
Preface

Anxiously I sat at the end of a large conference table surrounded by the five university professors on my doctoral dissertation committee. I had planned well for this day. I had strategically obtained feedback on my research methodology and writing from everyone on my committee—everyone except “Dr. Smith.” Every time I asked her for feedback, she was too busy to get back to me in a timely manner. I had wanted to make sure every committee member approved of what I was doing as I moved through the dissertation process because I had chosen an unorthodox topic to explore empirically: what teachers do to nurture bonding with students.

Now the completed dissertation, a tome of 418 pages, lay before each of the committee members. The first time “Dr. Smith” had ever seen any part of my dissertation was this week. Nervously, I glanced at her. I had no idea what her reaction would be and I knew a negative response from her could block my graduation.

My dissertation chair opened the meeting. After I gave a ten-minute opening presentation on my research methodology and the results, he asked if there were any questions. “Dr. Smith” immediately said, “Yes, I want to be the first to speak.” My heart began to pound. She did not look at me but stared at the other committee members and continued, “Because I have not had a chance to look at this dissertation until this week, I have been reading it every night. Last night I even dreamt about it.” She paused and softly laughed. “It is quite inspirational,” she added.

Then turning and looking directly at me, she said, “Judy, I have one question for you. Have you gone back to thank the teacher who made a difference for you?” I was stunned. I began to stammer, trying to think of an appropriate response. Finally, I simply admitted I hadn’t. “Dr. Smith” responded, “I haven’t either, but after reading your dissertation, I plan to.”

The next day I was on the phone, tracing down Mr. Charles Booth, the English teacher who had made a difference for me. You see, at a poignant time in my senior year he had said just a few words to me that I hung onto for years. It was not the result of any lengthy connection or intense involvement. I was not even sure he would remember who I was after thirty years! And I knew, for sure, he would not know what he had done, although the few words spoken meant the world to me. Because of my research, I now understood why those few words carried such persuasive power and made such a difference for me. I had always

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respected Mr. Booth throughout my four years in high school. And he had always treated me, and all students, with respect and dignity. I knew that I had to let him know how I felt.

I did get in touch with Mr. Booth, and thanked him for the very meaningful and significant role he had played in my young life. As always, he was gracious and wise. I have asked him to share with you his thoughts about our conversation and making a difference as a teacher.

Mr. Booth's Reaction

Recently one of my former students, Judy Deiro, tracked me down to tell me that I had somehow made a significant contribution to her development and career. Speaking with her brought forth a flood of beautiful memories and a tremendous feeling of accomplishment and closure. Judy made it clear that as her teacher, I had made a difference in her life. Yes, I did remember her . . . but I did not recall doing anything out of the ordinary for her when she was my student.

As a classroom teacher, my hope was to always help my students develop in as many ways as possible. I, of course, remained devoted to their mastery of important subject matter, but I wanted much more for them. Over time, my students would become more and more an essential part of my personal and professional experience. Their successes, failures, frustrations, and growth became personalized within our relationship. As each student graduated and moved on, I could not but wonder whether I had, in any substantial way, made a difference. Judy's call to me, after thirty years of not hearing from her, was a wonderful affirmation of many years of hard work well spent. I wish every educator could enjoy such wonderful feedback. Teachers do make a difference.

A LITTLE BOOK FOR BUSY TEACHERS

The little book you hold in your hands is a follow up to a longer book, *Teaching With Heart*, that I wrote immediately after completing my dissertation. This new book is written for the busy educator who does not have the time or energy to read the longer book, but wants to understand how he or she can make a difference for students. Backed by research, this book tells just what teachers do to make that difference. And even more important, it affirms that we *can* make a difference without adding more responsibilities to our already busy schedules, or going beyond the expectations of our job descriptions as teachers.

The relationship we develop with our students is the heart of how we make changes in student lives. Research clearly shows that it is the relationship—a meaningful, healthy connection with students—that promotes prosocial, responsible behavior among students. This book offers specific suggestions for building those meaningful connections in simple and appropriate ways. It debunks common myths about what we have to do

and who we have to be to make a difference. This book provides important principles for building close and trusting relationships with students. Along with the principles for caring, it provides real-life exemplars and vignettes of six caring teachers practicing those principles.

OVERVIEW

In Chapter 1, I verify that the most powerful and effective way teachers can help students overcome the harmful influences they deal with in their environments is by developing close and caring connections with them. Using research, I document that the healthy emotional and social development of children in today's society is dependent on having more caring adults meaningfully involved in their lives. In Chapter 2, I describe different strategies for making healthy connections with students, using exemplars from the six caring teachers I observed during my dissertation research. In Chapter 3, I discuss what teachers do to help students perceive our caring. In Chapter 4, I describe what personal resources and strategies we need to maintain our enthusiasm and professional energy, which can easily be depleted by working so intensely with students. In Chapter 5, I conclude with my thoughts and responses to some major concerns raised by different teachers regarding making healthy connections with students. And finally, in the appendices of the book, I give you more examples directly from my data highlighting the personal resources or qualities discussed as exemplified by *each* of the teachers.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

For all teachers, I know the information in this book gives us some new ways to think about how to make meaningful, inviting, caring connections with our students and different ways to think about our student relationships in general. For teachers working hard to engage students who are preoccupied with personal worries, I know we will find some affirmation and validation for our heartfelt efforts. For student teachers struggling to develop connections with students while still learning how to teach your subject content, I hope you are encouraged to continue your efforts to develop a teaching style that naturally integrates these two primary responsibilities of a teacher. I want to affirm that your goal is possible and you have chosen the right career. And finally, for those of us who are prevention specialists and responsible for intervening and preventing high-risk behaviors among students, I know this little book will reframe how teachers can be effectively involved in our school prevention efforts.

Finally, as you read this book I hope you too will be motivated to go back and thank the teacher who made a difference for you! As I disclosed

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in the vignette at the beginning of this Preface, I did. And “Dr. Smith” did too. For me, it was an emotionally touching moment that gave me a sense of completion. And as an added, unexpected benefit, I again have in my life the remarkable person who once made a difference for me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank the six caring teachers for graciously giving me the opportunity to observe them while they were teaching and relating to students. Doing the research for my dissertation is still a vivid memory for me. Observing their commitment, dedication, and high regard for students and the teaching profession was pure joy. Out of courtesy, I do not use their real names, or the real names of anyone introduced in the text.

I also want to express my appreciation and gratitude to several individuals who spent a significant amount of time editing drafts of this book and giving me valuable feedback: Georgeanne Brown and Sherrie Fulton, two retired K–12 teachers with more than fifty years of teaching experience between them, gave valuable insights that helped ground and shape this book during its evolution. Patricia Nerison, retired English professor and poet, who at the drop of a hat edited the penultimate draft and eased my fears and self-doubts. I also want to thank Bonnie Benard, whose belief in me and all teachers is awe inspiring. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Michael Knapp, the chair of my dissertation committee, who exemplifies what this book is about. His enthusiasm for the findings and sincere desire to see them published encouraged me to continue writing.

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