

Vignettes

A Magical Moment

Moments happen with kids that are just incredible. I had one grade schooler who had never written, and it was my first year in the classroom. Well, all kids at our school get to make choices, and he could choose not to do things that are hard. But I said to him, "It's okay to do things that are hard." Eventually, that little boy decided to take a risk and write something down. I looked at what he'd written, and it looked kind of poetic, and I told him, "You're a poet; did you ever know that?" He said no. I said, "You mean this is your first time writing, and you didn't know you were a poet?"

From that moment on, he started to believe in himself. All of a sudden, this kid started feverishly writing. It was a magical moment. Those kinds of things happen all the time. There's artfulness around teaching, helping kids to build identities for themselves that they didn't really know they could build. It's exciting.

A couple of months later, one of the teachers talked to him and said, "Gee, you're so different this year."

He said, "Well, I'm a poet."

Precious Cargo

I really came to teaching through the back door, watching what was happening with my kids. I guess that's why I became a teacher: Because, watching them, I realized that education should be an amazing experience.

At my school, it's been really wonderful, empowering. I know I've made a difference, and I know I respect the kids that come into my room. It's been an amazing four years here. Just to be able to work so individually, to have small class sizes, to be in a small school where you know everyone by name and you have a sense of responsibility for each other, to see how kids have grown, that's a magical thing to watch.

I feel privileged. I feel that seriously. It's about the most important work a person can do. I'm just one of the people who can wake up each morning and say I love what I do and look forward to what I do. I feel just really fortunate, and it's wonderful. I think it's critical how I react, and how I support the kids, and help create an environment.

They are precious cargo.

Everything I Stand For

You've got to believe in these kids because a lot of them don't have anyone else who believes in them. But that doesn't make it easy. We face a lot of challenges. We've seen that when parents get involved in kids' education it works like a charm, but too often parents don't have the time or inclination to give that support. There are discipline problems, and too many kids seem unmotivated. And we don't have time to do everything we need to do. It's more of a challenge to teach these kids, but that's why it can be more satisfying.

I love the diversity, the fact that they come from all these levels and backgrounds. A lot of the time, the kids don't realize their potential, and they might have jack squat for friendship at home. If I can help them feel hope, if I can help them feel respected, I can do something really important. I've taught in other places, and I like the relationships I get to have with my students. They give back to me. People have tried to get me to move to other schools and districts where the kids are more affluent and there are fewer challenges. I just don't know how to tell them that that kind of move goes against everything I stand for.

Empathy, Compassion, and Kinship

I think emotional safety is a core need for kids. I think that they need to feel like they're accepted, not going to be judged, teased, or harassed. You know, kids can be quite mean to each other. I can't imagine how learning can take place if that emotional safety isn't present. Yet often that is not prioritized. Often what is prioritized is classroom behavior. I don't know if this is something a kid would be able to articulate, but I do know that my happy days in school were when I felt loved and supported. And I also had days when I wasn't sure.

So when I talk about a partnership school, I'm going to start with what you shouldn't see. I don't want trivial celebrations where we do the Mexican hat dance and now we've got Mexico. What I don't want is that diversity is about you celebrate Hanukah, and I celebrate Kwanzaa. It's not just about cultural rituals! It's about racism; it's about fat kids and thin kids; it's about homophobia; it's about power and who actually has lunch every day and who doesn't. Who gets a car when they turn 16, and whose family can't even afford shoes. I think a partnership school should be about helping kids to feel empathy and compassion and kinship.

Ether

Racism can be like ether at my school: it's floating, and you catch a whiff of it.

There is too much of institutional racism at my school. I am really appalled that in the year 2010 I hear racist comments in school from my colleagues. Sometimes, the racism is less obvious. Maybe teachers categorize people based on race. Maybe they skirt the issue of race. Maybe they ignore racial issues, saying, "I treat everyone equally." Well, not everyone is equal; not everyone is the same.

There is a dire need for training in this area in my school. It's not right that such narrow-minded individuals teach our children. Too many people are unaware or do not care about the struggles of all ethnic groups. These teachers are doing a disservice to children, the community, the district, and the profession of teaching.

I Teach

I keep coming back to teach every year so that I can experience the light-bulb moment. I teach to instill a love of learning and a spirit of inquiry. I love seeing them learn, move forward, gain confidence. That gives me a great sense of accomplishment. I teach because I know I'm making a difference in the lives of students.

I teach because I love the fellowship of the staff. I love the friendship and the support, working with the faculty throughout the school. I love it when the teachers have the same spirit of inquiry that I want to see in my students.

Just a simple event makes it all worthwhile. I love it when a student comes back and says, "I remembered what you said about being a gentleman," when a student comes back and says, "I'm reading more now." I love it when a mom says, "I'm glad you're teaching my daughter, because you really helped my son."

I teach because I learn a great deal from the kids. I love how I feel when things are going great with a class. Nothing is better than when you're flying, and they're flying with you.