

Sharing Hidden Scars

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a middle grades teacher, the author made positive student-teacher relationships a priority within her classroom. In this narrative, she describes how sharing her own invisible scars with her students provided an opportunity for one particular student to come to her after this student experienced a sexual assault. By allowing her students a glimpse at her own humanity, this teacher was able to serve as an advocate for a student who was struggling to move forward in dealing with her own trauma.

INTRODUCTION

As a middle grades teacher, I believed in and saw the power of positive relationships within my classroom. I quickly learned that my own attitude set the tone for the entire class, and I endeavored to make every student feel welcome and safe. Even before I knew the research-supported benefits of positive teacher-student relationships, including higher academic achievement (Hughes, 2012; Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018) and decreased depressive symptoms in children (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018), I felt that such positive relationships were vital for my students. For some students, developing such a relationship was more difficult and required a true investment on my part to break through. For many, a positive student-teacher relationship could be a vital protective factor as they worked through various traumas in addition to the struggles of growing up and into their own sense of self. As I reflect on my career in the classroom, there are times I wish I had done more or done something differently. And there are times that I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing, only to realize later that a single moment had made the difference. In the case of one particular student, it was a moment in which I made myself vulnerable and bared my invisible scars to the class that provided the opening this student needed to approach me when dealing with fresh scars of her own.

The school I called home was a rural K-8 school with a vibrant faculty and supportive administration. Although this wasn't my first-year teaching, it was a year filled with a different kind of challenge; it was my first year as a teacher of classes designed for gifted and talented students. I had been asked if I was

willing to take on this new challenge by my principal and had eagerly accepted. I had already taken a few college courses toward earning my endorsement in gifted education and was looking forward to applying all that I was learning. I had spent the summer familiarizing myself with the curriculum resources adopted by my district for supporting gifted students, which the school district simplistically defined as students with IQ scores two or more standard deviations above the mean, and had worked closely with the other teacher in my school who taught language arts with this curriculum. I had reflected on my own experiences as a gifted student in public school and the teachers who had remained positive elements of that experience in my memory. And so the year began, with my students coming to me for two back-to-back class periods of language arts each day. As their language arts teacher, I was the only teacher these students would have for more than a single period per day, providing me with additional time to purposefully develop positive and supportive relationships with these students (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

THE ONE WHO NEEDS YOU

As a teacher I realize that my students need me to be there for them every day, not just to teach academics, but to support them as take steps toward achieving their long-term goals. But some students need you more than others. And, at some point, there will be one student who needs you more than you realize; one whose life your compassion and care can alter for the better.

I stood at the door welcoming each student who walked into my classroom for language arts. Leslie walked in reluctantly on that first day of her eighth-grade year, acknowledging my greeting with a polite nod but otherwise not engaging with me. Even among the quirky group of students in the gifted program, she stood out; she was tall for her age and heavy-set with a tomboy crew cut and worn Chuck Taylors on her feet. She rarely spoke up in class those first few days, and I had been warned not to push her or she might shut down completely. Her work was always top-notch; thoughtful and creative, expressing her understanding with a wisdom that was uncanny for her age. Thus, I had been told by her previous teachers to let her be, as she was succeeding academically.

After the seventh-grade language arts teacher had shared her impressions and knowledge of the students who would be entering my language arts classroom for eighth grade, I had envisioned Leslie as a loner. However, she had a small, committed group of friends who surrounded her like a shield against the stares and comments of her peers. It was through these relationships that I began to work my way into Leslie's orbit. I made sure to always group her with at least one of her friends during small group discussions, and I listened carefully when the class lined up to leave, as this was the best time to overhear what students discussed quietly amongst themselves. Through these social conversations, I learned more about Leslie's interests and hobbies; there were many we had in common. Anime, video games, and a common preference in reading genre gave me a place to start building connections with Leslie that had been developed so effortlessly with many of her classmates. I started weaving those topics into conversation with the class, as many students shared those hobbies and it gave me the chance to actively show an interest in my students' lives (Hamre & Pianta, 2006) while also supporting and fostering their self-esteem (Manning, Bear, & Minke, 2006). Many of the students began sharing their art and personal writing with me, including fan fiction based on their favorite books and anime series. Leslie also began to open up in class. She shared her writing by reading short passages out loud to the class and suggested books to her peers through book talks. Bit by bit, her voice emerged.

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