

What Do PET Scans and Heroes Have to Do with Teaching?

by Barbara Suter

Lately, on a web site I frequently visit, there has been a lot of “teacher talk” about creating student-friendly classrooms for the coming year, in which teachers chat about making adequate space and time for reading, writing, and technology. In such conversations, however, they may be neglecting some tried and true sources of inspiration for motivating students.

Kids need heroes to inspire them to do things greater than they think possible. The appearance of an obituary by Sam Roberts on August 6, 2015, in *The New York Times* about Dr. Louis Sokoloff reminded me of the importance of heroes.

What attracted me to Dr. Sokoloff’s obituary was the photo of him standing beside two Nobel Prize winners: Dr. Barbara McClintock was an early contributor to the vital field of genetic research; Dr. Michael DeBakey helped develop the heart-lung machine, which made open-heart surgery possible. Dr. Sokoloff’s inclusion with these honored scientists was appropriate; his research on the brain led to using the PET scan for the detection of cancer.

Dr. Sokoloff’s life offers some important lessons for students. His parents were Jewish immigrants who fled pogroms in Europe. His interest in biology was stimulated by his older brother’s aquarium, he explains in a piece he wrote for *The History of Neuroscience in Autobiography*. As a teenager, he was too poor to afford the trolley fare to a prestigious high school, but he eventually won a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania; in this he guided by the advice of a wise grandfather, who advised him not to seek material success but to aim for something no one could take from him: a keen mind.

There are Louis Sokoloffs in all our classrooms. They are the students who read constantly, ask good questions, have that extra level of insight, and whose families might be struggling financially. Many are considered “nerdy” because they can be socially awkward. Their special talents need to be encouraged.

Today we provide our students with unlimited digital resources, but are we encouraging them to dream? Are they given opportunities to meet everyday heroes? Do they have an opportunity to speak with a firefighter, a surgeon, a soldier, a family that might have participated in building a home through Habitat for Humanity? They know all about YouTube, but who are their heroes?

Teachers need the time to teach students about real heroes without being penalized for deviating from the curriculum. In my final year of teaching I introduced a group of fifth-grade ESL students to Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl shot in the head by the Taliban, who continues to fight for education for girls throughout the world. The youngest Nobel Prize laureate, her picture was displayed in my classroom all year.

If I were still actively teaching, I would hang the photo of the three scientists in my classroom along with photos of other heroes who inspire big dreams. Though my ESL students would probably still continue to do poorly on the state exams because of their limited knowledge of English, they would be encouraged to hope their own dreams might someday come alive.

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