

Sparks That Light the Dark

Stories ignite passion and connection

By Todd Nesloney and Travis Crowder

Words on a page can take you to places you've never been before, help you escape the harsh realities of life, give you a space to pour out your heart, teach you lessons, build empathy, and so much more. A great book can consume an entire day when we get lost between the pages of a powerful story.

But even more than reading a story written by someone else, there is power in writing our own stories. It is a scary experience, though. We understand how hard it can be for educators to put their thoughts or emotions onto the page to share with others in fear of judgment or that feeling of being “less than.” But we also understand the importance of collaboration.

Spend Time Writing Together

When we come together to write, read, and share, we participate in valuable activities, ones that are enhanced by collaboration. Meeting with a group of educators to write is a beautiful way to elicit strands of thinking onto a page—whether digital or tangible. We want teachers to write because it centers their thinking; ideas find their way into sentences and paragraphs, leaving a trail that provides insight, both instructional and personal.

When we write alongside teachers, we often ask them to respond to poems, articles, or images, or simply ask them to freewrite. Our fellow educators begin to explore the world in their notebooks, responding to the sentences, words, or ideas that

resonate with them. Ultimately, freewriting unearths ideas and deepens our thinking.

The beauty of a writing group is that it encourages teachers to write and think together. Even more compelling is the fact that this practice often bleeds into classrooms, and students benefit from teachers uniting around writing, discussing that writing, and encouraging each other in their craft as writers.

Tell Your Story

When we don't share our stories, we take away a learning opportunity from someone else.

Being vulnerable in front of people you trust is difficult. But it is an entirely different level of uncomfortableness to be able to put your heart on the page, knowing others will read it and, possibly, judge you.

During the writing of *Stories From Webb: The Ideas, Passions, and Convictions of a Principal and His School Family* (Dave Burgess Consulting Inc. 2018), the adults on the campus of John C. Webb Elementary in Navasota, Texas, were asked to share their instructional ideas, classroom design, and innovative practices.

It wasn't easy to convince educators, the school nurse, the secretary, instructional aides, and others that they had something of value to add to a book that was going to be published. But placing their stories on the page, and garnering feedback from others who were moved and

inspired by their words, lit a fire that won't soon be squelched.

“I know a lot of us think our words won't make a difference, that we don't have anything important to say,” says Ashley Jersey, a kindergarten teacher at John C. Webb. “I thought I didn't have anything to contribute, but I realized I can make an impact in someone else's life—that my story could help someone in some way or give them the courage to share their own story.”

Fifth-grade teacher Courtney Moore agrees. “Sharing your story is powerful and scary because it allows you to connect and relate with others on a deeper level,” Moore says. “It allows friendships to grow because we are coming from a place of understanding and compassion.”

Be the Spark

Whether you find a group of fellow educators to write with or simply start by writing in your own journal or online blog, it's important that you find the time to write. Just as practicing for a sport helps you gain skills and confidence, the same goes for writing.

When you put your thoughts and emotions onto the page, and then share those words with others, you're doing more than writing. You're lighting a spark. And that one single spark could be just enough to illuminate some of the darkness surrounding someone else. That spark could spread and light a fire in someone else. **P**

Todd Nesloney is an award-winning principal and the author of *Stories From Webb*.

Travis Crowder is a National Board-certified seventh-grade language arts and social studies teacher in North Carolina.

“Sharing your story is powerful and scary because it allows you to connect and relate with others on a deeper level.”

— Courtney Moore, fifth-grade teacher