Keynote Address

Western Mass Writing Project

Uncommon Teachers Teach the Common Core

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Policies Don't Teach Kids; People Do

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National Writing Project people are uncommon teachers. Uncommon teachers and thus National Writing Project teachers represent the best hope for public school children, especially for urban kids. Here's why:

Uncommon teachers know that each child is in the process of becoming a more complete human being.

Uncommon teachers know that becoming a human being means learning to use the mind and the heart.

Uncommon teachers do not teach writing; rather they teach young writers. They don't teach reading, they teach young readers. They don't teach math; they teach young mathematicians and young scientists and young historians and young artists and young singers and young athletes. They don't teach to the common core; they teach to the child.

Uncommon teachers realize that strategies are what teachers use before the real teacher shows up.

Uncommon teachers understand that the MCAS test is misnamed; it is no comprehensive assessment system.

They shake their heads at the Orwellian notion that the MCAS Growth Percentage Profile demonstrates actual growth of a real human being.

Uncommon teachers' souls often seem way out of sync with educational policy. To them policy seems overly politic, meticulous, cautious, trite, and common – directly in contrast with fantastic learning that requires openness, imagination inspiration, innovation, wonder, whimsy, and wit.

Uncommon teachers teach uncommon students in uncommon ways to understand uncommonly rigorous material. And they know that the best evidence of student academic growth lies in classroom assessment that is married to dynamic instruction.

Uncommon teachers know the value of love, respect, and trust.

Uncommon teachers realize they sometimes must defy common policies to do right by their uncommon students.

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"Hey, Teach, when the hell we gonna do English in here. All we do is read and write." His name was Boyaa. This was 9th grade and Boyaa did not connect an English class to reading and writing, and certainly not to thinking. If he were not used to doing reading or writing or thinking in English class, it is no stretch to assume he did no reading and writing and thinking in math or history or science either. "School is boring," he claimed, adding to the truth of Alfred North Whitehead's claim that "The central problem of all education is keeping knowledge alive and preventing it from becoming inert." - Teaching to a test or to a program or to a curriculum is counter to keeping knowledge alive – an all too common experience in our schools.

The policy for Boyaa and his friends was to identify "at-risk" students in middle school and place them in a program at the high school designed to help them improve their scores on a literacy test. The program was funded and suggested by a major business (corporate interest over educational expertise) in Worcester and teachers merely had to follow the program. Students were tested every day using standardized SAT-like format. Students passively submitted or else, resulting in classes that were as still as painted ships upon painted oceans.

Given the realities of high drop-out rates, low test scores, frequent absences, poor class performance, excessive failures, high achievement gaps, it is understandable how administrative decision-making may opt for a policy that purports to help those who have fallen behind. Slick language sells, especially when the program promises to target test scores. Not many policies, though, promise to keep knowledge alive for thinking and feeling human beings.

I need to point out - not learning well is a problem not limited to our at risk students. Langer and Applebee, researchers who have studied school curricula, state, "Put simply, in the whole range of academic course work, American children do not write frequently enough, and the reading and writing tasks they are given do not require them to think deeply enough." Guy Allen who teaches writing at the University of Toronto notes, "More than 95 percent of students entering my course have a negative view of their abilities and a negative view of the experience of writing in a school setting." Every semester I meet graduate students at Clark University who admit to having learned how to become fake readers and fake writers, meaning they learned how to follow the formula to get their grades, all the while never accepting themselves as real readers and real writers. They have learned to do school well, but they have not learned well. One of my master's students recently wrote, "When I see the word 'paper' I get a knot in my stomach that makes me double over in pain. Facing a writing assignment for me before this year was like getting sucker-punched in the stomach." Recent testimony at the State

Board of Education by college presidents confirms that many high school students score well on the MCAS test, but require remediation when they get to college. Our best students are not learning as well as they should be.

The policy that relegated Boyaa and his classmates to a programmed approach to English was a bad policy, though a common one. There were five such classes, and I persuaded the Principal to allow me to teach one of those five. That's how I got Boyaa and his class of 31. I would teach the class my way – no worksheets, no program, no formulaic approach. I am a teacher. I know my subject and I work my tail off to figure out how to share my passion for writing and for literature with youngsters. Together we would grow in our understanding of our world and that of our literary characters by learning to observe closely, analyze carefully, weigh evidence, predict counter arguments, and work to clearly express our thinking.

In contrast to the corporate packaged approach to literacy, I told my kids I would teach them "The Magic of Language". Language is magical when it helps us to celebrate what we were, what we are, and what we can become; language is magical when it helps us to transcend the common, the mundane, and the petty; language is magical when it helps us to see the complexity and beauty of our own humanity; language is magical when it helps us to generate ideas, when it helps us to see with different eyes, when it helps us to think.

Boyaa hated my class. He whined for the safety of the teacher-proof class. It took until mid October to get him to write anything. This is what Boyaa wrote in response to a big book adaptation of a classic novel:

> The Monster knock on the OLD Man door the old man was sitting in the living room he said "Come in" the door creck open. You can hear heavy foot stepps. The old "man said Who is it" Frankenstein said " am cool and hungry can I cam it."

Imagine. Boyaa was in high school and was unable to read or write. The institutional answer was to set a policy to relegate him and youngsters like him to a teacher-proof curriculum, designed to improve test scores. Sound familiar to any of you?

Boyaa was but one in a class of 31, labeled at risk non-achievers. In the class were tough gang members, special education students, English-as-a second-language students, young mothers, students to be expelled for weapons, minorities - all poor and low skilled, and not used to an English teacher asking them to read, write, and think. This was uncommon teaching to them.

Many teachers find themselves between a rock and a hard place and agonize as they follow orders from above; knowing the program they are using is not helping some of their children. Uncommon teachers who think of the child as their own must choose to defy policy if policy is getting in the way of helping a child grow.

In February Boyaa wrote:

> Tim is lying on the bench, *his hat wrinkled*, *his coat dirty, an empty beer can in his hand.* He was sleeping under a newspaper, *his wholly paints catching the cold wind,* he asked a man, "Hey... you got a dollar I can have."
>
> The man just looked at him for a while. He looked away, *not saying a word.* By this time his newspaper is wet. He ran under the tree, *the cold wind blowing in his wholly paints.* His knees and the bottom of his coat was wet. He tries to find a dry spot and he does, puts down his empty beer can, puts his wrinkled hat on his face and went to sleep.

This is not great writing, but it is great improvement. "Hey, Teach, I'm getting smarter," he said with a grin. That grin said it all for me. More so than any MCAS Growth Percentage Profile stat.

Next to Boyaa sat Teddy, smart, athletic, and impossible. If in my English classroom, I had the 'at risk' kids, on the ball field I had the 'losers', as I took over a team that had not won a game the year before and very few in the last decade. Baseball players like students believed the labels; they were uninspired, unimaginative, safe, and complacent.

Teddy was playing third base; I was pitching: "Come on Coach. Fire it in there. Got the corner, Coach." It was tryouts; I was the new coach, my first time outside, dots of diminishing snow banks, dirty along the heavily shaded areas, flurries in the air. As I wound to throw a pitch, my eye caught Teddy, a cigarette burning from his mouth, dangling on that same lip that continued to voice hustle and encouragement for his new coach. "Teddy, you've got a butt in your mouth! Take a lap around the field."

Dropping his glove, he immediately began running. Winding up to fire another pitch, I halted when Boyaa dropped his bat, laughing and saying for all, "Look at Teddy!" Teddy was still running, jogging hard, butt in his mouth, lighted, little puffs following him. I knew right then teaching baseball would not be my priority. Baseball would become the tool to teach Teddy, the person. As I had to get my English students thinking like real scholars, I had to get my athletes thinking like real ball players.

But it would not be easy. Teaching is a process and learning takes time. During one game early in the season, I noticed in the middle of an inning that I did not have a right fielder. "Where's Teddy?" I asked the players on the bench. They pointed to the foul pole where Teddy was relieving himself – Teddy was actually peeing while the pitcher threw, batters swung, and fielders covered, all except for the right fielder, of course. I whispered to the guys on the bench not to point or otherwise call attention to Teddy. I was embarrassed. Teddy wasn't. "When nature calls, Coach," he said with a shrug.

Teddy was such a fine athlete that he was recruited out of the eighth grade to play ball for a private high school in the area. The same antics he revealed to me got him kicked out of the private school, landing him with me. Even though I really had no idea how I was going to help him make better choices, I knew I would not dismiss him. That's what we do in public schools; we invite all in. Unwittingly, institutional policy came to my and Teddy's and the team's rescue.

When a team had home field advantage playing on the city's premier field, there was a policy – the home team had to place a uniformed player in foul territory on the other side of a cyclone fence that stretched behind the visitor's dugout down the first base line to retrieve any foul ball hit into that wooded area, rife with patches of poison ivy and strewn with urban litter.

I wonder sometimes if educators who create such rules for kids have any children of their own. I wonder if it is precisely these folk who contribute to the Teddys and Boyaas of public education, kids with attitude who show disdain for an absurd, impersonal system that champions sameness, compartmentalization, routine, and regulation. And so - some of our smartest and most gifted kids defy the service of a system whose metaphors emanate from the institutional handbook and the factory assembly line. Thus they smoke during practice or relieve themselves in the middle of innings or refuse to show they can think and never show their feelings. Some pass school and graduate as part of the herd like boot camp survivors, learning never to volunteer or offer a thought or opinion. Many others drop out. We educational leaders delude ourselves into thinking that instituting programs or adopting a new textbook or a new set of common standards or a tougher end of the year exam will improve student learning. The Teddys and Boyaas of the world do not suffer us fools well, seeing the silliness for what it is, simply reacting with their own silliness.

They are McMurphy in the Cuckoo's Nest, fighting institutionalization, realizing the

superficiality of a system that promotes standardization and mediocrity, and, too often, hypocrisy. Like McMurphy, they become outlaws against the system that quickly labels their behavior as irrational before they can try to expose the system for what it is.

While most of us are not outlaws, most of us really like outlaws. Maybe it is their soul, their spirit, their willingness to take risks, their rebelliousness - their disdain for the common, the mundane, the trivial, the inert. Randle Patrick McMurphy is the hero in Ken Kesey's novel, some even say a Christ figure. Outlaw Randle Patrick McMurphy was lobotomized.

Uncommon teachers are thinkers and free spirits. We need them. Thinkers and free spirits create institutional chaos. Smooth and safe and steady and secure cries the institutional policy in the face of ambiguity. Kill the spirit. Lobotomize the McMurphys. And institutional policies do, unless challenged by uncommon teachers.

I refused to put a youngster into the poison ivy and syringe needles. The day before the game I bought dozens and dozens of baseballs. The system had supplied me with but one dozen for the season. That is why we were ordered to place a uniformed player into the woods, to conserve the budget. So I bought my own baseballs, just as I bought my own pens and pencils and books for my English students.

At game time the umpire ordered me to place my player in the woods. First, I tried to

explain why I would not. He was a dad. Attempting to use his sense of fatherhood to move him, I tried to tap into his imagination. Imagine a dad coming to watch his son play, being a bit disappointed he was not starting, but then not seeing him on the bench even, but sitting amid the urban blight and debris in foul territory. He didn't buy it. Folks who believe in the institution over the individual have no imagination. Institutionalization, I believe, eviscerates thought and compassion and empathy.

A rule is a rule. But can't you see, Ump, it's a bad rule. No matter. It is much easier to fall back on absolutes than to make moral decisions. He pointed in that umpire manner, and I thought he was going to throw me out of the game before the first pitch, when he snarled, "Play Ball," with the warning he would call the game as soon as I was out of baseballs.

As fate would have it, more balls were hit down that first base foul area than anyone could remember. With each foul shot, the umpire grunted; I'd reach into my ball bag, pull out a shiny sphere, rub some dirt on it, before tossing it gently to him. He'd glare, smirk, and place it into the bag. Another foul, another ball, another glare, another smirk. As the game went on, the fouls continued, so did the new balls. The glares grew, but the smirks diminished, making the glares even more menacing, with each new ball tossed into play.

Inning after inning this game within a game went on, my kids watching, coach reaching

into a bottomless bag, umpire angrily squeezing us on every close play, coach ignoring the inequities, kids observing, saying nothing. We lost, but we played differently that day, no silliness. Teddy controlled his bladder.

"We lost a ton of baseballs, Coach."

"I don't care about the baseballs."

As I gathered the equipment to load into my van, I noticed every single player head for the woods on the other side of the cyclone fence, Teddy leading. I slowed my gate, fiddled with the equipment in the van, took my time changing my shoes, and watched in awe as uniforms scurried through the woods, bending over like potato farmers, their hands tossing aside Budweiser cans, brush, ivy, shopping carts, rags of clothing, syringes, all kinds of crap, finding many baseballs, some easily, others requiring a bit more digging. Boyaa had taken off his uniform top, using it as a ball bag. Others soon followed.

The harvest done, Teddy led the team back to my van, balls tied in shirts and resting in gloves. I barked at them, "You guys never listen to a thing I say."

Teddy countered, "How can we play for a coach with no balls?"

Boyaa handed over his load and quietly said, "Coach, you're a different type of teacher. Man, you a little crazy."

Different and crazy –I took it as an uncommonly high compliment. Uncommon teachers are crazily different.

They are crazy enough to wade against the current of an institution that too often fails to see the value of personalization, love, trust, and teaching for deep understanding to the whole child, a being engaged in the constant process of becoming. They are crazy enough to pledge their loyalty to the child over the institution, even if it means clashing with policy. They are crazy enough to accept crazy as a compliment because teachers crazy enough to think they can make a difference in a child's life, are the ones who do.