Out There with the Kids: Why Bother?

Esther and Kenneth tell a story about relationships and the long-term effects of literacy instruction through a slice of their personal and pedagogical history.

ESTHER

It is spring 2002. I have spent the day listening to panelists argue with each other in a hall filled with experienced teachers and teacher-educators. A disturbing number of them defend plans for continued cuts to educational funding and applaud the virtues of recently mandated standardized tests. Testing will begin with young children, continue through high school, and dictate the futures of Ontario’s students. New Provincial curriculum, combined with test pressures, will reduce the authority teachers have over their own classroom practices.

At long last, it is time for members of the surprisingly quiet audience to bring their concerns to strategically placed microphones. As questions become intense and challenging, panel members glance at their watches. Time is running out. With regret, board of education chairpersons and administrators rush to other meetings. They assure us that we will reconvene at a later date. In the meantime, they expect teachers to return to work, follow the rules, and see how right their leaders are.

On my way home, I think about a former student, Kenneth. Years ago, when I was his grade seven and eight special education teacher, I was able to negotiate for what I believed in. Now, there seems to be no escape from the mindless destruction of public education that is taking place. I wonder if Kenneth is still at the same number. We haven’t spoken in more than 10 years. The last time was when he won an award and phoned to thank me for having been his teacher. I think, too, about how Language Arts has invited articles on the topic “why bother with literacy?” Maybe it’s finally time to ask Kenneth how things have turned out for him, ask him the Language Arts question, and survey my own options as an educator who is not ready to give up on democratic education.

The following is narrated by Esther who weaves her own story with Kenneth’s adult voice and excerpts from his seventh-grade autobiography written in 1984, when Esther was his teacher. In the 1980s, many of Esther’s pedagogical choices were influenced by Yetta and Ken Goodman, Donald Graves, and Frank Smith. Her work as a researcher has been strongly influenced by Roger Simon and Maxine Greene who think about public schooling as an opportunity for the unfolding of possibilities. Her narrative writing has taken inspiration from the work of Carolyn Steedman, Linda Brodkey, and Nel Noddings who understand that through the blend of teacher and learner stories, we can learn much about how schooling happens.

This story comes from a series of meetings in which Esther and Kenneth exchanged information, reminisced, engaged in discussion, and conducted a taped interview. They worked hard to articulate a shared commitment to principles of equity and developmental education. They mapped out their article, read drafts aloud, revised in Kenneth’s office, and proofread on the phone. By the time they finished, it was summer, and they had begun to tell a long story. What follows is only chapter one.
I manage to locate Kenneth, and we meet in his office. He is a youth worker in the same housing project community where he lived when he was in my class. Now, as a man with strong views about why it is important to bother, Kenneth tells me what matters to him and to the young people he works with.

KENNETH

I always knew I had a reading problem. In high school, I hid it. That kept me safe, so it felt good at the time. Now I need to move on. I work with youth who have problems. One day a kid came to see me. I looked at him and saw a reflection of myself pertaining to reading and writing. Part of me wanted to tell him my story, and part of me didn’t. I came to the decision not to tell him. I didn’t know how he would receive it. Also, there was a little bit of fear of what he might do with the information. Kids need to have choices about how to live their lives. Because of this and because I have kids of my own, I think that telling my own story now is an important step in moving on; it offers perspective and enlightenment both for myself and others. There are a lot of reasons.

My grandmother used to say, “Good things fall when the stars are in line.” Life is a full circle. The time comes to get things off your chest. I’ve been in a room that’s become too small. I am someone else youth can measure up to. I can be a good measuring stick. “Kenneth did it, survived high school, developed skills, talked to people, so can I.” It’s time to step out. My head is more focused now that I’ve told people about my problem. I think it’s an important story to share with teachers.

OUR STORY

In the crowded urban community of his youth, Kenneth has become a celebrity. As a youth worker and confidante, he can snap his fingers in the large playground, and 40 kids assemble for a spontaneous basketball game. He is also a storyteller. Twenty-five-year-olds still return to their childhood community to hear him tell tales that made them shiver, laugh, and cry at day camp when Kenneth, then in his late teens and early twenties, was program director. “A deep story,” he tells me, “takes an hour and a half.”

When I first met Kenneth in September of 1984, he was in grade seven. He had been in Canada since grade three, living in the downtown Toronto housing project just beside the school. He lived with his mother, a hard-working woman who worked in a soap factory. She had to do with the information. Kids need to have choices about how to live their lives. Because of this and because I have kids of my own, I think that telling my own story now is an important step in moving on; it offers perspective and enlightenment both for myself and others. There are a lot of reasons.

I’m not an easy quiet. I knock on lots of doors until they open. My connection with Esther, my grade seven/eight teacher, was about being real. I want to be real with the kids I work with, but you can go farther. For me to have an impact with them, I have to get my story out there and be true to myself and okay with myself. I had to tell the truth and finally talk about myself to my boss, my friends, and others. I call it a full circle. I’m doing this with Esther again: me, Esther, reading, writing. It started with Esther and I’m at that point again: reading and writing.

Until age eight, Kenneth remained in the small village of Clay Valley with his grandparents who took good care of him and his two brothers. In the aftermath of a massive volcanic eruption and hurricane, there was no public schooling available to Kenneth, and he did not learn to read or write. Once Kenneth’s mother was able to provide for all of her children, she sent for the boys. During his first week in a large city, Kenneth was enrolled in the K–8 school near his home, and placed in third grade with others his age.

Four years later, in my tenth year of teaching, I accepted a job at that school. I had particular research plans in mind. I hadn’t met the students, but I was familiar with the community and knew the principal and a number of staff members. I wanted to do my doctoral study in

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choose books for me to read to him. He was attracted to complex stories that he could not yet read, and he loved to draw. I invited him to explore the art materials and work with any medium he chose. I found that he could concentrate for hours on a pastel drawing. Kenneth drew beautiful pictures of his past life, his childhood home, and his grandmother's garden. We found special places to hang his pictures on the classroom wall. He decided to set it up as an art gallery. He and I agreed that this would count as assigned work during the first semester.

Gradually, Kenneth told me stories about his life. Since many of the other students were writing in journals, he allowed me to scribe in a journal for him. He would dictate pieces of his history, I would print, and then we would review his

I was warned about Kenneth. He had a reputation for being unmanageable and defiant, and he was a non-reader.

pieces. He wasn’t yet reading; he was remembering and speaking in chorus with me. He would engage in this only if no one else was present. Kenneth decided to compose his autobiography beginning with family history. He dictated, I scribed, we read and re-read together, and he illustrated. The following excerpt came from this project:

When he [my great grandfather] came to St. Vincent he married my great grandmother, the lady with lots of land. She was black. So they had fourteen or thirteen kids, and my great grandfather lost all his money by drinking rum. And all the boys have to stay home and the girls go to school. The reason why the boys have to stay home is to build a sail to catch fish, and that’s why my grandfather can’t read. He’s not dumb. He can do all kinds of math. He used to measure the depth of the sea and the width and how long it is and everything, and he was the fastest knitter. You know you have to braid the nets yourself, you can’t buy them. When you knit you have to knit thousands and thousands and thousands of them with the cork and everything. And he was a good painter. He could write the name of the sailboat, called Urato, and painted the side of the boat. And he painted other people’s boats too. His mother was a missionary who goes around to heal and pray for people.

All Slater families in St. Vincent are related. It’s one of the biggest families in St. Vincent. The Slater family owns the biggest land in St. Vincent. All of my great uncles have special gift... like healing people and doing certain things that nobody else can do. So all Slater families have special gifts.

Now we’re up to my grandfather and my grandmother. This is how my grandmother and my grandfather got together: my grandmother’s mother was sick. My grandmother was nine years old when her mother died, and then this lady adopted her as her own daughter. And then she went to school, and she met my grandfather, and they got to know each other and they got married and they have kids.

There’s a volcano on St. Vincent, and it’s been there for centuries and centuries, and one week I heard on the radio that there might be an eruption. I was at home on St. Vincent, and my valley is called Clay Valley, and you could see from Clay Valley to Lee Woodside, and you could actually see the smoke and ashes that came out of the volcano, and then we had to go into the house, and we had to stay there until morning. I was around eight years old. And then when we woke up the other morning, it was ashes come off the ground about three feet high. When they fell it was just like the snow over here in Canada. And then that cooled down.

Then a couple of months later, down in Lee Wood, there was a big flood, and there was hundreds of people that died and got buried in the mud and the water mixed up. And then they had to call a bulldozer, you know like the things they’re using in the yard [at the school in Toronto], and then there was so much mud that the bulldozer didn’t see them, and he ran over them.

Kenneth was proud of his stories, and he became more comfortable with his peers. He developed a friendly smirk, a swagger, a slightly superior air. He was growing tall and athletic. His clothes were stylish and immaculate. This year he abandoned the wild child and became a super hero, a celebrity.

Other students began to look up to him, and as long as his learning difficulties were not apparent to others, he succeeded in carrying out his new role. A master at cover-up, he concealed reading difficulties that he now says made him feel incomplete as a 13-year-old. I figured that such deftness should be complimented. “You’re so clever,” I told him when he made his deal to read with me only during recess and only behind the bookshelves in his secret “office.”

If we arranged to read in his office, he showed up on time. He was hungry for knowledge and determined to learn how to read and write. Although he didn’t know the whole alphabet, he did know many letters. As his confidence grew, he allowed himself to try invented spellings. I showed him what he got right and helped him connect sounds to letters that he recognized. His draft writing became increasingly intelligible to him and to me, though this was still a big struggle for Kenneth. The deal was that this work was to be done in total privacy. I had to find ways to avoid recess duty. I made deals with other teachers and with the principal. They suspected
that I was an over-zealous special education teacher, too trusting of whole language and developmental writing, who wanted to prove impossible things, but they let me try.

I read challenging books to Kenneth and the others. I read them biographies, autobiographies, and novels. We read all of Roald Dahl’s autobiography Boy (1984). This scathing critique of a British upper class private school inspired some of our most fascinating critical discussions about education. Kenneth’s favorite work of literature turned out to be the novel Sounder (Armstrong, 1969). He loved it so much, he wanted to learn how to read it himself, take it home, and “read ahead.” While this Newbery Award-winning book has continued to arouse controversy among educators concerned with issues of representation and equity (Alexander, 1972; Bader, 2002; Bishop, 1994; Harris, 1996; Shannon, 1992), it was, at the time, the book that Kenneth wanted more of everyday. Was it the young boy’s quest for literacy that captivated his interest, I ask him? “Mostly,” he tells me, “it was the cabin, the close-knit family, and the dog” who reminded him of the dog he had as a child in St. Vincent.

One day soon, Kenneth and I plan to revisit this text and the film. We will dig more deeply into the critical discussion it has raised, try to discover what it was that this book said to him at age 13, and talk about what we each see in it all these years later.

Back in 1984, what we did was work out a plan. During our 20-minute morning recess, we would settle ourselves in Kenneth’s “office” to read aloud from Sounder. He would move his finger under the words to keep the place and study the text with his eyes as he listened. We would tape each reading so that at night he could repeat the experience at home on his own as many times as he wished. At school, Kenneth would summarize and analyze what we had read. He would speak his thoughts, and I would print them in his reading journal. This record of his responses to daily readings became another set of familiar texts for him to remember and reread aloud with me.

Kenneth was joyous about his newfound relationship with literature and print. We were reading sophisticated text that was appropriate for his intellectual level and social age, while still far beyond his reading level. Yet we were not reading the baby books that were at his actual reading level. At that time, such books would have bored, humiliated, and embarrassed him to the point where he would have had no respectable option but to completely reject reading and writing in order to protect his social self.

I persuaded administrators and consultants to keep Kenneth in my class into the eighth grade. His regular classroom teacher, an advocate who had taught him before in third grade, recommended a different path. She wanted full-time special education in a self-contained program to which he would be bussed away from the neighborhood. Such debates can become highly political. I was out on a limb with Kenneth, caught up in a hope that I saw as a teacher’s moral obligation. At the time, I felt that if I didn’t believe in and defend Kenneth’s right to continue learning at home in an integrated program, I didn’t belong in teaching.

All these years later, I look back at my struggle to keep Kenneth in a less traditional setting among friends, and I wonder if I was right. At the time, my reasoning was that he had already experienced several major separations: from his mother in early childhood, from his grandparents at age eight, from the regular stream into my class in seventh grade. Another change seemed risky, particularly since I was the first teacher with whom he had openly tackled his reading difficulties.

Toward the end of the grade eight year, Kenneth and I, along with others from our half-day program, visited many high schools, and together they chose a school that offered special education support for the next two years and a program that would keep them together.

What I did not foresee was that in this new setting, Kenneth would find himself unable to disclose his difficulties and that his deftness at cover-up would increase. Perhaps this was shortsighted of me, since he was still very cautious about what he revealed to friends, even in my classroom. I did visit with the high school teacher, sent my records, and visited the students once they had begun ninth grade to see how they were doing. But by then they were teenagers with social pressures I couldn’t see as a visitor. I believed that Kenneth was getting much more help than he was.

One day in the early nineties, about five years after Kenneth had moved on to high school, he telephoned me with exciting news. He had won a prestigious Canadian award for his outstanding work in a community center after-school program in the neighborhood where he had grown up. He was being honored for being a Canadian youth who had contributed significantly to children’s
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ning to fill. His literacy history is becoming less of a mystery.

He reads to me from his grade seven journals and is amazed at the voice he finds in his own early work. He begins to re-think questions about his literacy and asks himself, “Is it really illiteracy or is it fear?” We ponder what else might be contributing to his difficulty with print. Kenneth speculates. He wonders if the fact that he has recently been able to reveal his reading difficulty to some others in his intimate social world and workplace might actually be helping him become a more confident reader who is less concerned with being found out.

“I have begun to shake the cage,” he tells me again. “There is more room inside now.” Kenneth thinks about studying at a community college. He thinks he might like to be a mortician. He has discussed this with his
new teacher, Margaret, who has recently retired from many years with the board of education in Toronto. She has extensive special education, library, and urban teaching experience. She and Kenneth have enjoyed four months of regular study and discussion. They are reading books together and studying English spelling, grammar, phonetic patterns, word families, and taking up puzzling aspects of language as they arise in the context of reading and writing. Often she reads to him from long novels. She has never taught an adult before. At first she was unsure that she could, or would want to continue doing this, but now she is loving the work and the opportunity to know and learn from Kenneth in the process of teaching him.

Kenneth is a hard worker. Soon he will get himself on e-mail and begin corresponding with me. He already knows how to access information on the Internet. When he reads aloud to me, he stumbles over small words like “the” and “they.” He reads longer, much more complex words competently, though sometimes there is a slight pause while he figures out a word. He is a better reader than he realizes. My guess is that as his skills improve, he will go on to read sophisticated text; that could happen fairly quickly, now that he is opening the doorways (his expression) to people who are eager to help him learn more.

Kenneth tells me that the community center would continue to employ him after school hours if he became a full-time community college student. They would also pay his tuition. He and Margaret have already begun to write for information and application forms. I tell him LD help is available in community colleges in Toronto, and that within certain community college programs, eventual transfer, with some credit, to university is sometimes possible. At university, LD support is also available.

There is lots of room inside the cage. Hoping he will begin to expand his horizons, I talk about stepping outside the cage. We drop the metaphor and agree on a plan for our next meeting. He will allow me to interview him with a tape recorder. I will show him the questions when I first arrive, before he must answer any of them. He will bring assigned work from Margaret, and I will go over it with him and help him if he needs it. Talking with Kenneth is like talking with a colleague who has deep understandings and convictions about the processes of teaching and learning. Kenneth speaks about fear, about how fear got in the way of his continued reading development once he entered high school. He learned to duck exams by doing extremely well in all courses early in the term. He picked up information orally. He studied drama. He took assignments home to work on them and handed them in early. He participated actively in classroom discussions and group work. He took on roles of leadership where he could exercise control and conceal his insecurities.

Now in Kenneth’s office, two high school age boys from the community drop in and plunk themselves down to chat. The larger, probably older, of the two boys says to Kenneth, “You asked me if I have any gay friends. This is my one gay friend.” Kenneth welcomes them. I introduce myself and shake their hands. Kenneth asks them to wait and then gives me a tour of his office. Upstairs there is a small computer room, displays, and work rooms. Downstairs there is a kitchen. Kenneth has painted the walls in several shades of green, beautiful bright hopeful colors. They are the colors of grass and farm country in mid-summer.

I tell Kenneth that I always wondered whether I made a mistake in opposing the proposal to move him to another school for self-contained special education in his grade seven year. He tells me I was right, that he needed the opportunity to “find himself” in his home environment, that if he had been moved at that time, he wouldn’t be who he is today. He says as a community member, he felt important, that he was praised and given opportunities at an early age to use his skills to help other young people. He tells me that the housing project community felt like a village, like being at home in St. Vincent, where he could have an impact on people who lived near him. He says he likes who he has become, but now he wants more and knows himself to be capable of a great deal more.

How is it that Kenneth and I have so much to say to one another and so many connections and immediate understandings? We recognize each other as clearly now as we did when he was 13 and I was 43. What do we have in common that is close to the surface, even as we recognize its origins deep within each of us? We agree that it has to do with understandings about and commitment to teaching and learning.

Now during our third meeting, nearly 20 years after we first met, I interview Kenneth and record his responses. He has so much to say that we almost fill a 90-minute
tape, an hour-and-a-half, just enough time for a deep story.

E: Describe yourself as a reader. Are you a reader?

K: Yes, I think I’m a reader. The kind of reader I was a year ago . . . materials that I must read for work or a letter, material that I had to read to process. I wouldn’t read just for the sake of reading or having fun . . . only if I have to read. I wasn’t a full-time reader, but now in the last couple of months, I’ve become more of an active reader. When I say active reader, I mean looking over the Internet. I’m a sports junkie. I look up Michael Jordan every day; if I find a four-page article there, I read it. That would be every day. Or I’ll be coming on the streetcar and I find a newspaper, so I go through it. Or I’ll be riding my bike seeing signs, ads, those kinds of things. A lot of books in and around nursery rhymes, more kids books, for the fact that I have kids. Reading to them. Also I have lots of Dub poems. I read a lot of Dub poems. I love to bake, so I read a lot of recipes. I read a lot of recipe books, and sometimes I just sit down and go through a whole bunch of different recipes and figure out whether I’d enjoy making this one, and stuff like that. So those are the kinds of things I enjoy now in and around reading. In the future, I’d like to get to a point where [hesitation] . . . History really interests me more around the life of Malcolm X, the life of Bob Marley, you know these people that stick out in history that I see. I’d like to read a novel of both of their lives. Those kinds of things. That’s more my long term. Finding books that might interest me, actually getting into a novel and reading it. I think now I’m an engaged reader. So I really get engaged. But it’s changed from a year ago where it’s less “I have to read.”

E: Tell me about the process of that change—how that worked?

K: I think it’s like, you know, you have a candle and sometimes it’s on real low and it just flickers. And I think that’s what it was for a long, long time. And it’s kind of like when I wanted to turn it up, I turned it up. You know, sometimes you’ll be really pressured to turn that candle up, but I think in the last couple of months working with Margaret and actually going through some of the phonetics of reading and the tricks or the art of learning how to break down big words or learning how to put things together, just basically learning the rules. I’m a good basketball player, and once I understand the basics of playing basketball (everything, fancy moves you do after that) is all your extra work. So I think doing all that stuff with Margaret has really turned up the candle a little bit more, and has actually pushed me to want to introduce myself to reading a lot more, so I’m inclined because I guess because I got all the little rules that I need, little tricks that I need, to break down things a little bit faster and easier and kind of like you have your conscious and then you have your subconscious. . . . I can read, and there are certain things that you see and automatically you know what it sounds like, but what it sounds like is not what you see. So she’s been doing that for a lot of those kind of things where she calls [says] English doesn’t make sense sometimes, so she’s been showing me all the nonsense in English, and it’s helped me out a lot because a lot of words and a lot of everyday reading has got things that don’t really sound like what it really looks like, so that’s been, I guess you could say, the fuel to my fire.

Kenneth talks about his strong belief in the possibility of collaboration and change.

I think kids could teach each other, but I think you really have to make sure it’s safe. And where kids hurt each other very easily, but they don’t do it out of malice or anger, you know, they do it out of just being a kid. But I think you really can teach kids how to be really gentle and how to be really loving, understanding. And I think it just takes a while, but I think you break down those walls. When you’re teaching a kid to do it, you have to do it in a way where they don’t know that you’re teaching them how to do it. You have to make sure that they think that they’re doing it by themselves.

I like working with kids that everybody says they’re problematic, you can’t deal with them, they can’t be changed . . . because I’m a strong believer, I think everybody has at any time in their life the possibility of change. And I think some people have a hard time with changing because they don’t know how to go about doing it, but I think there’s gifted people out there to teach them how to do it, and I think I’m one of those people.

With so many life experiences and complex struggles behind him, Kenneth is out there working with kids who may themselves have a chance to teach and parent with humanity and wisdom 20 years from now. Speaking with Kenneth reminds me that despite standardized testing and a new mythology that vilifies humane, egalitarian, developmentally appropriate pedagogy, it’s still worth the bother.

REFLECTIONS

Nearly three decades of teaching and research have taught us a great deal about how to build interactive classroom communities in which student and teacher voices can flourish. Theories about how children develop as readers, writers, and spellers through interaction with meaningful text (Goodman, 1986; Graves, 1983; Smith, 1997), opened new possibilities for teachers and students to read whole books at school, share their personal and cultural histories, discuss complex and controversial issues, and develop as thoughtful questioners. In this article, we revisited a small slice of personal and pedagogical history to think further about the ways in which schooling does and does not fulfill promises to students.
Now, public education finds itself returning to antiquated practices that restrict what can be read and talked about in classrooms. Large and often poorly informed bureaucracies require teachers to follow highly prescriptive programs of study, while students are measured at every turn. Schools are ranked, rewarded, and punished on the basis of standardized test scores. Funding is down, tension is high, and student violence is drawing attention. We need to ask ourselves what will happen to students like Kenneth, when they are tested again and again and told repeatedly what they already know, that they can’t read well enough. We need to ponder whether such information will function as punishment or as an incentive to further learning. Then we need to wonder what the effects of increased punishment might be.

As we have seen, Kenneth came to a relatively small urban Canadian K–8 elementary school from a warm and caring village in St. Vincent, where he lived with loving grandparents. During his middle school years, he was in a grade seven/eight classroom for half of his time and in a multiage special education classroom for the other half. The multiage situation, which functioned more like a family than a traditional classroom, provided opportunities for him to bond closely with others his own age and with much younger children. It was a place to receive and give support. Kenneth learned the lessons of caregiving early in life. He knew how to give and receive warmth, and he knew the importance of sharing. He has taken this knowledge into adulthood.

Young people struggling with serious concerns visit his office to talk openly with him about their lives. Nel Noddings (1991) discusses the communal role that schools can play in providing opportunities for teachers and students to talk openly, reason with one another, and “take delight in each other’s company” (p. 168). Just as conscientious parents try to guide the social and ethical lives of their children, teachers need to help children learn how to be their best selves. Noddings argues that warm interactive social layers form an essential part of meaningful schooling. She believes that when balanced and caring relationships forge a mutual “foundation of trust,” cognitive goals can often be reached in less painful and more natural ways.

It is true that the system failed to provide Kenneth with the literacy skills he needed to get the most out of school, and that he needed far more one-to-one attention over a much longer period of time. His compelling life story makes clear, however, that communal experiences in St. Vincent and during elementary school gave him opportunities to reason, interact, and learn with others of many ages in an environment of mutual support and trust.

If Kenneth’s attachment to neighborhood had been ignored, or if he had grown up in a setting where standards took precedence over people, he would not now be the adult who tells us that praise and opportunities to care for others are what enabled him to experience his own importance. Kenneth’s warm interactive work, his stories, and his qualities of leadership offer hope to young people who may, like him, grow up to be caring adults who continue to grow, learn, and contribute to their communities.

References


Author Biographies

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