

Transformative Teaching

Changing Today's
Classrooms

**Culturally,
Academically, &
Emotionally**

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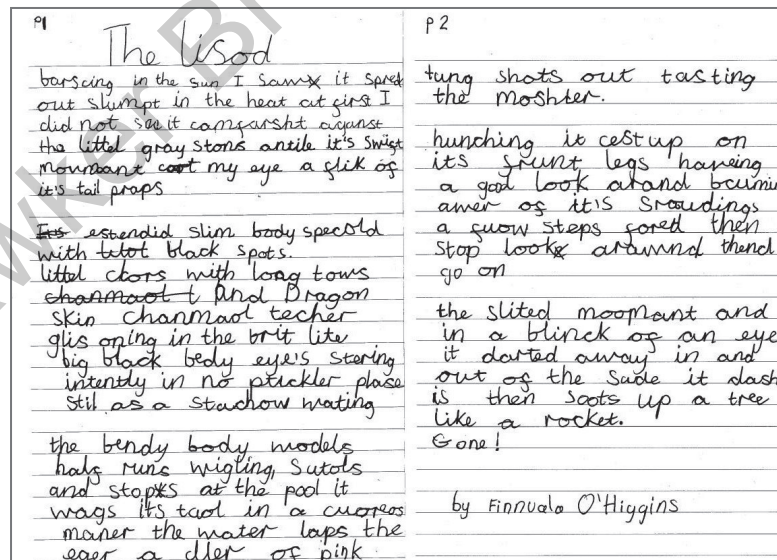
introduction

Blaming the Lettuce

When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce.

—Thích Nhất Hạnh

Finnuala, a nine-year-old student whose mother was in Kathleen's Inspiring Learners Institute in New Zealand, was assigned to write a descriptive poem. Her poem appears in figure I.1.



Source: Finnuala O'Higgins. Reprinted with permission.

Figure I.1: Finnuala's poem.

Finnuala's teacher, untrained in teaching students with learning disabilities, saw only the spelling errors and sloppiness of the piece and therefore gave Finnuala a low grade on the poem. Finnuala was devastated. She

had worked very, very hard on the poem and had given it her all. She went home and read the poem aloud to her mother, and here's what she read:

Basking in the sun I saw it
Spread out, slumped in the heat
At first I did not see it
Camouflaged against the little grey stones
Until its swift movement caught my eye
A flick of its tail perhaps.

Extended slim body, speckled with black spots
Little claws with long toes and dragon skin
Chainmail texture glistening in the bright light
Big black, beady eyes
Staring intently into no particular place
Still as a statue, waiting.

The bendy body waddles, half runs
Wiggling, scuttles and stops by the pool
It wags its tail in a curious manner.
The water laps the edge
A blur of pink tongue shoots out
Tasting the moisture.

Hunching its chest up
On its front legs
Having a good look around
Becoming aware of its surroundings
A few steps forward and then stop
Look around and go on.

The slightest movement
And in a blink of an eye
It darted away
In and out of the shade it dashes
Then shoots up a tree like a rocket
Gone!

Finnuala's poem is an amazing, descriptive poem for a nine-year-old! Sadly, her teacher could not see past the spelling errors. It wasn't the teacher's fault; she had no background in understanding the needs of students with learning disabilities. Yet clearly the teacher's lack of understanding led her to *blame the lettuce*. Had Finnuala been given a chance to use technology or to read her poem aloud, both she and the teacher could have had a rich and rewarding learning experience. The teacher would have felt successful in teaching Finnuala to meet the descriptive writing standards, and Finnuala would have felt successful knowing that her learning disability did not stop her from expressing herself in powerful ways.

The demands placed on teachers are daunting; when we are expected to accomplish so much, often with so little, we may find ourselves wanting to blame the lettuce that is struggling to grow in our classroom environments. Furthermore, when we see the many different types of learners in our classrooms, we may feel overwhelmed, and it's easy to be frustrated when we are feeling overwhelmed, fearful, or angry. Still, we must find ways to teach *all* kids who come into our classrooms.

According to Joseph Campbell (1968), American author and mythologist, heroes give their lives to something greater than themselves. Teacher heroes have the courage to step outside of themselves to see the bigger picture in our students. When we see beyond their cracks, we do what we can to support our students on their hero's journey—imperfect as we all are.

The three of us have been on this hero's journey. We didn't enter the profession knowing how to work with the most challenging students who came into our classrooms. However, along our journey, we discovered it was not the students who sat quietly, following all our directions and completing work on time, who helped us hone our teaching skills. This made us realize that if teachers only have the "perfect" students, we might never change our teaching practices because the way we are teaching is working just fine.

When comparing notes about our varied teaching experiences, we agree that it's the students who pushed us, the students we lost sleep over, the students who didn't learn the way we taught who made us question our pedagogy, challenged us to grow our mindsets, and made us grow our skill sets as teachers. We learned that blaming the lettuce got us nowhere. However, if we became joyfully curious about the students who learned in unique ways, it would open doors to seeing the amazing potential within each of them and, surprisingly, also within ourselves. We learned that even with our limitations and imperfections, with our fears and failures, we could make a difference for students in ways we never imagined with love, understanding, and an open mindset. We hope the ideas in this book will encourage and guide you as you join us in this joyfully curious exploration.

Our inspiration for creating this book has been all the students who pushed us to grow and become better teachers. We wanted to combine our many years of experience with all types of learners to give you clear and simple ways to understand who *those kids* are. We offer the strategies we found to be most successful for including and honoring their emotional, cultural, and academic needs and supporting them in developing the mindsets and skill sets they need to succeed.

Emotional, Cultural, and Academic Needs

Throughout this book, we explore the needs of those kids in three areas: (1) emotional, (2) cultural, and (3) academic. From our experience, these three areas are interconnected facets of a student's whole self, as seen in figure I.2 (page 4). All students benefit from these three elements being addressed in the classroom; however, our most challenging learners benefit the most when we address learning needs in each domain. Without addressing all elements of the whole self, students may fail to thrive, and then we are at risk of blaming the lettuce for not growing as we expected.