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Breakthroughs *in* Literacy

TEACHER SUCCESS STORIES
AND STRATEGIES, GRADES K-8

Susan E. Israel
and Contributors

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Introduction: Why Teacher Stories?

CLASSROOM TEACHERS, SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS, teacher educators, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and even parents can all gain new ideas and approaches for helping children learn to read and write from reading success stories from today's classrooms. The idea for this book came when Addie, an experienced graduate student in my "Phonics, Spelling and Word Studies" course, was sharing a story with me about one of her fourth-grade students who had been a reluctant reader. I recall Addie entering the classroom right before class started. She was always enthusiastic, but on this particular day she seemed especially eager to tell me something. Paraphrased from my memory at the time of our conversation, Addie explained:

"I was so excited today. For the first time a student shared with me a reading success story. She told me that because I kept on encouraging her to keep reading books and to read books that were especially enjoyable, she finally discovered books that she loves, and all because of me!"

I loved how Addie referred to this as a "reading success story." It was like she was telling me, "Look, something I did made all

the difference in the world to a child.” Her story stuck with me, primarily because a teacher had shared something with me that was working rather than something that was not.

Breakthroughs in Literacy is a collection of powerful stories authored by a diverse group of people who have devoted much of their lives to working with struggling students. Although most of the authors were teachers in general education classrooms when their stories took place, some were reading specialists or literacy coaches, while others were special education teachers, ESL teachers, or even tutors. Many of them are now university professors.

The authors were invited to contribute stories because of their many years of working with children on literacy learning and finding success along the way. They were asked to submit personal narratives about a meaningful experience where they felt their teaching made a difference in setting an individual student, or group of students, on the path to achievement. Although the authors were given a set of guidelines, they were encouraged to write their stories as if they were sharing them in the teachers’ lounge or over the phone with a colleague.

The guidelines for writing these stories included the following criteria:

- *Personal reflections about reading success:* Try to identify what worked for you in the particular learning situation and what you think you could have done differently.
- *Explain how the success was realized:* Describe why and how you made a difference. Reflect on what helped you understand how the transformation started. Identify strategies you employed.
- *Lessons to learn:* In closing each story, summarize the insights and understandings gained so the reader can learn. Each lesson should be placed in context with the learner and the situation.

Retrospective personal narrative is the appropriate writing style for the authors to convey this type of message. Rather than being bound to a scholarly approach, citing relevant theory and research, the storytelling format allows the authors to freely communicate their thoughts, reflections, and insights, as well as the breakthrough strategies that lead to their teaching success.

In the stories, the authors describe their experiences with individual students who had been having difficulty in either reading or writing or who posed a particular instructional challenge. Some are resistant or underperforming readers, some are special education students, and others are English language learners. Many of the students face particular learning barriers, whether fear of not being accepted by peers, deficits in oral language, or diagnosed learning disabilities. Some of the students described suffer problems of poverty and homelessness; others are gifted but have come to dislike reading or writing. As you will see, many of the students in these stories have hidden talents that had never been discovered by anyone.

Goals of the Book

Because it is important for educators to be guided by research-based practices, this book shows readers the outcomes of research-based strategies by having teachers explain why and how they carried out particular instructional approaches. In many cases, the authors found they had to try unusual or unconventional instructional strategies. In each story, you will read about an authentic experience and the author's insights as to the approach that fueled the success with individual students. Whether it is a story about how a child was taught to read or about a particular strategy or program that worked well, the goal is to enable you to use these experiences to reflect on your own

approach to teaching literacy. The stories bring multiple viewpoints and perspectives to questions that have always been asked by those in the literacy field:

- What is the best way to teach reading to a struggling learner?
- What is the best way to teach writing to a struggling learner?

Many of the stories spotlight the use of writing, not just as a tool for supporting and inspiring reading but as an essential attribute for converging ideas and expressing understanding of skills and content interpretations.

As a former university professor who continues to work with teachers, I seem to spend a lot of my time trying to help teachers feel good about what they do. I have learned that teachers need to self-discover, through instructional inquiry and reflection, what it is they are doing well. Focusing on what they are doing well helps them realize or affirm why they are teachers. Teachers need affirmation that their work can make a difference. Teacher success stories need to be documented to help other teachers learn and think differently about what they do and can do, to give them hope, courage, and inspiration that they can succeed with their students as well. It is my goal to help you use the stories in this book not only as a tool to discover instructional strategies that you might try but also as a way to help you identify your own reading success stories and share them with others. My personal request would be that you not hide your success stories. We need to hear them. The stories in this volume have been written with humility. They are written from the heart, as you will read, but they are also written with the goal of sharing a success story to help others.

By having multiple teachers describe successes that were memorable to them, my desire is that you will feel as if you are sitting next to each of the authors yourself, listening intently and with a goal of learning new ways of thinking and teaching.

Overview of the Book

The book is divided into four main parts, with stories in each part focusing on the following breakthrough themes:

Part One Connection: Knowing the Learner

Part Two Motivation: The Right Book Can Make a Difference

Part Three Engagement: Multisensory Experiences

Part Four Transformation: Learning Together

Part One focuses on breakthroughs in reading and writing that resulted from application of learner-centered teaching strategies, especially practices emphasizing knowing the learner and involving the student in collaboration. Too often, we think learning has to be done individually. The connections described in these stories demonstrate the power of collaborative learning to motivate students when they are given opportunities to work together. Teachers can work collaboratively with students, and children can support each other to achieve literacy success. The stories invite reflection on the following questions:

- How do I feel when working with others to learn new things?
- What types of collaborative connections can I make to allow students to work together?
- Does my classroom environment allow for moments of social-learning engagement?

Part Two focuses on breakthroughs in motivation that can result when children are provided with meaningful literature selections. In many of the stories, the teachers describe how they enable the children themselves to discover books that are

important to them and that invite them to experience the reading world. What is wonderful about these stories is the way the teachers used their own literacy interests and talents to motivate the students. The stories invite reflection on the following questions:

- Do I have specific types of personal reading materials that I can share with my students to make a breakthrough in their thinking and learning?
- Are there talents that I have that can be used as a tool to promote inquiry learning and investigation?
- Is it important for students to have a say in the types of books they read regardless of ability level?

Part Three focuses on breakthroughs that were made possible by having the students engage in hands-on visual, tactile, or other multisensory experiences prior to their reading or writing activities. The stories show that content presented using multisensory methods can enhance achievement and connect with students' individual learning styles. What is interesting about these stories is that the teachers are not afraid to do whatever it takes to motivate the child. They explore interesting and creative ways to teach while at the same time finding success with literacy learning. The stories invite reflection on the following questions:

- What do I want to do to help one child that might speak to teaching in a multisensory method?
- Are there changes I can easily make in my method of teaching today that will promote creativity and reach individual learning styles?
- What will it take to engage my most challenging student?

Part Four focuses on literacy transformations that can occur once the teacher gains a personal understanding of the learner.

The stories in this part feature children who learn in many different ways. The stories demonstrate that unless teachers spend time getting to know their students as individuals and gaining their trust, it can be difficult to engage them in successful learning situations. The stories invite reflection on the following questions:

- How much time do I spend getting to know my students and how best they learn?
- How do I use this information about my students to construct meaningful lessons that appeal to the students' interests while at the same time staying true to meaningful tasks?
- What actions demonstrate a trust-building factor when I am working with struggling students?

Each part of the book includes a separate introduction followed by the stories themselves. At the end of the story section, I share my own thoughts and reflections about the stories as if I were writing in a journal. The stories are further elaborated as follows:

- *Breakthrough Elements*, a section highlighting strategies, practices, and “elements of success” detailed in the stories.
- *Reflection Questions*, a series of study questions encouraging readers to think about their own classroom situation and how their teaching practice might be changed in light of findings in the stories.
- *Lessons Learned*, a summary of themes and discoveries revealing the stories of particular relevance for literacy learning.
- *Breakthrough Actions You Can Take Today*, suggested teaching practices that can be immediately applied in the classroom.
- *Further Reading*, suggested resources to help extend and apply the concepts offered in the stories.

In Part Five, the Conclusion, I draw from the stories to summarize my own views about teaching reading and writing. I suggest seven pathways that teachers can take to ensure that their students engage in successful literacy learning with the goal of achieving a literacy breakthrough.

Susan E. Israel
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Susan welcomes your literacy breakthrough stories and comments, and is seeking success stories with special populations and diverse groups, brain injuries, and severe reading disorders. She can be reached at sueisrael@comcast.net or through her Web site, <http://home.comcast.net/~sueisrael>.



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