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Memories from the 'Other': Lessons in Connecting with Students

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***“There is no significant learning without significant relationships” James Comer
(Payne, 2004)***

This article is a result of several years of presenting workshops on meeting the needs of children with learning differences throughout Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. I share many stories during these workshops and this is an attempt to share some of them in print while making some larger philosophical points at the same time. It is also a result of experiencing special education as a student, and teacher in the public schools, as well as teaching and researching in the field as a professor of education.

This is an autobiographical case study. It offers illustrative stories of a system that creates the 'other' and works to marginalize 'at risk' students (Bartolom'e, 2003). Because of the learning differences I have I was placed on a slower academic track that defined me and marginalized me very early in life. I began to think of myself in terms of what I couldn't do as opposed to what I was capable of. So did my teachers. Through the years of schooling it was difficult to say which damaged me more, this 'other producing' system or my own construction of self. I believed what I was being told about myself. My self-image reflected that belief.

I believe the one truth in life is that our relationships with others on this earth matter deeply. They matter so much that they can literally save people from despair and death. Significant relationships can save children in schools (Werner,1995). They can bring academically struggling students back from the brink and yet we deemphasize the very thing that can make our schools the best in the world (Payne, 2004).

This is descriptive data so the point is not to make generalizations. It is a simple descriptive case study that offers a view of how one student grew up in the public school system. However, since 1999 I have been presenting workshops on some of these topics and hundreds of people have shared with me similar experiences. So perhaps this is a larger phenomenon that I first thought.

I was so happy as a young child. I can remember when I was four years old coloring with my mom at home. I can remember her telling me how smart I was and how much she loved me.

I hated school. I struggled in school from the moment I entered kindergarten in 1964. I remember quite vividly entering Hayes Elementary School in September of that year and entering the large kindergarten room. I entered the room excited about school and eager to learn. I had perfect attendance the first semester of that year and received a certificate for the achievement. But as the year progressed things changed. My memories of that year have faded somewhat over the years but there are overriding themes that stay with me today. The first is that I very clearly was different from most of the other children. I had trouble sitting on the floor 'Indian style'. I needed to get up and move.

The next theme I clearly recall was that I wasn't as smart as the other boys and girls. Learning to read was difficult; learning to write was even harder. In fact anything that required me to focus for an extended period of time, or use fine motor skills was lost on me. The final recollection I have is finding out that I was a 'problem' in class. I recall being sent to the 'cloak room' several times that year for 'not playing nice' or 'disrupting the class'.

Mrs. L. came over to me and took my paper fire truck I had just completed. She peeled the wheels off of the fire truck and told me that she knew I could do better. I had tried to cut out round wheels but was unable to create anything better than an octagon shape. Obviously this was not good enough.

In first grade I was placed in a class with an entirely new group of children. With the exception of a boy named Tommy. He came to first grade with me and was with me until my senior year of high school. But most of the other students were placed in one of the two other classrooms. The children I met in first grade were to be my classmates for the next five years. Children were tracked back then and

I was in the 'slow class'. This was the term that Mr. P., our principal, used on more than one occasion. It was true. All of us had trouble reading, writing and behaving. I can't imagine what the teacher must have been thinking when in August she received her class list. This might explain why many of the teachers we had did not return the following year.

Class was so boring. The print made no sense to me. So I found ways to entertain myself, especially during reading. I can remember looking for Tommy during reading group. I knew if I could catch his eye I could make him laugh. I was always searching for a way to escape the monotony. When I caught his eye I turned both of my eyelids inside out and stared at him. Pretty soon every boy in the reading group was doing the same thing. Mrs. S. became very angry and made all of us stay in for recess.

The overwhelming message I received every day was that I was different, not as good, and defective. I had different books, I completed different assignments. I was not asked to participate in any of the extra activities my fellow students in the other classes participated in. There were only a few kids in our class each year that excelled. The next year they would be moved to one of the other classrooms. Their spot was always taken by a new kid usually a kid like me or a new student who couldn't speak English. The funny thing is that after the kid learned to speak English he then usually excelled and left our class. My grades were horrible. They used to trust me to bring home my grade cards for my parents to sign. Mine never found its way home. Every year my mom would have to call about the whereabouts of my grade card.

I dreaded oral reading groups. My handwriting was illegible and the teachers always claimed that I was very smart but that I was lazy. By third grade I had discovered some 'truths' about myself. The first truth was that I was stupid. This was reinforced daily by teacher comments and the eventual absence of teacher concern. A kind of teaching boycott put into effect because of my perceived bad attitude. Second, I was different from the 'cool' kids in the other classes. I was viewed by my peers and my teachers as different and because of this had a very limited group of people around me to draw friends from. Last, as a resiliency feature. I was one funny guy. I could make people laugh. Turning my

eyelids inside out was just one trick. I had a million of them. But it only worked within the context of school. Outside of the classroom the groups were even more rigidly defined and I did not have purview.

The middle grades of elementary schools were very tough. These years were marked by a tremendous lack of accomplishment. I had never read a book. I had never completed a book report. I rarely passed a test. I never completed any homework. But I continued to be passed to the next grade with little or no assistance with my increasing academic deficits.

In 4th grade I had Ms. S. for a teacher. She was determined to whip me into shape. I can remember turning in a written assignment of some kind to her and she handed it back to me asking me to recopy it. It was far too messy and there were too many misspelled words. I recopied it and she handed it back to me again. I handed it in a third time and again, she handed it back to me. I was not allowed to go to recess and gym that day. I stayed after school until 4:00. I started to cry and she told me that if I continued to cry I would have to stay in the next day as well. I stayed inside for three consecutive days. She finally gave up. I did too.

In fifth grade I had Mr. H. for math. It was in this class that I really learned my place in school. The pain and humiliation I and my fellow students experienced in this class was remarkable. By fifth grade you should be learning fractions, long division, pre-algebra, equations, probability. We were still on two digit times two digit multiplication. One day Mr. Hall caught me clowning around in class. As punishment he had me get up in front of the class to complete the following problem:

23

X13

Mr. Hall knew that I could complete this problem only to the point of putting the place holding zeros down. I got lost and could not go any further. As I froze and tried to climb inside of the chalk board Mr. Hall said these words, "Mr. Knestrict, I could teach and teach and teach and you still would not get this. I give up". I heard "You're stupid Mr. Knestrict. You can't do math Mr. Knestrict, you are not a capable student Mr. Knestrict.

This is a moment I would relive many times in my academic future. His is a voice I still hear today. I hear it when I bounce a check. I heard it when I took my first statistic course in college. I hear it

when I am at the grocery store figuring my bill, or when I am figuring the tip at a restaurant. Like so many kids with learning differences these words were burned into my heart, in my brain. At that moment Mr. Hall verbalized ten years of my internal dialog. When he voiced this, it made it so for me, for my peers and for him. At that moment I was defined.

Beth was a smart girl. She attended the same elementary school I did but was always in the 'smart class'. In Jr. High we were mixed in with the 'smart kids' for art and music. I sat next to her in music. We had to do a report on a famous musician together. We decided to do the report on John Denver. We began reading some books on him and she started taking notes on index cards. I asked her what she was doing and she showed me how she would read a fact about John Denver in a book that she thought was interesting and write it down on the card. "A different card for every fact. Then when its time to write we can just copy down what we wrote on the cards". I was stunned. I could do this. It took a 12 year old girl to show me that I could complete a meaningful academic task."

In Jr. High things changed a bit for me. I was still tracked with the same kids. However several elementary schools merged and all the 'dumb kids' from each school were grouped together now. At least there were some new faces. There were also 'mixed ability' groups for art, music and industrial arts. Beth was the first 'smart girl' I had made friends with. She helped me get my first A in any class...ever! Our paper on John Denver was a thing of beauty. During the writing process she told me that it was ok that I had trouble writing. 'I'll carry us Tom". She did. But she also taught me that I could do a few things myself. During the research part of the assignment she could not find some basic biographical data on Mr. Denver. I had all of his albums at home and on one of them there was a John Denver biography. I brought this in and wrote out five fact cards to contribute to the effort. Beth was so pleased. I felt like Einstein.

I remember sitting in Mrs. A.s English class. We were diagramming sentences. I could not figure out the appropriate lines to draw for the various parts of speech. So I invented my own. I brought my paper up to Mrs. A. and she looked at it and told me to sit down and re-read the assignment because I had done it completely wrong. She handed the paper back to me and continued to work at her desk. She did not know I could barely read the book we were using.

I had to go to other classes in Jr. High. I had to take Spanish in 6th grade. I never could figure out how a kid who couldn't master English was supposed to learn Spanish. I failed. In fact, I took Spanish I three years in a row. I think it still stands as a record at Harding Jr. High School. Math was still a mystery. Physical education, an enjoyable class for me in elementary school, became a daily nightmare in Jr. High. Taking your clothes off in front of others? Taking showers. All of the 'smart' boys and all of the 'dumb' boys were in gym together. In one respect, the playing field was leveled in gym class. Luckily intelligence had little to do with the tasks in Mr. S's gym class. It was all about testosterone. Who could withstand pain, tumble, run, jump and wrestle? I was a good athlete and I went into this class feeling good. But that wouldn't last. Mr. S. had a rule. If you did not remember to bring your uniform you had to wear the community clothes. A pair of very dirty shorts that smelled funny and had brown stains in the seat and a smelly, tank style top with the words 'Lakewood' on the front. It was a well known fact that the girls wore the shirts that said 'Lakewood' and the boys wore the shirts that said "Rangers". Clearly, I was now a girl. I missed a record number of days during my 6th grade year. 34 to be exact.

There was a spelling bee in sixth grade. The entire sixth grade participated. I can remember standing in line, on stage, in front of all of the 7th and 8th graders, waiting for my word. The first round was usually seen as a practice round and the students were given a simple word to spell in order to get comfortable. It came to me. My word was 'Lakewood'. Simple enough, my hometown. "L. a...k...w...o...o...d, Lakewood". Silence. "Incorrect" The auditorium erupted. I laughed and joked but I was dying inside. I then had to sit down in the front row for the next 30 minutes until another speller made a mistake and left the competition.

In high school I attempted to take Spanish 1 again. I failed it. But the teacher I had referred me to the school counselor. My Spanish teacher, Ms. D. told me "Thomas, you must first learn the English language before learning Spanish". She referred me for academic testing. The year was 1975 and PL 94-142 had just been passed. I sometimes think I was the first child identified after its ratification. I was given a tutor and had to attend certain classes in the resource room for extra help. I made sure nobody saw me go in to that room. It would be social suicide. Although, given my social status, I had very little to lose.

I was told that I was learning disabled and that I had to go to special education classes. The school psychologist told me as if this were cause for celebration. "Hooray, we finally know what is wrong with Tom". I wasn't ready to celebrate the fact that there was yet another thing that made me different.

Sometime during my sophomore year a counselor met with me and she talked to me about vocational school. "Tom, it's clear you are not on the college track here at LHS. So I would like you to start thinking about vocational school or even the military". I was devastated. My entire family attended Bowling Green State University. I was going to go too. But now, it looked like I would barely get out of high school. I finished that year in special education. I was sixteen, low on the social ladder, attending school on the special education track, told I couldn't attend the 'regular' read 'normal' high school next year and I could barely read and write. I became very depressed. I started to cut class and feign illness to avoid going to school. There were days I came to school just for homeroom, so I could be counted as present, and then I would leave for home. I easily did this 50% of the time and never got caught. Still, I passed to the 11th grade. Remarkable!

In my junior year I was required to take the ACT test. I scored a total score of '7'. I have been told that you could guess and score higher than this. I didn't guess.

At the end of my senior year I had a GPA of 1.7, I read at about the 4th grade level, still had not mastered my multiplication facts, had never read a book, had developed a consistent pattern of starting and then quitting new activities, thought of myself as stupid, could not write a coherent paragraph, had few friends, and on June 7th 1978 was handed a diploma and graduated with my class from my high school. It still ranks as the most inexplicable moment of my life. I kept thinking that my fellow classmates would attack if they knew that I was getting the same piece of paper they were that stated that I, too had completed all the requisite coursework to graduate. No I had not!

I woke up after graduation and wondered what had just happened? School was over, they let me graduate? Huh?

Somewhere between my graduation and the following school year I had an epiphany. During that summer I worked at a gas station and a pizza place. I was very aware of how the people I was

working with had been working these jobs for most of their adult lives and didn't seem real happy. I went home that night and talked to my father and he convinced me to try taking a class at Cuyahoga Community College, also known as Tri C. I signed up for a series of high school level reading and writing classes affectionately known as the 0900 courses. There were adults in these classes older than me and somehow that fact made me feel better about myself.

I signed up for all the high school level courses I could that year and in my first writing course I had a professor who saved my life. He taught me how to write and how to love to read. We read Death of a Salesman, books by Hemingway, Poe and then talked and wrote about the books. It would take me forever to finish a book and sometimes it would be a combination of reading the book, watching the movie and using the Cliff notes that got me through the course but I loved every minute of it. It was the most amazing thing I had ever experienced.

I was learning about metaphor and simile, seeing how the literature gave me insight to my life, writing reflections on my feelings about these books. It was wonderful. It was life changing. I learned more in that one year at Tri C then I learned in the previous 12 years.

What was different was that I was seen as capable. The professors knew I could do it and expected me to do it. Also, they wanted me to enjoy the process and worry about the products later. One professor I had during this time stated "Process over product, if you learn the process of reading and writing the products will follow" But most importantly they knew me and I knew them. We had a relationship. They cared about me. I had never, in twelve years of school had that before.

Upon leaving my last writing and reading class at Tri C the professor looked at me and said "make sure you read the comments I wrote on your last paper". When I got to my car I pulled the paper out and it read "Thomas, this paper was one of the most insightful, and inspired papers I have ever received from a student. I am so pleased with your progress this year. "Grade for the quarter- 'A'. I cried.

Later that year I ended up being accepted 'conditionally to Kent State University. During that year I met a man who ran a camp for children with learning disabilities and behavior problems. He was

in Kent to hire counselors for summer camp. I started talking to him a bit about my school experience. He hired me on the spot. I worked that summer leading hikes, camping, doing crafts and canoeing with children who were experiencing some of the same things I had experienced in school. I found I had a real talent for working with children. From that point on I knew I would teach. That summer the director of the camp, Jerry Dunlap taught me something that has become a fundamental part of my teaching philosophy; he told me that all children deserve to feel lovable and capable. He then asked me if I felt loveable and capable. And for the first time in my life I could say yes.

I had spent most of my school years believing that I was not loveable and not capable. The system had beaten me up. But for the good work of some significant teachers in my life I was on the mend with a focus on teaching and helping kids.

*During my first year of teaching in the classroom I had a student by the name of Dante. He was 7 years old, could not read or write and spoke only sparingly. As I introduced myself to Dante and his parents on the first day of school I laughed at the joke God had played on me. Dante was me and I was quite possibly the only person able to help him. We had a wonderful year filled with lots of loving and learning. In June I asked Dante if he felt loveable and capable. He looked at me and smiled and said "I know you love me Mr. Knestrict but what does capable mean?" *

CONCLUSION

As I reflect on my life in school I am struck by the times teachers failed to connect with me on any real human level. I am a professor of education now and I am still struck with the lack of emphasis on this human connection in education. We spend so much of our time as teachers accounting for the standards, testing and focusing entirely on content that the child as a person seems to disappear. One of the fundamental theories we teach undergraduates in our education programs is Abraham Maslow's notion of hierarchy of needs. We know that human connection is crucial to child development but our schools fail to manifest this knowledge in practice (Wink & Wink, 2003). Classes get bigger and bigger and test scores matter more and more. Our cultural obsession with measurement and testing often serves to sort students not help them. These trends define students very early in life. Once defined the

person begins to see himself that way and it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. In fact, once identified with a special need and placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that child will actually have that label for a minimum of three years and, as research suggests, emotionally much longer (Weisz, Bromfield, Vines, & Weiss, 1985). I can tell you from experience that I still hold onto internalized notions of my self as a child. I still have trouble seeing myself as smart, loveable and capable. I believe that this is a result of the damage caused by my experience in schools and in particular our education system's notion of how to help children with different needs. I am not advocating de-emphasizing content. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that we could teach a solid curriculum while at the same time treat students with dignity and care.

"I don't know enough' cried the scarecrow. "That's why I am going to Oz to ask the wizard for a brain". "Having a brain is not that special" said the tin woodsmen. I once had a brain and heart too. Having tried them both I should rather have a heart" (Baum, 1983).

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