, standing in front of their shack-poor again.

As I read through the story with my students, I noticed that once again, Bryan was off - task and being unproductive. Immediately I was reminded of the stress "the test" has

caused me and I wonder how I can possibly get students who cannot focus to pass it. Not wanting to disturb my hard-working students, I used my teacher look to try and encourage Bryan to get to work.

After finishing the story with my group and feeling confident that they comprehended it, I began to circulate around the room. Over and over, students have correctly responded in writing to cause and effect and are excited to share the moral of the story. "Mrs. Mahugh", they say, "you should always be happy with what you have", "don't wish for more than you need", or "you shouldn't be selfish". Then I came to Bryan. I had to mask my frustration because his paper was completely blank. Instead of making one of the comments running through my head, I calmly sat down and said, "Bryan, read this story to me please". He flew through the story with lightning speed, so proud of his reading ability and the attention I was giving him. I listened to him read, but silently I prayed for patience with this child and for some divine intervention that would magically turn him into an independently productive student who cares about his academics. When he finished reading, I pulled out the questions and asked him, "so Bryan what is the moral of the story?" His enthusiastic reply: "Never trust your wife!"

In that moment, I did what all teachers should do in a time like that - I let go of my stress. For that moment, I saw a child for the person he truly was and thought to myself, "Wow, do I have the best job in the world or what?" and I laughed out loud in spite of myself!

# Climbing Up

*How confident encouragement from a teacher can help even the most reticent climber reach new heights*

by Tammy Buss Alejandre, 2012 ESD 189 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Eagleridge Elementary School, Ferndale School District

"No, Mommy. Back." Julia commanded, putting a defiant hand up to me, warding off any assistance. She just turned two yesterday and she's such a little monkey. We've had this play structure for only a few weeks and she's climbing the ladder like a pro. The only thing I actually didn't like about this castle-like swing set was its steep ladder leading to the lookout tower and wavy, green slide. Not that its five feet height was a dangerous distance to the lawn. I was more worried that it would be a frustrating challenge for them both and I would be stuck lifting each up, one after the other. Julia, however, tackled it like she does everything else. Fearless. Determined. Independent. With ease, she just scuttles up the steps and bumps down the slide.

Joaquin is another story. My beautiful, cautious boy who must think through every move his body makes. At almost four years, his speech and motor delays have yet to be explained. His little sister, though, pushes him to new heights. In this case, literally! He pulls my hand, uttering, "Mom," and signs the word help.

I'm his voice, "Oh, you want to go up the ladder to the slide, too. Fun! Mommy will help you."

I place my hand on his back, more for moral support than anything. I know he can do it. He gets a grip on a rung at his eye level and puts his right foot on the first step. I can tell he wishes his whole foot had a surface to rest on. He realizes that's not going to happen. He lifts his left foot to match.

"Good job!" I encourage. "Now the next step. Put your hands here." He grasps a spot a bit higher with his long-fingered hands, white at the tips. He looks down to where he wants his foot to go. Slowly, he maneuvers both feet to the second step.

"Excellent!" I praise. "Now try your hands right here."

He grasps the top edges of the ladder. With great effort, he pulls his foot up. His toe hits the front edge of the step. A panicked expression flashes on his face. A short yelp escapes his lips. I don't grab for him, but just place a little more pressure on his back. Giving courage. Offering strength. Willing success. On the second try, his right foot makes contact with the third step and his left foot follows suit. Finally he stretches his knee to his goal and hoists himself to where he wants to be. He did it! He stands up



straight and tall and applauds his achievement. Pride shines from his eyes like rays of sunshine. I clap, too, tears stinging my eyes.

“Good job, Buddy!” his little sister calls from below, then scrambles up to join him.

FLASH FORWARD THREE YEARS...

That seems like just yesterday, and now they’re in Kindergarten and first grade. They’ve grown up so much, but they’re still very much the same. Julia tackles school like she tackled that slide... fearless, confident. The first writing activity in class, she was one of the few that put words to paper. She amazed her new best friend who asked, “How did you know what to write?” Julia replied, “I just said it slowly and wrote the sounds I heard.” She loves school.

My sweet boy loves school, too, but it’s not easy. Joaquin’s language skills have improved vastly, but he unfortunately developed a strong stutter that interferes with his ability to communicate clearly. His fine motor skills get in the way of showing what he knows. He knows what an “A” is and knows what it looks like, but to get his pencil to form what’s in his mind’s eye frustrates him. It takes time and support. He took his first spelling test this year. His teacher called him back to do the assessment one on one. She said the words slowly, stretching the words out. Just as I placed my hand on his back as he ascended that ladder, she repeated the words slowly and gave him the time he needed to form each letter, slowly. She said, “The next word is ‘the’.” Joaquin confidently replied, “Easy peasy. My mommy told me that one. T H E.” The letters don’t sit neatly on the line, but they are there. He earned eight out of ten on that test.

Each day, children of varying abilities enter my classroom and my children’s classrooms. We teachers encourage them to try things they’ve never done before. We encourage them to take that next step, from reading more fluently to solving math problems. We scaffold learning to the next rung on the ladder, no matter what rung they’re currently on. Some are adept and sure on those steps, others need a little more time, a little more support. We look on with shining eyes and applaud them when they achieve something they never thought they could.

# Clark Kent's Apotheosis

*We don't need another hero; we just need inspired teachers*

by John Hagney, 2012 ESD 101 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Lewis and Clark High School, Spokane School District

The student announced that there was a Web site dedicated to me and I grimaced, a spasm of incredulity swelling inside me. In the next moment, I remembered how I regarded my own teachers. When I was in second grade our teacher made us do a Presidents' Day "art project" which involved tracing and cutting out the profile silhouettes of Presidents Washington and Lincoln. As some of us were to learn much later, these heads, which always seemed larger than normal, revealed nothing of the human beings, never mind their history. I also remember the first time I saw one of my teachers shopping and how disillusioned I was to glimpse a god engaged a mundane act of mortals. In a similar way my students regard me somewhat one-dimensionally, how they project onto me their vision of the ideal teacher. Yet even ancient gods were flawed and it was their frailties that were often the most instructive.

Though some students deify their teachers, those same teachers are often vilified by the public. The former see in us a Superman, the latter a clueless Clark Kent. Both are simplifications, if not general misrepresentations. Politicians insist that higher achievement can best be measured by higher test scores, and the teacher is measured by those scores. I am reminded of Sissy Jupe in Dickens' *Hard Times* who "must be kept to it" but became "low spirited but no wiser." The true test of learning is whether it is *enduring* beyond school and that will not be realized until learning is again *endearing*. And that means understanding teachers and students holistically, not as automata but as human. As Dorothy's journey in *The Wizard of Oz* should instruct, the path to knowledge includes both the head and the heart.

Some insist that if we apply the principles of the marketplace, public education will be reformed. Yet in many places, this "choice" has produced few new outcomes. And, like some of my students, its followers wish to believe in a myth. My students' naiveté is quite natural. But those who set public policy should be sufficiently critical and possess an independent mind to scrutinize the evidence they are given. They should discern that many of the vocal critics of public education are selectively perceiving data, a practice that I do not accept even from my youngest high school scholars. However, in school, such errors can be meaningful steps toward learning; in politics they produce misguided, albeit, well-intentioned policy.

What we need in order to resolve our current crises is to be honest about their collective genesis. It's time to examine our current educational culture and rethink teaching as an art that must fundamentally understand human needs and aspirations. Waiting for

Superman is folly for I am only a highly motivated Clark Kent. When my students begin to see me more like themselves they will be able acknowledge our shared frailties and, I hope, will be inspired to believe that it is possible to be better, destined not to dwell in others' shadows but to be a source of illumination themselves.