

Introduction

*"If you've heard this story before, don't stop me,
because I'd like to hear it again."*

— Groucho Marx

Stories. Nearly everyone loves a good one. Stories engage us. They help us remember things. Stories can make us laugh and they can make us cry. They have the power to make us *feel*.

When I'm in church, I love when my pastor tells a story to illustrate a point in his message. Every time he utters a phrase like, "A few years ago" or "Let me tell you about the time when," my ears perk up. I lean forward in my chair. *Every* time. Why? Because I know a story is coming. I know he's about to drop some truth on me in a fashion that will not only be entertaining but long-lasting.

Storytelling is an extremely effective instructional strategy, but don't just take my word for it. Research has shown that listening to a good story can cause the brain to produce cortisol and oxytocin, neurochemicals responsible for increasing focus and creating feelings of connection and empathy (Zak, 2013). Focus. Connection. Empathy. Ingredients for making learning memorable.

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Did you ever have a teacher who was a master storyteller? I did. It was my first year of college in a history class. I don't remember the professor's name, but what I do remember is that during every single class — *every single class* — he had me on the edge of my seat as he masterfully spun tales of the Magna Carta and the fall of Constantinople. I don't remember him ever using notes. He just stood at the front of the room, periodically making illustrations on the chalkboard (yes, a chalkboard) and passionately took content many would consider boring and made it come alive.

So what's better than a good story? A story with a message. That's my goal for this book. I love sharing. I *really* love sharing. Writing that reminds me of Weston Kieschnick (@Wes_Kieschnick), one of my eduheroes, who says about himself, "I love teaching. No, really. It's a problem." That's me with sharing. I am a firm believer that the field of education is transformed when teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals — anyone who works with kids — shares their wisdom and expertise with others. This book is my humble attempt at making my contribution. I'm not sure how much wisdom I possess, but one thing I do know is this — after more than two decades in education, I have a ton of stories to tell.

A little background before we get started. I entered the field of education in 1996 and spent the first 15 years of my career teaching fourth and fifth grade in southern California. In 2011, I was given the opportunity to move into an administrative position in my district and spent the next two years serving as an

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assistant principal at the middle-school level. In 2013, I was again blessed with a new opportunity, this time to lead an elementary school as its principal. As I write this, I am in year six as the lead learner of Alta Murrieta Elementary (Go, Mustangs! #AltaRocks).

It's important to note that in the early part of my career, I had no aspirations to move into administration. None. Zero. In fact, when people would ask, "So, do you want to be a principal someday?" my response would be something like "Are you crazy? No way!" See, I became a teacher to be a teacher. I had no long-range plan that had me teaching for "x" number of years and then becoming a principal by a certain point in my career. I'm not knocking that mindset. Some people know that's what they want, set a goal and work hard to accomplish it. That just wasn't me. I wanted to be a classroom teacher, I became a classroom teacher, and a classroom teacher I would remain. Or so I thought. Administrators I worked under saw something in me I didn't see in myself and nudged me down the school leadership path. Though I initially resisted, I began to feel a calling in that direction. After several years, I answered the phone.

So back to the stories. Through my experiences in the classroom and front office, I have seen time and time again the incredible influence a teacher can have on the lives of children and the other adults around them. In a society fascinated with superheroes, I am reminded every day that the real superheroes live among us, wielding the superpower of **EduInfluence** in classrooms, front offices, cafeterias and on

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playgrounds. If you work with children, you are a superhero! Your words and actions have the power to shape the character of those you serve, to steer them toward greatness and to make them feel loved. This is an awesome responsibility and we have two choices when it comes to how we respond. We can 1) choose to be completely freaked out by this (“Oh, my goodness! What if I mess them up?”) or 2) embrace the challenge and say to ourselves, “What an opportunity!”

This book is divided into chapters, each focusing on a unique power you possess, a facet of your influence. Each power is centered on a particular belief, a belief that if embraced, can transform your practice. To illustrate these powers, I’ll share stories from my experiences, both successes and failures. We learn more from our mistakes than from hitting the bullseye and, believe me, I’ve missed the target more times than I’d like to admit. It’s my hope that by sharing my stories, even the ones I’m not proud of, I can help others become better educators. Student names have been changed to preserve their anonymity, but every story you read actually happened. There’s no fiction here. At the end of each chapter you’ll find questions for reflection to help you take what you’ve read and apply it in your own classroom, office or at home with your own kids.

If you’re looking for a book written by someone who has this education thing all figured out, I hope you saved the receipt. Sorry, but that’s not me. I’m just a guy who loves kids, loves his job, has learned a few things over the years, and is looking to share what he’s

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learned. But if you're an educator who has ever become discouraged and asked yourself, "Am I making a difference?" this book is for you. If you're looking for some encouragement and inspiration conveyed through stories that will make you smile, laugh and even cry, this book is for you. Because you *are* making a difference. You are powerful, more than you realize. You are a life changer, a superhero filled with EduInfluence.

So grab a cup of coffee or your favorite drink and settle into your favorite chair. It's story time!

Chapter 1

The Power of a Name

*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet."
— Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet*

What's in a name? A lot. While Juliet may argue that a name is unimportant, I have to disagree. A person's name holds immense value. It represents identity. For some, it's all they have.

If you have children, chances are when you were deciding on a name for your precious little one, you didn't choose it from the back of a cereal box. Your parents probably didn't do this either when deciding on your name. More than likely, it wasn't a decision made on a whim. In naming your own children, you may have wanted to use your own name, or a family member's, to honor someone you love. Perhaps you studied the etymology of names to find one that had a definition that really resonated with you. Names are important to people. Don't believe me? I just logged on to Amazon.com where a "baby names" search yielded more than 6,000 results in its "books" section. Over 6,000 books! Names are important and, in this

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chapter, I want to show you just how much power they possess.

Have you ever had one of those experiences when you encountered a student out in the community? You know, those times when a student sees you out of context, away from your campus, and has a look of utter shock on his or her face, because, in his or her mind, you're supposed to live at school? Several years ago, I had one of these experiences, and it beautifully illustrates the power a name holds.

What's Your Name Again?

One evening several years ago, I was out running some errands. After I'd finished picking up the items I needed, I hopped in my car and proceeded to head out of the parking lot, stopping at a red light at the exit of the lot. There I was, sitting in my car, with some music playing, just waiting for the light to turn green. As I sat there, I noticed movement out of my peripheral vision to my left.

In the back seat of the car next to me was one of my former students. She had the window three-quarters of the way down, and she was leaning her head out of the car. She excitedly called out, "Mr. Coley! Mr. Coley! Mr. Coley!"

Seeing a former student brought a smile to my face. You know the feeling. I turned the music off, rolled down my window and enthusiastically called out the window, "Hey, Christy! How ya doing?"

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The smile on the girl's face vanished, her excitement replaced by a crushed look.

"I'm Abby," she said in a forlorn voice.

Oh no! I said the wrong name! Terrible, I know, but wait — it gets worse!

Abby's car was in the left turn lane, while I was in the center lane waiting to go straight. Immediately after the words "I'm Abby" floated out of her backseat window, the left-turn light turned green. Abby's mom started to pull their car forward, leaving Abby clutching the window with both hands, a look of complete devastation on her face as she looked back at me and pulled away.

Clutching the steering wheel, I was left fumbling for words. "No! No! No! Noooo!" I cried as Abby's car pulled away, while I remained stuck at the red light, powerless to change the situation.

For you *Seinfeld* fans, you may remember the episode titled "The Pick." In it, Jerry was sitting in his car at a red light, and, unbeknownst to him, his girlfriend pulled up alongside him in a taxi to his left. Jerry proceeded to scratch the right side of his nose, but to his girlfriend looking on from his left, it appeared he was *picking* his nose. Jerry then turned to the left to see his girlfriend, a look of horror on her face. The taxi cab quickly pulled forward, leaving Jerry to cry, "No! No!" If you haven't seen or don't remember this classic sitcom moment, look it up on YouTube.

At that moment sitting in my car, I was Jerry. Abby had driven away, and I was powerless to communicate to her the truth. See, the truth was that I actually knew

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it was Abby. The crazy thing is, not only did I know it was Abby, I remembered her last name as well as both her parents' names. Christy was Abby's best friend. They played soccer together and, for whatever reason, when I saw Abby, "Christy" is what came out of my mouth.

Abby's name was important to her, and unfortunately, I got it wrong. I haven't seen Abby since that night. I hope she realizes it was an honest mistake and that I really did know who she was.

"I'm Special"

Fast forward a few years. I had the opportunity to move into administration and was in my first year as an assistant principal at a middle school. Like many administrators, one of my duties was to operate the front gate each morning as students came on campus. At 8:30 each day, I would open the gate and greet sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders as they arrived at school. While I was also checking for dress code violations, this was a great opportunity to build relationships with students, to let them know I wasn't just the guy who issued detentions to kids who got caught breaking the rules. It was a chance to look them in the eyes and welcome them — a chance to hopefully communicate I was an adult who cared about them. This was probably my favorite part of the day (well, not the dress code part).

Most mornings went something like this: Students would approach the gate, often in groups and I'd greet

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them with something like, “Good morning!” or “Happy Wednesday!” The majority of the time the most I’d get in return would be a grunted “Hey” or “Hi, Mr. Coley.” Regardless of the responses (or lack thereof, as, after all, it’s not always cool to talk to the assistant principal), I really enjoyed this time. But it wasn’t until one winter day that I realized just how impactful this time could be.

One morning I stood at the gate greeting students just like any other day, when a few groups of students approached me.

“Good morning, ladies,” I said to a group of three or four girls. “Good morning, gentlemen,” to two boys right behind them. Then to a single boy a few feet behind the other young men, I said, “Good morning, Connor. Have a great day.”

As Connor passed me, he mumbled something. Now, if you’ve ever worked with middle school students, a student mumbling something under his or her breath can raise suspicions. It wasn’t like Connor to say anything inappropriate, but I confess I was a bit curious as to what he said.

Perplexed, I asked, “What was that, Connor?”

His response was not what I was expecting. He stopped, turned, looked me square in the eyes and said, “I’m special.”

Now I was really confused. Connor was a great kid, but I was surprised to hear him say this, wondering what prompted his comment. He must have seen the confusion on my face, so he threw me a lifeline. “I’m special,” he said again. “You said, ‘Good morning,

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ladies. Good morning, gentlemen. Good morning, *Connor*.’ I’m special,” and he pointed at his own chest.

Boom! There it was. Wisdom from a 14-year-old. I called him by name, and in his eyes, that made him special. I was completely blown away. The simple act of addressing Connor by his name was enough for him to not just think, but audibly announce he was special. Looking back on my own teenage years, one of my greatest desires was to feel liked by others, to feel special. For Connor, it took one word to accomplish this — his name.

There is power in speaking a person’s name. Do you like to hear your name said aloud? Unless you’re in trouble with your spouse or your parent or are being summoned to the principal’s office, my bet is you enjoy hearing your name. I do. When my wife says to me, “I love you,” it feels good. I love it. But when she adds my name and says, “I love you, *Brent*,” it takes it to another level. It’s more personal, more intimate. Somehow it means something more. Can you relate?

I enjoy attending edcamps and educational technology conferences, and I go as often as I can. It’s a great way for me to be inspired by, learn from and share with other educators who share my passion for kids and technology. I love it when I’m at a conference and run into someone I interact with on Twitter but rarely see face to face. What makes it even better is when the person greets me by my name. Every time this happens, it fills my tank. Like Connor, hearing my name makes me feel special. It makes me think to

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myself, “He knows who I am!” Have you experienced this?

My wife, Jill, and I recently discussed the power of hearing your name, and just the other day she walked in the house after picking up Chick-fil-A for the family and announced, “You’re right! I love hearing my name!” She proceeded to tell me about how, since it was a busy time for the restaurant, a Chick-fil-A employee was out in the drive-thru taking orders and processing payments. Jill told me that after placing her order and paying with her debit card, she proceeded to drive up to the pick-up window where she was greeted by a different employee. Jill said she was surprised when the girl at the window cheerfully said, “Hi, Jill!”

Smiling, I asked my wife, “How did it make you feel?”

“Awesome!” she replied. “It’s just my name. It’s so simple, but it made me feel special.”

As the principal of our school, one of my daily responsibilities and privileges is to supervise the drop-off loop at the front of the school as kids arrive. What a great way to start my mornings! I get to open car doors and, as I did at the middle school, greet smiling students with a “Good morning” or “Happy Monday” and wish parents a great day as they drive off. I get to high-five students as they walk up the sidewalk to the front gate. And whenever I can, I try to call students by name. Why? Because I want them to feel special. I want them to think to themselves, “He knows who I am.” Is it working? You bet it is. I’ll never forget the time I greeted a first-grade student by name as she walked up

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to school. As she and a friend walked by me hand-in-hand, I heard the friend whisper in an awe-filled voice, “He knows who you are!” Names are powerful.

Before moving on, I have a confession to make. I’m not good with names. I’m great with faces, but I have a really hard time remembering people’s names. At times, it almost feels like a disability. I know how important it is to address people, particularly my students, by name, but after the Abby incident, I’m understandably a little gun-shy about making the same mistake again. So I work at it. I work *hard* at it. If a student asks me, “Do you know who I am?” and I don’t remember his or her name, I’ve learned to respond by saying, “Will you remind me of your name? Because I want to learn it.” After the student tells me, I then follow up with, “I sometimes have a hard time remembering people’s names, so if I forget tomorrow, will you remind me again, because I *really* want to learn it?”

I think this approach serves two purposes. First, it models to students that we all have strengths and weaknesses, even principals, and that we have to work at improving those things we struggle with. Second, it shows the students I care about them. I hope that it communicates to them, “*I may not know your name now, but you’re important enough to me that I want to learn it, even if it takes a few tries.*” I don’t use people’s names nearly as often as I should, but I’m trying. I’ve learned I can’t live in fear of getting it wrong. I can’t be afraid to exercise my EduInfluence because of the possibility of messing up again. Could I

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say the wrong name again and create another “Abby” situation? It’s possible. But what if I get it right? What if I refuse to let my fear control me, speak a student’s name and create another “Connor” situation? What if a single word, a name spoken aloud, causes another student to feel special? It’s worth the risk.

Now, I’ve spent almost an entire chapter talking about the importance of speaking people’s names, but before I close, it’s essential to note there’s something even more powerful than using a person’s name — saying that name correctly. Pronunciation matters. Have you ever had someone mispronounce your name? I have, quite frequently. While it’s difficult to mess up my first name, I hear my last name mispronounced all the time. Coley is pronounced *Co* (as in co-worker) *lee*. Cō•lēy. Long “o,” long “e.” Yet, more often than not, people seeing my name for the first time pronounce it with an “ooh” sound (as if it was spelled Cooley). At least half of my professors in college said it incorrectly, and now, it’s one of my detectors for determining if a phone call I receive is from a telemarketer — “Hello, Mr. Cooley?” Nope, no Cooley here.

When people mispronounce my name, I don’t get upset, but it definitely doesn’t have the same effect as when someone says it correctly. It doesn’t make me feel special, because what it communicates to me is that the person doesn’t know me. The power in speaking a person’s name comes in the connection felt when that name is uttered and heard. But it must be spoken correctly for this connection to be made. A name said correctly creates that “He knows me!” feeling. A name

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mispronounced does the opposite. What I've also learned over the years is that you have to ask how a name is pronounced, because students won't always correct you if you get it wrong. Some will be too shy to say anything, thinking to themselves, "Oh, that's OK." But it's not. When you take attendance on the first day of school, if you're not sure how to pronounce a name on your roll sheet, ask. We *must* get it right. Students deserve that.

If you're great with names, I envy you. Use your gift to speak life into your students (and anyone else around you) by using their names. If you're like me and recalling names is a struggle, remember that you're not alone. I encourage you to join me in doing whatever it takes (i.e., studying yearbook pictures, using mnemonics, utilizing Flipgrid so students can record themselves saying their names) to learn the names of those around you and then use those names to make people feel special. What's in a name? When spoken aloud and pronounced correctly, the power to make someone's day.

Belief to Embrace:

There is power in speaking a person's name.



Questions for Reflection:

- Can you recall an instance when someone made you feel special by calling you by name?
- Has someone ever shortened your name or given you a nickname without your permission, producing a negative feeling in you?
- Have you ever positively impacted a student or adult by speaking his or her name?
- Have you ever addressed someone by the wrong name?
- Challenge: For the next week, when you're out in the community at Starbucks or any other retail establishment, take note of employees' name tags and call them by name in your interactions with them. See what kind of reactions you receive.

Tweet your thoughts and stories!

#EduInfluence