

THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's argument that we need to hear more than a single story about a place before we form an opinion about it is a serious challenge to teachers.

Not only does it challenge teachers to avoid making assumptions about students based on where they are from (i.e. "Pakistani kids are all like this," or "Refugee kids are all like this"), it also challenges us not to make judgements about the students themselves based on what we've heard about them.

It may or may not be obvious, but I am extremely outgoing. I would often challenge teachers in school, ask questions, write long papers and, unfortunately, goof off plenty with friends in class.

I also have four younger siblings (I am the oldest child). I feel that teachers read a lot into how to treat my siblings based on how they perceived me to be. I know for a fact that my oldest younger brother often struggled with teachers I'd had. He is quiet, athletic and an introvert. Not only did he have to overcome the story I'd told on our behalf, he also didn't have the personality to tell his own story effectively.

This reminds me of two important ideas. First, that it's important to let each of my students tell their own stories. I shouldn't make assumptions of their upbringing based on older or younger siblings, or stories I've heard about them from other teacher (along with, obviously, things like "how they look" and "where they're from"). I must let each student tell their own story.

However, and the second big idea I'm reminded of is an equally important counter-argument, I suppose -- I am reminded that not every student is able to or prepared to tell their story effectively. Essentially, because we are dealing with children, we are dealing with unreliable narrators.

Children are still framing their abilities to judge many things in the world. "My family is rich" or "My family is poor" are examples of two things I wouldn't trust

a child to be able to accurately tell me. Students don't reliably know what rich and poor are.

I first remember in my first year teaching at Second Street, I had a conversation with Wendy Blackford in the hallway.

One of her (grade 2) students walked by and asked if Wendy was my girlfriend. Now, Wendy was married, to start with. She also had a CHILD my age. But the student wasn't joking. Their perception of our ages was "They are both adults" and in that child's mind we were theoretically able to date one another.

Kids tell lots of stories about their home life to teachers. It's important to reserve making judgements about this homelife solely on the stories told to us by students. (Of course, this doesn't apply to situations where students tell us they are being abused -- we have a duty to report those). But when it comes to things like "My family is so rich" or "My family is so poor," we should reserve judgement on a kid. Let the story play out a little longer. Listen and watch for more perspectives. Because without a reliable narrator there are all sorts of conclusions that can be drawn.

The image below is a comical example of a school project that floats around the internet. "When I grow up... I want to be like Mommy!" says the kid. It certainly looks like mommy is a pole dancer. But actually, she's shoveling snow for money.



ON WORK AND VALUE

A good friend of mine just got a new job. While by trade he is a finish carpenter, he'd spend the last few years working for our church as a custodian/handyman. He was paid well, but paid salary and often worked far more than 40 hours per week. Two years ago, he had twin girls and now he has a third child on the way.

Thus, the realization hit him that he needed to return to working a job that paid him hourly. While the church job was nice, it didn't pay him the value of his work, considering the hours he was put in. And, while it was a satisfying job (working for an employer he believed in), eventually the good of his family came before the good of his employer.

Two weeks ago in class, we were asked to sit with a partner and share E-Postcards. Heather was my partner. Her E-Postcards read like a How-To Book on Stress. She is, as you're aware, dealing with a lot outside of work. Stress outside of work is something that everyone deals with. This is not just something teachers go through.

However, teachers not only deal with stress outside of work... we deal with students -- with children -- at work. So, while it may not matter if, as a burger-flipper or doctor, I show my stress on my face one day... as a teacher, it matters that I stay fairly neutral on a day-to-day basis.

On Wednesday morning, one of my students was abnormally quiet and sullen. Her face was sunk into her desk and she was crying. The bell had just rung and I was taking her class for music first thing in the morning. My colleague, her classroom teacher, whispered into my ear, "If she doesn't participate much today, don't bug her. She saw a cat run over by a car on the way to school this morning. She tried to rescue it and it died in her arms." Our kids deal with stress, too. I've had students whose uncles have died over Christmas break. I've had students who lost their grandmothers in kindergartens. I had a student whose puppy died. (And, quite unfortunately, I've worked long enough that three of my students have died... which, besides being a stressor to me, is hard on the other kids too).

Everyday, teachers are stressed. What

makes us come back? It would be nice to say that, like the friend I started with, we come back because we "believe in our students and want the best for them." But realistically, there must be times when the well-being of our families come before the well-being of our employers... who are ultimately the students.



As Heather's post-cards showed, something eventually has to give, which is why, no doubt, such a high percentage of teachers leave the profession for greener pastures in the first few years.

Remarkably, the number one stressor for teachers is not that they feel unable to devote enough time to family. Rather, it is the opposite. According to a 2014 study commissioned by the Canadian Teacher's Federation (CTF), teachers reported "that the top stressor in their work environment is the inability to devote as much time as they would like to each of their students."

What were the cures for teacher stress pointed to by the CTF? Remarkably, they weren't quitting and heading for a job that paid hourly. Rather, teachers wanted smaller classes, more support for special educational needs and more time for planning and preparation. **Also high on the list was more time to spend with colleagues.**

More time with colleagues. It's remarkable what we can accomplish in community. Maybe that's one of the reasons that despite this course adding a workload (and time away from family) on Monday nights, the experience has been overall enriching to my professional practice and made me feel like a better (and less stressed) teacher than I did before.

¹ <https://www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/Work-LifeBalanceandtheCanadianTeachingProfession.pdf>



THE ART OF GETTING BY

Perhaps it's not immediately evident when I arrive at class unshaven, late, and with a large cup of fast-food coffee in my hand (often accompanied by a stain on my shirt from where I have already spilled the afore-mentioned coffee), but I am a very meticulous person.

When it comes to art, that is.

In most other aspects of my life, things looking not-so-great doesn't bother me. But when it comes to art or music, things have to be perfectly-arranged. In fact, one of the main reasons why I hadn't handed in my E-Postcards until now is that I couldn't find the time to put them together in the layout

program and I was unwilling to just send them in Microsoft Word. My postcards had to match, darn it. It's a rule that I set out for myself at the beginning. In fact, originally this postcard just had the image above (of the empty gas tank) accompanying it, but all my other postcards included stamps so I added one to this postcard as well - bonus points if you can spot the often fairly abstract connection between the stamp and the theme spoken about on each postcard.

Anyways, I thought I would tell a little story about my art on this postcard. It might be hard to believe, but in high school, I got in trouble for talking during class a lot. In fact, my Grade 9 Social Studies teacher once gave me 14 detentions in a row for being too social (ironic, I know). My parents grew insanely tired of receiving honour roll report cards full of comments like, "Lucas talks during class too much." In fact, they didn't truly accept a report card of mine until I was in grade 11 and got an honour roll report card with no negative comments on it. What changed? I finally figured out that I needed to draw during class. For most students, we would see this as disrespectful. Perhaps we would see a kid drawing and assume they aren't paying attention. But for me, drawing is a way to make sure I don't interrupt the flow of the class too often. I'm still always listening - I just need to occupy my brain with something else so I don't call out... well, more often at least.

Two weeks ago, I drew the Running on Empty image on the back of a paper plate. I had come to class feeling sore (it turned out later to be the flu) and green. I really had wanted to participate but my body got the better of me. A few people saw my drawing and said, "Wow, that's amazing. I wish I could be that creative."

Funny... I'd never thought to say to someone, "I'm amazed you can keep so quiet during class. I wish I could be that quiet." But truth is, I do sometimes.

