# Using Story to Teach Courage to Aspiring Administrators in an Educational Leadership Classroom

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*Teaching evening graduate students who are working all day in demanding K–12 classrooms requires creating opportunities for them to become involved with the material in class. One of the best ways to do this is through using story to illustrate key points. This article spells out how the use of story makes the concepts of courage and persistence in school leadership clear and engaging. Students listen to stories about teachers, young students, and leaders. They then interact with one another as they discuss the ideas that have come forth through the stories. The students become animated, have the opportunity to form their own opinions, and can envision how they might react in situations similar to the stories they have heard. Storytelling has been with humankind for all time. It remains an excellent vehicle for promoting classroom engagement, critical thinking, and the development of key leadership dispositions.*

Many teachers who enroll in graduate school to study for a master's degree in educational leadership and to gain an administrative credential believe that they have observed enough of their own boss's behavior that they can do

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the job as principal. Many arrive in the graduate classroom and think the whole program will be a cinch. They believe that administrators need to take care of paperwork, manage student discipline, and meet with parents. The graduate students often want to work directly with teachers and believe that their own knowledge of curriculum will be sufficient to improve student academic achievement.

Some of these thoughts, of course, are true. However, what they tend not to think about is what it *feels* like to be in charge of a school and that actually influencing, transforming, and changing the school on behalf of all students takes courage and persistence. I find that illustrating the importance of these qualities works best by telling stories.

In "Storytelling in Teaching," Melanie C. Green describes the power of storytelling in our culture and how stories bring abstract ideas to life for students:

> The power of stories has been recognized for centuries, and even today, in Hollywood and beyond, storytelling is a multi-million-dollar business. Stories are a natural mode of thinking; before our formal education begins, we are already learning from Aesop's fables, fairy tales, or family history . . . scholars generally agree that stories are a powerful structure for organizing and transmitting information, and for creating meaning in our lives and environments. Stories can bring abstract principles to life by giving them concrete form. We cannot always give students direct experience. A story tends to have more depth than a simple example. A story tells about some event – some particular individuals, and something that happens to them. Stories engage our thinking, our emotions, and can even lead to the creation of mental imagery. (1)

As Green indicates, story can be more powerful than a simple example. Jan Carter-Black also states: "Storytelling is a universal experience shared by every social group" (32). Therefore, as I look for ways to involve my students in thinking and reflecting on leadership, I find that telling stories is a good way to connect them. After all, being the leader of a school is an impressively emotional job. Telling stories and engaging students in case studies encourages them to tell their own stories and involves them in their graduate class in a way they might not have expected. Additionally, they tend to remember stories and continue to tell them to others. The following comment even popped up on my evaluation that students fill out at the end of the term:

> This course was exactly what I imagined it would be based on the syllabus. Loved having the principal panel, *hearing all of Alison's stories*, experiences, and suggestions (italics mine). (Mills College Student Evaluations, December 2016)

How do I encourage students to consider courage as a quality to develop in themselves? I start with the story of Monica, an African American student who took my advanced placement US History class when I was teaching high school in a high poverty urban school district. I had a policy that any student who wanted to take my class could take it. This created a situation where I had large classes; sometimes almost forty students would pack into my classroom. But another consequence of this open-door policy is that I tended to get remarks from other teachers: "Why did you let Damion into your class? He isn't ready for AP." Or another one, "I can't believe you let Tasha into your US History class. She's a behavior problem. You'll regret it. Why are you rewarding her with an advanced class?" It was not lost on me that most of the students that other teachers complained about were African American.

Monica was one of these students I got comments about. "She doesn't have the skills, you know," one teacher told me. Still, Monica was motivated. She wanted to learn. Her first essay was almost unintelligible. She started one direction, then turned off in another and then turned again. It was like she was creating a map that was designed to confuse and get people lost. But she was willing to come in after school and keep at it. She wanted to be challenged, which was a key component of why other students wanted to take my class. I used to say that I could throw the proverbial kitchen sink at them and they would just keep coming back for more. It was profoundly moving to me to see how hard my students could work.

Monica did not pass the advanced placement exam that she took in May. The story does not have a perfect ending. However, she had learned to write an organized, coherent essay. She had learned to stay on topic, write a thesis, use evidence, analyze information, and write a strong conclusion. At the end of the school year she said one sentence that I never forgot: "You know, Ms. McDonald, I never thought I could read a book that was this big (referring to the AP US History textbook), but I did. I read the whole thing." That sentence stayed with me, because I realized that Monica had gained an academic confidence that would serve her well in the future. She was far more prepared for moving on to college than she would have been if she had not taken the course.

Why would I have wanted to deny her that opportunity? Why do we adults so often want to limit access to "advanced" classes to students that we decide are not ready? And why do we see, even twenty years after I had Monica in class, that advanced placement classes are usually made up of students who are white or Asian? The black and Latino students are still not fully included in that rigorous academic curriculum.

So, what does this story have to do with courage? As a teacher, it did not take much courage for me to decide to let any student into my class. I simply had to decide to ignore other teachers' comments and hold to my own vision for the students. But, what if I were the principal and I had an advanced placement teacher who absolutely wanted to keep out the students who "didn't have the skills" or "weren't ready." I then tell my graduate students about the AP US History teacher at the high school where I served as an assistant principal. This teacher told me in a jaunty tone of voice, "Well, I'll start my AP class with thirty students on the first day of school, but I'll only have seventeen or so by the end of the month. Once they hear what's involved, they'll run to their counselor to get moved from the class." He spoke proudly. He was a veteran teacher. He knew how to scare off his students.

This story then gets followed by a reading from the book *Academic Profiling* by Gilda Ochoa, written fairly recently in 2013. Ochoa studied a high school in Southern California where most of the students were either Latino/a or Asian. She discovered that the school had tracked their students. The Asian students were mostly in the "gifted" classes or advanced classes and the Latino students in the "basic" classes. She brought the voice of the students into the book and I bring their voice into my classroom of aspiring school leaders by giving them a number of excerpts to discuss.

> The approach to education might be like an Asian tradition. Since back for thousands of years, education has been the thing for like millions of years. Chinese dinosaurs probably took school seriously.
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> —Sandra Wu, International Baccalaureate (IB) senior (qtd. in Ochoa 28)

> You grow up in a world where some people are just stupid and some people are smart. You assume that Asians are smart and that Mexicans are always stupid.
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> —Monique Martinez, student (qtd. in Ochoa 29)

> The Asians seem to be motivated and driven. The Latinos don't seem to value education in the same way. Their parents don't seem to be as involved the way the Asian parents are.
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> —Anthony Castro, teacher (qtd. in Ochoa 36)

Would it take courage to take on this situation as a new administrator? How would a principal change up the demographics in the advanced classes? How would the principal involve teachers in considering the consequences of their comments? How would the principal involve counselors in considering the consequences of their actions?

My graduate students react strongly to the quotations that are presented in Gilda Ochoa's book. They know it is not right to set up a school where the culture of that school supports one ethnic group having access to advanced classes while another ethnic group does not. It is even worse when that culture is supported by longtime teachers, counselors, and yes—administrators, at the school. They realize that disrupting a culture like this would take courage from the leader.

I then tell my students another story. This one is about a principal named Mike who arrived at a middle school in the Bay Area and found that it was also tracked: Asian students were in the "advanced" classes and all of the rest of the students—black and Latino/a were in the "basic" classes. He began by holding meetings with the teachers before school started. He presented them with the demographic evidence and helped them talk about fairness and equity. He had the support of his district and was able to hire a counselor and two assistant principals who understood what he was going to do. This was key, of course. He needed to have support from a team he trusted. He and his two assistant principals and the counselor then spent the following year meeting with teachers and parents and making concrete plans to de-track the school for the following year. All students would be enrolled in English, History, Math, and Science. The use of the labels "advanced" and "basic" were eliminated.

He got pushback of course. Some parents went to the school board to complain. But, Mike knew he had the support of his superintendent and he moved forward. In year two, he discovered that after an initial period of resistance, most of the teachers got on board. Why the change? Well, the teachers who had been teaching the "basic" classes discovered that they had fewer discipline problems when the classes were mixed. The school as a whole had fewer discipline

problems as more students had access to more challenging curricula. Who were the three teachers who were his greatest resisters? Three teachers who had taught "advanced" classes for many years. They were angry and unhappy. They talked constantly about how the Asian students were better prepared and stronger students. They also had classroom management issues that they had not had in years, which given their hostility to non-Asian students was not hard to understand. They were being encouraged to change but they experienced that change as a loss of status. They were excellent examples of what Ronald Heifitz and Martin Linsky say, "People do not resist change, as such. People resist loss" (34).

In class, we discuss how when teachers, parents, or students operate in the school setting with some privilege, they will often be the biggest resisters to change. The loss they resist is the loss of privilege. Taking on societal privilege by a school leader indeed takes courage. It can be a thankless task, and yet the rewards are also great as the leader sees students begin to flourish and thrive, like I saw with Monica.

When I was a high school principal I had two female students, both seniors, come into my office in September. They were Latinas: Maria and Silvia. They wanted me to take them out of their calculus class, and they complained bitterly that their teacher refused to help them change their schedules. They had fulfilled the minimum math requirements for high school graduation and did not want to work that hard their senior year. They did not need the class. I told them that they had to stay in the class and that I would talk to them in October after the first grades were in. They both cried as they felt calculus was too hard and they would get a bad grade and it would ruin their GPA. I understood the fear, but I also knew the teacher and knew how hard he would work to help them be successful. I had to ignore their tears, and I played the part of a firm and unbending authority. Maria and Silvia never came back to my office, and at graduation they both gushingly thank Mr. B, their calculus teacher, for believing in them. They felt a sense of academic pride that only his belief in them and their hard work could provide for them. Both of them successfully went on to four-year colleges. This is another story I tell my graduate students.

Yes, courage is an important quality for leadership. But, a leader must have the courage to deal with many types of problems. I tell my graduate students about an urban high school principal, who I worked with, who took over a school that had a reputation for being out of control. She had only been in her job a few weeks. She made the decision to stop a Friday night football game because of fighting between

the spectators from both schools. She felt she did not know how to otherwise quell the violence, as groups of young men were roaming through the stands throwing punches, pushing, shoving, and otherwise totally disrupting the game.

However, the following Monday, she had the courage to go to the football team's practice and apologize to the players for canceling their game. She knew it had not been right to punish them for the behavior of others, so she went directly to the students and simply apologized.

Much later she told me that the unexpected consequence of talking to the students about her quandary was that the football players became her supporters. They started saying to other students: "Ms. Anderson's all right. Let's give her a chance. She's OK." The support of the football team held a certain prestige in the school, and other students began to be more cooperative. She told me that she had not realized how much personal social capital she would gain by simply talking directly to the football players and being strong enough to apologize to them.

Sometimes courage looks like persistence, and often the two qualities are intertwined. I tell my students the story of another colleague of mine: a school leader, born into poverty in South Carolina, who did whatever it took to establish relationships with his school neighbors. He had become the principal of a new continuation school, which had opened in a tough part of town. His students were teenagers who had experienced failure at the regular high schools. He knew the neighbors would be upset about this new school that was bringing a bunch of teenagers into their neighborhood every day who were not good students. He had quite a bit of experience and felt confident that he could work well with his students. But, he did worry about the neighbors. He did not want to spend his time fielding their complaints about the new presence of all of these young people.

His school was just a couple of blocks from an elementary school, and he noticed that there were dog fights going on in that neighborhood, especially on weekends. The children had to walk by dead pit bulls left on the sidewalks in the mornings. Rather than beg the city for help, he got out there with several staff members from his school and cleaned up the dogs, so the children didn't need to pass by and experience that gruesome scene in the mornings. The neighbors came out and said, "Why, you don't have to do that. You're a principal. That's not your job!" His answer: "I'll do whatever it takes." He told me that the consequences of his getting out there and working to improve the neighborhood around his school meant that he virtually had no complaints from the neighbors. In fact, they became strong school supporters.

Finally, I tell a story to my students about a principal who has the courage to stand up to her boss. This is a tough area, as a district supervisor, usually an assistant superintendent, can move a principal out of his/her job fairly quickly. It is not easy or automatic to stand up to one's boss. However, when a principal has the strong support of his/her school community, teachers, parents, and students, it is clearly much easier to hold the course in the face of a new boss who might arrive making unreasonable demands from central office. A principal who has clearly shown that students are progressing at his or her school also will have more clout and more ability to resist making changes at the school that might actually take the school in the wrong direction. As the example below illustrates, from an administrator named Sophia, principal supervisors do not always understand how to develop teachers, which is critical to school improvement.

> There was a new teacher who made a mistake with testing. He ordered the wrong number of answer documents. Phil [her boss] wanted me to write him up. I'm like, "are you kidding me? He came to me, he admitted he made a mistake, he apologized, it's ok. He's not going to make the same mistake again."
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> Phil: "How do you know?" Sophia: "I'm pretty sure he's not going to."
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> "Well you need to document this." I'm like, "I don't need to document this."
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> I will document something if I'm trying to fire someone or if they did something egregious or dangerous. This was not egregious, it was not dangerous. This was a rookie mistake and the moment I write him up, he's never going to be my friend again. And I need to develop this teacher. So, anyway, Phil didn't have a sense of how you build a teacher.
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> It was his stance with leaders too. He never wrote me up, but he threatened to write me up for not writing a teacher up. "I'd hate to write you up." And I was like, "I'd hate that to." So, he didn't do it. That was one of our first meetings. We got into these crazy fights early on over nothing important and I was very flummoxed about how I was getting into these stupid battles. (McDonald 127–28)

Sharing this story and others with my aspiring administrators provides them the opportunity to consider what kind of boss they want to be. Sophia makes very clear later in her interview that her boss Phil did "not know how to listen" (McDonald 125). We read literature on leadership that makes it clear that listening is critical for leaders—but Sophia's story about her boss Phil makes the point in such a way that the students remember and become engaged with the topic. The

story gives them a way to reflect on how they might handle a person like Phil from central office.

When researchers Richard Ackerman and Patricia Maslin-Ostrowski administered a survey to sixty graduate students at three different sites, they found that what they called "case-stories" "contributed authenticity to the classroom, fostered involvement, bridged the gap between theory and practice and illuminated discourse" (1). I found their research to be true for my classroom. Creating opportunities for case stories, or simply using storytelling to illustrate a point, has made great contributions to my classroom.

When given the opportunity to tell their own stories or simply to reflect on the stories they have heard, students become more highly engaged. They are inspired to think deeply about what kind of leader they want to be. They get excited about preparing for a future where they can find their own stories of courage, persistence, and success.

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