



Yellow Brick Roads

Shared and Guided Paths
to Independent Reading 4–12

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Looking for the Wizard

“Then you must go to the City of Emeralds. Perhaps Oz will help you.”

“Where is this City?” asked Dorothy.

“It is exactly in the center of the country, and is ruled by Oz, the Great Wizard I told you of.”

“Is he a good man?” inquired the girl, anxiously.

“He is a good Wizard. Whether he is a man or not I cannot tell, for I have never seen him.”

L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

I well remember beginning my teaching career and wishing for a wizard who would show me how to teach. My city (not to be confused with the City of Emeralds) was at the northeastern edge of the country, where we had no mandated direction from our state department of education and no school- or department-mandated curriculum. In fact, just prior to our first day of school, I was told there were no textbooks for students in the classes I was teaching. Without the support of textbooks and curriculum resources, each day of teaching made me feel more like a failure. Like Dorothy, I had ended up in a place inhabited by people I didn't recognize from my past experiences as a student and intern teacher. Unlike Dorothy, I had no idea where to begin looking for a wizard who could help me learn how to teach struggling and reluctant secondary school readers. Most days I couldn't even have found the yellow brick road if it had been there! So I began counting the days until I could resign. Each day as I crossed off another day on the wall calendar in my room, students would come and ask me what the calendar was for. My response changed only by the number of days remaining in my contract: “In fifty-five days you'll know what this calendar is for.”

Twenty years (and thirty-six hundred days) later I finally left that classroom and moved to central Florida. Shortly after moving, I made my first school visit

to an inner-city school and once again I felt like a displaced Dorothy, in a community I only vaguely recognized from television and movie screens. As I walked past the security guards at the school entrance, I paused to summon my courage and to wonder in what ways these classrooms would be different from those in my background. I made my way to the English class I was to observe; my intern found me a seat in the back; and I began taking field notes to document my initial impressions. I knew that my intern would not be teaching this period. When her supervising teacher had heard I was coming, he had suggested I observe the class while he taught so I could see “just what these kids are really like.” He assured me it would change my expectations for the intern’s performance, and she had seemed visibly relieved by his plan. I wasn’t introduced to the students and initially no one seemed to notice I was there.

During the first ten minutes of my observation, students made their way into the room in a leisurely manner. They chatted, pushed, laughed, made witty comments, and generally enjoyed each other’s company. After several minutes, the teacher said, “Take your black books and turn to page 371. Read the introduction on those pages and write down what is important.” The students groaned, made a production of getting the texts, glanced at me, and slumped back in their seats. The animated voices and moments of joy had vanished. Minutes passed like hours until finally the teacher stood next to an overhead projector, placed a handwritten overhead transparency on the projector, and proceeded to read what he considered the important points in the introduction that the students had “read.” The students sat copying from the barely readable transparency, seemingly having blocked out the person standing by the machine. Occasionally, students stopped the sound of his voice with questions such as, “What’s the fifth word on the third line?” The task ended and the students brought up the issue of vocabulary.

“Why do we have to know these stupid words anyway?”

“I told you. They’re going to be on your SATs.”

“Well, I can’t do them analogies. Those words don’t make no sense to me.”

“You have to know them and we’re going to have a test on them this Friday.”

Unanswered questions, unquestioned answers.

The vocabulary debate continued until the bell rang. Students slammed their books closed, jammed papers into book bags, and meandered from the room as the teacher was saying, “Don’t forget the vocabulary test and your research paper topics.” No one acknowledged his words, either through looks or response. English IV was over for another day.

Just as I was about to stand and leave, a young man walked up to my desk, leaned down so his eyes were level with mine, looked into my eyes, and said, “I don’t know who you are, but it’s time for a change.” He walked away and although his words were more pleading than threatening, still I felt assaulted. I felt part of a system that perpetuated the curriculum I had seen played out before

me that afternoon, and I felt guilty. I wanted to run after him and say, “Wait. My classroom wasn’t like this.” Instead, I smiled inanely as he walked away from me. I drove back to the university with his words ringing in my ears. “It’s time for a change.” Unfortunately, students’ pleas for change are often the ones that get the least attention. The pleas for change that usually grab our attention (and time) are those from politicians, state boards, business leaders, and the media.

The cry for change is not new in education. In fact, I recently found a special issue of *Life* magazine in an antique store with a cover declaring “U.S. Schools: They Face a Crisis” (1950). The articles could have come from any newspaper in the country this year. “Obviously, something should be done,” said one. “But nobody agrees exactly what this something is” (11). The cry for change may be the same, but the stakes certainly seem higher these days. When these widespread, and often opposing, views of desired changes are combined with attempts to “fix” everything at once, the result is a maelstrom not unlike Dorothy’s tornado.

How Many of Us Feel Like Dorothy?

If you remember the beginning of the *Wizard of Oz* movie, Dorothy was leading a relatively happy life. She may have been looking for a little adventure, but she was surrounded by people she cared about and who cared about her, and she believed she had found her place in the world. Alas, Miss Gulch soon arrived with her threats. Dorothy felt unjustly accused by her attack and began running. Our educational Miss Gulches have kept us running for many years. Often not knowing where we’re going and not quite sure what we’re looking for, we spend our days in a frenzy of activity, trying to meet mandates that change by the minute and attempting to get kids ready for high-stakes tests.

In Eleanor Duckworth’s book *Teacher to Teacher*, she talks about why teachers get worn out from the demands of teaching: “They are too often dealt with as functionaries—meant to carry out some hierarchy’s directives” (1). In the last twenty-five years, teachers and students have experienced many such directives. We have been Hunterized and computerized. We’ve struggled to define the difference between authentic and alternative assessment and then been told to abandon both to get ready for *the* test. We’ve learned independently, collaboratively, and cooperatively in whole groups, small groups, and with buddies. We’ve been whole languaged and fonicated. We’ve been taught to behaviorally objectify the curriculum while being encouraged to see our classrooms as having no walls. We have been told to create classrooms with attention to multiple intelligences, brain-based learning, cultural awareness, character education, technology as a tool, inquiry-based essential questions, and developmental/gender issues. And, just to keep things interesting, every few years someone gives the battle cry to get back to the basics, except no one seems to agree on what those basics are or how

we should all get back to them. I think that, like Dorothy, we've ended up in a place that most of us don't recognize, not sure how we got there.

Making Sense of the Journey

So, what can we learn from Dorothy's journey along the "yellow brick road"? For me, a place to begin is acknowledging that—for Dorothy and for us—there is no wizard who can solve the problems. We will have to get off the road and create our own paths to literacy. And we don't have to make the entire journey to discover that truth.

When we are working with students who have reading problems, a critical aspect of overcoming those problems is getting students to believe they are capable of making choices and taking action that would help solve the problems. If students attribute their lack of literacy success to something outside their control, such as genetics, family background, poor teaching, frequent moves, learning disabilities, or social status, it is difficult to get them to take action that would change their patterns of failure. On the other hand, if students believe that their reading difficulties have occurred because they didn't understand the tasks, didn't use effective reading strategies, practiced passive learning, or were assigned to unsupportive learning environments, they could make a decision to change.

Teaching is the same way. If we attribute success or failure to a program, a text, a well-known speaker, an administrator, community support, or the kinds of students who enter our classrooms, we attribute success or failure to things that are mostly out of our control. Over time, that can lead to what Seligman (1975) calls "learned helplessness." If, however, we acknowledge that all those factors can make teaching easier or more difficult but that ultimately we are in charge of making choices that will affect students' learning, we then take on the responsibilities and rewards of professionalism. We learn how to choose and create effective resources and methods for the students we have, not those we wish we had. We learn to use our time to have the most lasting effect on students' learning. We develop strategies for ongoing assessment that help us identify learning problems, and we learn how to make appropriate interventions to change the outcomes. We also learn to become cautious consumers because we understand the limitations of any product. We don't look for wizards; we refine the strengths we have in order to create our own magic.

Obstacles and Rest Stops Along the Path

You may remember that although Dorothy landed in a place that seemed perfect, it wasn't perfect for her. Dorothy was in Oz only a few minutes before she dis-



covered that even “perfect” places have people and events that get in the way of success. If we’re aware of those roadblocks, sometimes we can figure out ways around them.

Some of the most challenging people to work with are those who think they have no need to change their methods if only everyone around them would get better at their jobs. As a high school teacher, I often heard that things would be so much better if the middle schools would get their acts together. When I started working in Orange County’s systemwide middle school literacy project that Kyle Gonzalez and I wrote about in *There’s Room for Me Here*, we frequently met teachers who refused to learn new teaching methods because they were just waiting for the elementary schools to figure out how to teach reading the *right* way. I think lots of people thrive on the kind of change Calvin advocates.

As a teacher and department chairperson, it was a painful lesson for me to discover that I couldn’t change others around me. All I could do was provide resources and hope that our classroom success would be infectious. When we began the literacy project in Orlando, I advised the literacy teachers to focus on their own classrooms and students, and not try to force the literacy project methods and materials on those around them. In just a matter of months, teachers who had been skeptical were coming to the literacy project teachers asking for advice because they had seen positive results.

Finding your own path is difficult, and there will be those who make it more difficult by telling you there is no reason to do all that work. They believe that if they wait long enough the necessity for change will go away, and in the meantime your excitement over “new” methods or materials makes them look bad. Many new teachers have left teaching early in their careers because of the negativism of “mentors” in their new profession. If you haven’t had the opportunity to read Codell’s *Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher’s First Year*, it is well worth your time. It is a sobering reminder of the way we can influence the newest members of our profession. Early in the book, Codell describes the excitement she felt as she designed her Fairy Tale Festival proposal. She first had to form a committee

because proposals require committees. The committee finally convened, only to explain “that it was not realistic to do, as I would surely have known had I been teaching awhile” (9). Dorothy encountered many who tried to get in her way; fortunately, she didn’t have to encounter those negative forces alone.

Early in Dorothy’s travels, she met three who would travel with her: the tin man, the cowardly lion, and the scarecrow. Each joined Dorothy’s journey because he realized something was missing from his life. The tin man needed a heart; the cowardly lion needed courage; and the scarecrow needed a brain. Do you teach with anyone in need of those critical components?

There have certainly been times in my career when I would have been quick to characterize some educators as heartless, spineless, or stupid. With time and experience, I have come to realize that we aren’t all going to be in the same professional place at the same time. In retrospect, I can well remember times when I lacked heart, courage, or brains for the task. If you have been in education for a time, you know that those who travel with us can make the trip miserable or energetic and rewarding. They can also bring their strengths to compensate when ours fail. Sandra Leighton taught across the hall from me in my early years of teaching. Each day as I crossed off days on the calendar before I could resign, Sandra came in to tell me that she had noticed something about my teaching that told her I was going to be a great teacher. She helped me find my teaching heart before I was lost. When I tended toward complacency, Gail Gibson and Connie Piper spent hours of their lives saying, “Have you read this book? Do you think we should try to figure out how to rethink this problem? Don’t you think you should write about that?” They gave me brains when my brain got tired. Glenna Smith and John Moran spent many days before retirement saying, “You can’t argue with fools. Think of the kids. Choose a battle you can win for them.” They gave me courage and purpose when mine failed. I believe that finding those who want to create their own paths by doing the difficult work of identifying effective methods of learning together is a critical piece of the journey.

In Your Own Backyard

When Dorothy and her friends followed the yellow brick road and finally made it to the Wizard, he pointed them back to themselves. He told them they didn’t need him after all; they had what they needed all along in their own backyards. So, what do effective teachers have in their own backyards that supports wizard-less paths to lifelong literacy? In our literacy projects, I look for common characteristics of effective teachers of language and literacy. While each teacher brings some unique teaching methods and materials, I have found several observable characteristics these teachers share: