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Analysis and Response to “Stepping Stories”

The writer of the narrative essay, Kimberly Parker, details the extraordinary academic successes of her students during the first two years of her high school teaching career, and she concludes by asserting that her students' exemplary successes can be replicated. Although Parker's essay may be considered primarily narrative in its style and structure, it has very strong argumentative qualities; furthermore, the essay converts to full argumentation toward its conclusion. The principal argument that Parker makes in regards to setting the academic bar higher, encouraging the students, and their subsequently succeeding is analogous to the famous line from the classic 1989 baseball movie, “Field of Dreams”. That famous movie line which the farmer character hears whispered to him while in his cornfield is, “If you build it, [baseball diamond] he will come.” Parker argues that students—particularly minority students—should be encouraged to learn through the fostering of a counter-narrative by being exposed to culturally relevant material, by receiving positive reinforcement, by receiving positive peer support and social interaction, and by being offered new challenges. Parker begins her essay by citing that one of the greatest impediments to the academic achievement of minority students is how they perceive themselves in their historical, social, and cultural narratives and that these narratives, indeed, impact these students' personal narratives. The cause and effect relationship that Parker suggests among the students' personal narratives and the other aforementioned narratives is that it can give the students [minority] a shortsighted vision as to what their achievements could actually be. Furthermore, emphasizes the students will not attempt to

achieve a certain role, goal or status if they cannot envision themselves in that particular role, goal or status. The students had subconsciously established an achievement barrier or wall based upon how they perceived themselves and based upon the subliminal, negative narratives that have been frequently whispered into the students' mind. Success among certain minority students in society is portrayed as being a professional basketball player, professional football player, or successful music star. These images are reinforced by the media. Since minority students, like everyone else, aspire to be successful, these are the very limited and

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often unrealistic future life roles or achievements in which they perceive themselves. As she stated, “ I constantly worked to counter students' images of athletes with ones of African American poets, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Exposing them to these different people through, via field trips and classroom visitors, as well as newspaper articles and read-alouds, helped them consider a future beyond the playground.

Parker argues that developing a counter-narrative is essential to the success of students and that the way to accomplish this is by introducing students to culturally relevant and intellectually enriching material and by continuously raising the challenge bar. Parker offers supporting details of how she developed a counter-narrative by introducing her students to the relevant and positive writings of noted African American writers. By being exposed to these writers and historical figures, the students began to gradually envision themselves in more intellectual roles based upon the prior accomplishments of their predecessors. Her intent was twofold—to develop a counter-narrative

while augmenting the students' reading and writing proficiency. In doing so she introduced books into her classroom such as the trilogy by Sharon Draper due to the books' cultural and subject relevancy [death of a young basketball star], and Parker also realized that some of her students were interested in basketball and played basketball; thus, she used this fact as an entry point to introduce new reading and learning. She used the Sharon Draper trilogy as a building block or cornerstone for more complex but also relevant reading and knowledge.

Parker's goal at the beginning was to build a community of learner which one may deem tantamount to fostering positive peer pressure as opposed to negative peer pressure that one may equate with such activities as teenage drinking, illegal drug use and other activities. Therefore, a large part of her classroom activities involved group interaction such as sharing information about a book that was read, a "Publishing Party" and other activities such as the theater presentation, "Stepping Stories". Ms. Parker herself also became part of this community of learner as she would model success for the students, call the students and their parents frequently to monitor and report on progress, hold after school learning sessions, enlist classroom visitors, build a sizable classroom library, organize a comfortable reading area and coordinate a public presentation so that students' family and friends could attend for support.

Parker argued and illustrated that students, even if they are special needs students as many of her students were, are able to achieve superior successes by utilizing one successful benchmark to achieve a higher one and that high levels of success in the classroom leads to higher levels of success

in life. She argues that she was able to convince the students to shed the limitations that society, culture and distorted history had placed upon them, and all it takes is hard work and dedication on the parts of the students, parents, community and teachers.

My views are similar to that of Ms. Parker in that success first begins with a positive attitude by believing that I can, for I feel that if I believe it, then I can achieve. However, there are many factors that can offer challenges to my self-confidence and that of others. One of these factors which could be a negative or positive, given the situation, is that basically everyone desires to be successful and that rather than fail, some people refuse to try. This is where teambuilding, peer interaction, positive encouraging and success modeling can be immensely beneficial. I call this the team approach to success. I recall the most recent NCAA men basketball tournament during which Louisville reserve player, Kevin Ware, broke his leg while he and his teammates competed against perennial men college basketball powerhouse, Duke. Although Ware lay in pain with a bone protruding inches through the flesh of his leg, he urged his coach and teammates to win the game, and they did win the game. The Louisville players and head coach later credited Ware's urging as being one of the primary factors in finding the resolve to compete after witnessing such a horrific injury to a teammate and player. It was later reported that the head coach planned to stay overnight in the hospital with the injured player. Not only did Ware's teammates go on to win the game, they eventually won the national championship.

I cited this bit of recent sports history to illustrate and support that I feel that success does not exist in isolation; for, as I aforesaid, I feel that success is

always a collaborative effort like a team sport, and even individual sports such as golf, tennis, figure skating and swimming does require some collaboration. As in the Kimberly Parker narrative, I personally seek bigger successes by using smaller successes as stepping stones, but I also struggle constantly and sometimes unknowingly to venture pass some invisible and stereotypical barriers that have been place

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before me—barriers that are abstract but as prevalent and sizeable as billboards on a major thoroughfare.

As was true of the students who invited their family and friends to their presentation, “Stepping Stories”, which was not only a history lesson, but a celebration of their achievement, I am convinced that if I build my own field of dreams—which are the successes that I aspire to in life—they will come; this means, of course, others will take notice of me and perhaps may wish to follow the example that I will have set and the pathway that I will have made.