To Witness the Magic of Learning, Find a Classroom

Educational success–and failure–are often easier to observe than to measure.

By Samuel G. Freedman

Midway through a December morning, I eased into Gary Wieland's third-grade classroom at McNair Elementary School. From years of making such entrances, I knew how to move the door hinges slowly so they wouldn't creak, how to slide along the wall until I found an empty seat, how to position myself in the rear of the room. That way, I could see the students more easily than they could see me.

Gary Wieland was a lean and rugged middle-aged man, instantly notable for his handlebar mustache. At that moment, he was perched on a desktop, reading a passage aloud from one of the "Junie B. Jones" books and tossing out questions about plot and vocabulary and character development.

Just then, I noticed one of the boys in class was wearing a jester's hat, apparently with Wieland's sanguine approval. A whole array of hats, including a

Viking helmet, were hanging from the walls. There was also a picture of Wieland, on a dare from a previous year's class, wearing a dress.

As I absorbed the unlikely adornments, Wieland closed the book and turned his attention to a boy who had finished a make-up test in math. Unimpressed by the result, Wieland declared in a stentorian tone, "Tedrick, to the dungeon!" And everyone in the room, including Tedrick, laughed, not at his fate but at their iconoclastic teacher.

It is relevant to mention that McNair Elementary School is run by the Defense Department at Fort Bragg, N.C. All of the two-dozen pupils in the classroom were children of soldiers in the 82d Airborne Division, and at least one-third had a parent deployed in either Iraq or Afghanistan. As for Gary Wieland, he was a veteran of 30 years in the military who won the Silver Star for service with the Special Forces in Vietnam. He taught Sunday school at an evangelical Christian church, and he had signed photos on his desk of President Bush, thanks for campaign contributions.

I say all this to point out that Mr. Wieland's classroom in McNair Elementary was not the place I expected to find inspired irreverence. Yet it was occurring right before my eyes. And the approach plainly succeeded, because I knew from McNair's principal that Wieland's students scored near the 95th percentile on the Terra Nova standardized tests in math and reading.

The more time I spent in Wieland's room, the more layers of his effective teaching I saw. Knowing that Tedrick's father was posted in Iraq, Wieland let the boy develop and present a research project about his Dad's water-purification unit there. All the parents overseas were able to e-mail their children right in Wieland's classroom. Sometimes at the end of the day, when the students were gone, Wieland would sit in the chair of every child with a parent at war and pray for a safe return.

The lesson I drew was broader than Wieland and McNair. The mixture of rigor and humor, the use of performance to put across curriculum, the deeply palpable sense of caring from teacher to student and family – these were the characteristics that I had seen in successful classrooms, whether in a heavily immigrant school in a Georgia meat-packing town or an alternative school for the disaffected children of corporate executives in Chicago's tony suburbs. They are traits nearly impossible to quantify and yet readily observed.

By the time I walked into Wieland's room, you see, I had been observing teachers and students in similar rooms for nearly 28 years. I started covering education in January 1979 for Suburban Trib, a subsidiary of the Chicago Tribune, and I have continued coming back to the subject ever since, once at book length, lately as a twice-monthly columnist for The New York Times. By a conservative estimate, I have spent 500 days of my professional life watching, listening, and taking notes in classrooms.

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At the outset, I am chastened to admit, I did not realize how essential such first-hand reporting is to excellent education journalism. Somewhere in my storage locker there rests a photo from my first year on the education beat, taken while I was doing a story on kindergarten opening day. My chin sinks into my hands, my pen lies flat atop my notepad, and my face broadcasts utter boredom. I am sure I was thinking how dull it was to watch a bunch of 5-year-olds having circle time.

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I was totally wrong, I now realize, partly because in the intervening years I have become a parent. What could be more intrinsically dramatic than the first day of school? What could fill parent, teacher, and pupil with more anticipation and anxiety? I was so smug, I missed all of it.

Before long, however, I learned that no part of reporting on education was more stimulating for me as a writer, or more revealing of academic success or failure for me as an analyst, than to behold a classroom in action. In its physical arrangement alone, a classroom resembles a kind of theater, and the actions within it certainly form the most fundamental drama in education. The events in a classroom take place without the mediation, buffering or spin-doctoring of the publicists, bureaucrats, ideologues, and theorists who otherwise work so hard to separate the journalist from the actual enactment of teaching and learning – or the terrible absence of it.

We have such a profusion of movies about schools, from "Up the Down Staircase" to "Freedom Writers," because filmmakers recognize the dramatic potential of classroom activity, of the chemistry between teacher and student. Any journalist or nonfiction author should be as alert. If the golden rule of narrative writing is "Show me, don't tell me," then the events of a classroom provide more than enough raw material – monologue, dialogue, collaboration, friction, accomplishment, futility, laughter, yawns, tears.

Rarely in my experience have teachers or students falsely performed for their journalistic audience of one. If you sit in the back, as I do, people quickly forget you are there. After several months of attending class daily at Seward Park High School in Manhattan for what would become my book "Small Victories," even though I had clearly identified myself, a number of students still thought I was some guy from the Board of Ed.

More important, the classroom is the place where a journalist can most accurately take measure of educational quality. I could see, in a short time, just what kind of teacher Gary Wieland was and what kind of school McNair was. I certainly put my hypothesis to the test by checking the school's record on basic-skills exams and by interviewing parents and students away from the building. As is so often the case, the evidence tended to support the impression I had gleaned from the classroom.

As journalists, we live in an age of multitasking and myriad devices. We report with cell phones and Blackberrys, conduct research through Google, navigate between windows on our laptops as we write. Being in a classroom forces us back to first principles. Watch. Listen. Think. The passion and magic of education is right there, waiting to be captured. ■

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