chapter
TWO

Power Play

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"It's not fair, Mrs. Laub!" After seven years of teaching, I had heard those five words many times. However, when these words were uttered on one particular day, I had no idea that they would be the impetus for a journey on which I was about to embark—an experience that would forever alter my beliefs about student voice in my classroom.

It was a typical day in my urban first-grade classroom in Las Vegas, Nevada. My nineteen students, a majority of them from low-income homes in which a language other than English was spoken, were just returning from the library. Everything seemed normal as they gathered on the carpeted meeting area to listen to a story. As I began reading, I could sense that all was not right with their world. So I asked them, "Is there something we need to talk about?" Nothing. All I saw were heads turning and eyes darting from one face to another. I spoke again: "I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong." Finally, someone spoke. One of my students who spoke English, but not without putting a lot of thought and effort into what he was saying, spoke up.

"She wouldn't let us check out any books we wanted to!" he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"The librarian said we had to check out books with those dots."

The colored dots to which Edgar was referring were placed on the books to match students with particular reading levels. Each color is assigned a reading level, and students are to check out books in "their" reading range. My students were

aware of this practice, but in Reader's Workshop, which is the program we do in our classroom, students read books of their choice.

Edgar, who seemed to have taken the role of speaker for the whole class, continued with his complaint: "This is our library too, and when I go to the other library [the public library], I can get any books I want!" This seemed to be the cue for other students to chime in. The comments came slowly at first. Then everyone had something to say.

"I can take books home that are too hard for me and have someone read it to me."

"We know you can read by looking at the pictures."

"How come if the library is for everyone, only certain books are for us?"

I couldn't believe how angry and impatient I was becoming. My first instinct was to march right down to the librarian and explain to her why this was so unfair not only to my students but to all students at our school. Then I thought that maybe I should just take it directly to the principal. After all, she knew how I ran my classroom. I have always taught my children about the importance of making good choices and have tried to provide ample opportunities for them to practice making choices in our classroom community. Surely she would listen to me, and then this book access problem would be settled. I am such an enlightened teacher, I thought. Or am I? Wait. I am such a hypocritical teacher.

The "shoulds" and "coulds" of this situation resonated in my mind in the course of about a minute. Then reality hit again: I am a hypocritical teacher. Perhaps I am being a little hard on myself, but at that moment, I remembered what I had just said: "I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong." I had just communicated to my students that the only power and voice they had was confined within the four walls of our classroom. Anything that happened outside of Room Five was beyond their control. I asked myself what had caused me to automatically react that way when they presented their problem to me. Did I not trust them? Did I not believe that they had the power to change things that they felt were unfair? Did I view myself as *the* one to make change in our classroom and beyond? Why did I have to be the one to fix the problem? "Trust the process" is what Social Action promotes, right?

As I glanced into nineteen pairs of trusting eyes, I saw it—opportunity. I saw power in numbers. I saw a group with a common goal. I saw voices to make change. But this time was different. It wasn't my voice that was going to be heard. It was theirs.

As a novice to the Social Action process, I wasn't sure what the next step should be. I knew that the students had decided what the problem was. Why this was a

problem had been voiced during the class discussion that followed identification of the problem. Because the discussion was happening so rapidly, I didn't have the opportunity to stop and think about which step was next in the Social Action process. Instead, I listened to the children and proceeded to facilitate them through what I thought was the next logical step.

How were they going to solve this problem? When I posed this question to them, it was obvious that many of them assumed that their inability to check out the books they wanted was my problem, not theirs. My question was answered with blank stares. I fought my natural urge to assure them that I would take care of this problem. I restated my question, but this time, I asked, "If this is something so important to you and you think it's unfair, how are you going to change it so that it is fair?" At this point, I still wasn't certain whether my students were taking me seriously. I think some were still thinking or maybe even hoping I was going to find a solution to the problem. I would tell them how to fix it, and they would just do it. I didn't. "Well?" I asked them again. A tiny voice from the back spoke up: "What if we told her [the librarian] why we don't like this rule?" asked Lucia. "Okay, how would you do that?" I questioned. "We could tell her at lunch," Alexa replied. "You sure could, and just remember what you said earlier about why you don't think this procedure is fair."

After about ten minutes, we had three different ideas for a solution: talk to the librarian in person, write the librarian a letter telling her why this practice of book checkout wasn't fair, or stop going to the library. Although I wasn't a fan of the last choice, I listed it as an option. At this point, I wasn't sure what to do. Did everyone get to choose from the ideas presented? Should I tell them that the third idea really isn't a viable solution? I asked each child to decide on one of the ways they were going to act. I'm not sure whether that was what I was supposed to do, but that is what I did. No one that I'm aware of spoke to the librarian at lunch, and no one wanted to stop going to the library. Several of the students did decide to write letters to the librarian explaining to her why they thought the book checkout process was unfair.

After school that day, I took the letters to our librarian, Mrs. Patterson. She is an older librarian, and I feared she might view the letters as disrespectful, but her reaction was quite the opposite. She was very impressed by the way my students were able to explain their concerns. Even if their explanations were marked by misspellings and lacked many conventions, their messages were loud and clear: not being able to check out books of their choice was so unfair. Their voices were heard,

and their reason honored. My class was allowed to check out the books of their choice from that point on.

Fast-forward a year. Same room, same school, same population of students, and the same questions remained about how to create a safe and open classroom environment. How could I continue using literacy as my avenue to ensure that problem solving and change are a natural part of the classroom climate? I envisioned the first six weeks of school as a critical time, just like I always do. I wanted to integrate more of the students' voices right from the start. I wanted to allow them opportunities to have a voice in classroom decisions.

We began the year by developing our classroom rules. This year, however, the word *rules* was replaced by the word *promises.* These were our promises to each other as a developing community of learners. Using the word *promises* seemed like a minor detail at the time, but it gave my students a sense of ownership because it indicated that these were ideas that they had developed and agreed on rather than a set of imposed rules with predetermined consequences formulated by me. It's amazing how much respect and attention my students gave to these statements. Each member of our community was expected to keep these promises and agreed to this by printing their name on a written copy of them.

We also had weekly class meetings in which we could discuss our accomplishments as a class and as individuals. It was also an opportunity to address any issues we might be facing. These meetings always began with me reading from a book. I usually read a story that addressed an issue I had seen occurring in our classroom. Perhaps the story would encourage a discussion or evoke the need to write and reflect. During one of our classroom meetings, I again found myself face to face with opportunity.

I had begun to dread picking up my students from lunch. It seemed like every day there was some major catastrophe that had occurred the instant the bell rang to signal the end of lunch recess. Tattletales ran rampant. On one particular day, I was greeted with so many tattles and stories of pushing and shoving that I had just about had it! I conveniently became hard of hearing during our short walk from the blacktop to our room. The students entered the room quietly, because they could tell I was not in the best of moods by this time. After they sat down on the floor in the meeting area, I voiced my disgust with the behaviors I was hearing about every day after lunch. "Something had better change—and change now," I said. That was the end of this one-sided conversation. Problem solved. In my mind, the change I had envisioned was in the students' behaviors.

I quickly racked my brain for a nice picture book to calm them—and me—down. I happened to grab the book *A Fine, Fine School,* by Sharon Creech. I began to read this story about a school that was so wonderful that no one ever wanted to leave it. Throughout the story, I modeled think-alouds, sharing the connections I was making while reading the story. Normally, I am not able to get a word in edgewise as my students command the floor with their thoughts and their personal connections. On that day, this was not the case. Perhaps they were all just so disappointed in their own behavior outside. Or perhaps I was oblivious to what they were really thinking.

By the end of the book, I was quite curious about why this story didn't elicit the conversation I was hoping for, so I asked my students whether they thought our school was like the school in the story. What were things we liked about our school? There were a few responses to that question, but nothing extraordinary: "We like P.E." "I like to read and write." Okay. So I went to the other end of the spectrum and asked them whether there was anything at our school that we didn't like. That must have been the opening my students had been waiting for. The floodgate had been opened! What was amazing to me, though, was how the conversation unfolded. This was still pretty early in the year, and normally, we practice for months and months how to listen intently to others, how to wait our turn, and how to have a discussion without needing to raise hands.

The students were pretty patient and respectful of each other as, one by one, they vocalized their complaints about our school. In a nutshell, the main problem was "We don't have a playground to play on anymore." Because we are a year-round school, there is not an opportune time for any major renovations to take place on our aging campus. We were in dire need of a new multipurpose room, so the construction for that had begun toward the end of the preceding school year. Our playground had been directly behind the old multipurpose room. When the old room was demolished, the playground was taken out, so there would be no playground until the completion of the new one.

Everything for the new playground had been completed except one minor detail. The construction company had not been back to inspect the new playground to be sure that no building materials, metal, or glass were left in the area, so the playground was not deemed safe. Someone was supposed to have come back to our school the preceding week, but no one had yet. There was still the blacktop area for basketball and tetherball, but that equipment was usually monopolized by the "big" kids, so my students and many other students had nothing to do after

lunch. That thought sparked a question: "Do you all get bored at lunch recess?" They all responded with a resounding "Yes!" I went to the front board and wrote the word *playground*. I asked the students to let their minds wander and then say what they thought of when they heard that word and what it might have to do with all the problems that kept occurring during lunch.

Here are a few of the responses I was given: "Playgrounds are fun." "Kids need a playground." "We want swings." "We need to play." "We want the bridge back." "Please make it safe." "When we are bored, we get in trouble."

I never doubted them for a split second. It was myself that I doubted. Could I follow the process? Would I allow them to take control? Was I setting them up for failure? I had so many questions and misgivings. I decided to take a deep breath and trust the process. "So what are you all going to do to change this?" Despite my experience in asking this question about the library, I was not prepared for their response. They sat there and stared at me. Their faces displayed looks of confusion and fear. I think I also heard a few giggles in their midst. I asked them again what they could do to change the situation. Finally, Kimmi spoke up: "Us? What can we do? We are just kids." In agreement, James stated matter-of-factly, "Yeah, they won't listen to us. We can't tell adults what to do." I noticed the others nodding their heads in agreement with those two statements. At first, I felt saddened and scared. To think that at six and seven years of age, these students already believed they were powerless to make change.

I continued, "You know, I could talk to the principal and see what can be done, but guess what? This isn't affecting me like it is all of you. I think it would be best if the news came from the people who are being affected by the situation. You don't realize how much power you really have." Audible gasps could be heard. I went on: "Think about the authors we have studied and how they use words to change people's minds, to convince them of something. That is the kind of power I am talking about."

I reminded the students of all the persuasive books we had read and asked them to think of how the characters tried to get other people to change their mind in the stories. "Did they beg? Did they tell them they *had* to change their way of thinking? Did they disrespect the other people in the story? No! What did they do? They gave reasons to prove their point."

At this point in the conversation, the Social Action process wasn't in the forefront of my mind. We had covered the "what" and "why" parts of the process. Instead of thinking about the steps, I did what seemed like the next natural step,

and it turned out that I was following the Social Action process. I was considering how to take action. We brainstormed about how we could change the situation. I recorded the students' ideas as they voiced them. No matter what the idea was, it was written on the white board. It was suggested that we talk to many people: our principal, the mayor, the janitor, the people who needed to inspect the playground, the construction men. After the suggestions, a discussion followed about who would be the logical choice. We voted on it, and the decision was reached to contact the construction men.

How were we going to do this? Again, we had a brainstorming session about our options. A few of the suggestions were call the company, tell the principal to talk to them, go to their office, or write them letters. Another conversation ensued. Sadie said that talking to the principal wasn't a good idea because we would be asking her to fix our problem for us. (Yay!) We voted in favor of writing letters to the construction men. Before writing the letters, we shared ideas about what we could write to the construction men to convince them that the playground was badly needed by the students at our school.

The letters were written, copied, and delivered to the construction company. Every day after that, my students came to school to see if their playground was ready. I reminded them that sometimes change takes a little bit of time and a lot of patience. They didn't have to wait for too long. Within that week, their playground was inspected, deemed safe, and reopened to the students.

I'll never forget picking up my students at the end of the after-lunch recess on the day after the playground reopened. They were beaming, so proud of what *they* had done. I looked at them and said, "See how much power you really do have." Emma said, "Yep, I guess you were right. They did listen to us."

I will always view the "playground day" as a major milestone in my teaching career. What is really encouraging to me is how my students are now so much more at ease with thinking of themselves as agents of change.

These experiences have been life-changing events for me. At the Social Action retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico, my eyes were opened to a set of principles and a process for change that I had been thirsting for, without being aware of this need. I am not sure the library incident or the issue with the playground would have unfolded the way it did without me having knowledge of this process. When I returned from the retreat, I became more cognizant of opportunities for my students' voices rather than mine to be heard. I reflected on situations in which I should have stifled my voice. It's not as if my participation in this retreat made me

suddenly able to see every opportunity to use the Social Action process or take every problem through that process. But I was definitely more deliberate about how I approached problematic situations. I was no longer *the* problem solver in the classroom; I was just one of twenty.