

## What to Do With a Story

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## Catherine considers choices made in the wake of hearing a student's story.

"The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed." Barry Lopez, Crow and Weasel, p. 48.

"Hey! How are you!?" reflexively jumps from my mouth the moment I see a student walk into my classroom.

Most days I offer this question up without a missed beat while moving toward the supply closet at full speed, trying to remember where I put the box of spring scales or bag of rubber bands needed for a lab. Full speed toward the next item on the to-do list that unfolds accordion-style each morning as I step through the school doors. The same list that seems to multiply like cells if I sit down—or even simply slow down—long enough to really listen to a student's response to my question. Most days, "How are you?" is more of a mindless greeting than a genuine check-in. But some days of teaching feel more expansive than others and a rare pocket of

time finds you.

This happened one day last week. I got to school early before the buzz had begun and as I walked down the quiet hallway I found that one of my students had beaten me there and was sitting outside my door. This was not unusual. Most mornings I say a quick hello, unlock my door and breeze inside to get the day set up and rolling. What was unusual on this day was my light list of to-dos. I had time. So I stood still in the hallway for a moment with my hand resting on the handle of my classroom door. I looked at the student and said “How are you?” with full presence.

And this student quietly said, “I’m okay.”

And I still had time.

So I said, “Just okay?”

And that was all it took for a story to begin tumbling out of them. Precious and honest and theirs, not mine, to tell. This story lasted no more than two minutes and yet it provided me with some knowledge of the baseline stress this particular student was beginning this particular school day with.

I thanked the student for sharing with me, and as they headed off to their first period class a little while later, I turned into my classroom to get the day rolling—a little slower than normal.

In the immensity of this task—of this educator role—we fail to create moments of stillness.

I feel incredibly lucky to work where I do: a small, urban public high school. With just about 300 students, this place has a familial feeling that sometimes reminds me of the small town where I grew up. Here students and teachers are greeted by name each time they walk down the hall. As sole grade-level content teachers, the staff here get to know nearly every student at some point along their high school path. As a result of this familiarity and an administrative team committed to classroom presence, our staff doesn’t just know students’ names, but also their

favorite types of music, how they get to school in the mornings, where they work, which sibling they have to pick up in the afternoon, and probably even the topic of their most recent research project. Here, from the top down, students are known.

Each year, our students are asked to report on school climate by answering a national SurveyWorks questionnaire. We are proud as a staff that the majority of students report positive school climate and teacher-student relationships. Our school consistently performs well above the district and state averages on questions like “How respectful are your teachers toward you?” and “If you walked into class upset, how concerned would your teachers be?”. When asked “Is there at least one teacher or other adult in your school that you can talk to if you have a problem?”, 83% of students responded favorably last year. This feels good. There is another question on this survey; however, which polls, “When your teachers ask, ‘How are you?’, how often do you feel that your teachers really want to know your answer?”. To this question, only 49% of students respond favorably. Across the country, the favorable response rate to this same question is 37%. This does not feel good.

The dichotomy of these results disappoints me but does not surprise me. It is believable that most students feel connected to one or more adults in our school. I see my colleagues working daily with great effort and genuine care to know their students. I see them using this knowledge to include, empower and raise student voices in their spaces. It is believable that this type of work welcomes students in and builds positive relationships. And it is believable, too, that in the immensity of this task—of this educator role—we fail to create moments of stillness. Moments to listen.

My slow morning last week eventually quickened into normal busyness. For my physics classes, this was an end-of-unit exam day. As the periods came and went, I handed out one exam after the next and I found myself returning to the story that had been shared with me that morning. Not the details of it, really, but the fact that it had gotten told. And even more so, the fact that it had almost not gotten told. I could have walked right by. I often *do* walk right by.

Once I know a story, what am I, as a teacher, supposed to do with it?

When fourth period came around and the student from the morning came into class, I paused. I considered the exam I held in my hand for them against the backdrop of the story they'd shared. And I questioned it. Was it essential for me to give this student this exam today? Should I offer them an exemption given their circumstances? But then, I questioned a little more. How would that be fair to the other students? What about their stories, too? The ones that I didn't hear, couldn't hear, would never hear because there weren't enough moments of stillness in a school day?

Once I know a story, what am I, as a teacher, supposed to do with it?

Twice a month our faculty meets for common planning time after school. Some portion of this time is always dedicated to a protocol we call "Kid Talk." Most basically, this is time set aside to provide space for communication and collaboration between committed educators. It is integral to the mission and culture of our school.

The protocol for Kid Talk exists to maintain professionalism and is constantly being adapted as we strive for equity. The current protocol asks staff members to individually review grade level rosters and mark students with whom they feel they have a strong connection. Space is provided for staff to make comments about specific concerns related to individual students. Directly following this, an administrator compiles quantitative data from our responses into clear visuals broken down by grade level which are then shared out with the staff as a whole. Finally, the staff groups up by grade level to talk more thoroughly about students who are thriving and those who might be in need of more connection or support at school. Thriving students are chosen to receive awards at recurring all-school town hall assemblies and students who would benefit from more support are referred to a skilled team of school counselors and administrators.

When we share stories it helps to inform the plans and interventions we design.

Last year, during one of these conversations, I gained context about a student who experienced gaps in their education during formative years. Though this student was not producing coherent written work in class, I noticed in our conversations that they showed deep knowledge of content. After hearing more of this student's story during Kid Talk, I worked with a special education teacher to redesign an oral assessment system for this student and, once implemented, their grades began to reflect their knowledge of class content.

I see productive results from Kid Talk frequently at our school, including targeted interventions related to attendance, course placements, and individualized learning support. And still, I know and worry it is not enough. A system like this relies on individual teachers capturing and remembering relevant information worth sharing from weeks of interactions with hundreds of students. A system like this demands moments of stillness during school days to hear stories in the first place. There is no protocol for this.


With all of this tumbling around my mind, I decided to give all of my students the exam that day as planned. No exceptions or extensions. And that night as I sat grading, I discovered that the student who had shared their story with me had not only taken and completed the exam, but had earned the second-highest score across all of my class periods that day. At this, I stopped.

Sitting in my kitchen and looking at the score in front of me, I understood something I hadn't before.

I understood then that while stories importantly provide context in our tireless efforts toward equity in the classroom, they also inject bias into our interactions and teaching choices. If I had let my own interpretation of this student's story impact the way I taught that day, I would have denied this student space to practice resilience.

So, what do we do?

Students will interpret and make meaning of the stories they live, just as we all do with our own stories.



Stories come to our classrooms in abundance. As teachers, we can make space for students' stories as often as we can. Even if it will never be enough. We can remember and hold them, share them with colleagues when it will serve to support students and to care for them, always. And, ultimately, they are not ours. They belong to the tellers. Students will interpret and make meaning of the stories they live, just as we all do with our own stories. The work we do as educators demands that we provide differentiation and support repeatedly. And this work equally demands that we provide opportunities to empower students' own strength and adaptability. After all, these are the things students will keep and carry into an unknown future.

For me today, this work means adding small moments of listening into the school day. It means check-in circles to start the week and open-ended quick writes to end it. It means learning enough Spanish to be able to talk with a new English-learner about their day during a passing period. And it means constant conversations with colleagues about ways to bring student stories into curricula; knowing that these stories—when cared for—add to, and do not subtract from, students' capacities to learn.

## CITATION

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