

Our Hero Stories

As we completed the Teacher Hero Self-Reflection Journal, we were surprised at how much we learned about ourselves. We had already done a lot of reflective work as part of our own journeys and as we prepared to write *Transformative Teaching*. Even so, we found that this deep reflection helped us continue to reveal unexamined parts of ourselves through cultural, academic, and social-emotional lenses. We share our hero stories in the following pages and invite you to really use the self-reflection tool, as we did, to gain a much deeper understanding of yourself.

Kathleen's Story

My Academic Self

My History

- *How academically successful were you in school?*
 - + I was good at school. Learning came easily, but for the most part, I did not feel inspired or challenged by my teachers. Math was my weakest subject, and I definitely had a fixed mindset about myself as a math learner.
- *How hard did you work in school?*
 - + In elementary school, I was a model student and did everything that was asked of me to the best of my ability. By middle and high school, I was not super motivated. I was big at procrastination and just getting by. I could get decent grades without working hard, so I didn't put forth much effort. If a project was creative and inspired me, then I would give it my all.

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- *Did you enjoy the academic or social aspect of school?*
 - + I enjoyed classes that were engaging or interesting. I remember the teachers who made me think or created meaningful learning experiences.
 - + I was involved in theater, choir, and dance. I had a lot of good girl friends who were really important to me.

- *Where you motivated by grades or learning even if you had to struggle?*
 - + In elementary school, I was most motivated to please my teachers, be liked, and be a nice girl.
 - + In middle and high school, I thought grades were important, but I didn't feel the need to be a straight-A student, and I refused to join National Honor Society.

Effects of My Academic Profile

- *What are some positive outcomes from your academic experiences, and how have they impacted your teaching and the students you teach?*
 - + Because I was bright, most classes weren't really challenging or engaging to me. When I became a teacher, I was totally committed and passionate about teaching in powerful ways. I have spent my career learning best practices and understanding the learning brain.

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- *What are some negative or challenging experiences or outcomes from your academic experiences, and how have they impacted your teaching and the students you teach? How could your past academic experiences impact how you respond to students you teach who have special academic needs?*
 - + Because learning came easily to me, I was not patient or understanding with kids who didn't learn easily, and I started "blaming the lettuce" for not growing. I can look back on some things I said to kids that make me cringe today.

- *Have you gained any insights into how you need to shape your teaching mindset and skill set in reaching the students you struggle to teach?*
 - + When I realized that it was my responsibility to know how my students learned, I decided to go back and get my special education certification. I became much more understanding and compassionate about kids who learn differently from that point forward. Over the years, I have made it part of my journey to learn about the kids who have most frustrated me. I have seen them as gifts to me to help me grow my patience and my teaching skills. I am also big on asking for help from colleagues who have the skills to work with the kids I am struggling to teach.

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My Cultural Self

My History

- *Describe your cultural self.*
 - + I am a first-generation American with a Polish father and a Scottish mother.

- *Describe the majority culture of the schools you attended.*
 - + The schools I attended were white, middle-class American schools. We had one African American family. We did have a good foreign exchange program in my school (my mom was the president for a time), so we did have kids from other countries visiting our school.

- *Was your school culture similar to or different from your cultural identity? How? If you were the person from a different culture, how did it feel? Was your understanding of your school culture at the surface level or at a deep cultural level? How did you feel when you were with a person from a different culture?*
 - + The culture of my school was similar in color, but not always culture. I looked like I fit in, but I felt different. I never really felt like I belonged or fit in at my school. Kids teased me. I remember being called a “dumb Pollack” on the way to school, and being teased because I ate with my fork upside down, and because I called oatmeal porridge. I was very shy and sensitive, and these things really hurt me.

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- + Regarding being around other cultures, I loved being a part of the exchange student program in our community. We had kids from around the world in our home, and I loved it. I loved learning about their worlds and teaching them about ours. Since I felt different, I felt I had more in common with the exchange students. I saw myself as a global citizen.

Effects of My Cultural Profile

- *What are the positive outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*
 - + Because I know what it's like to not feel a sense of belonging and because I am accepting of other cultures, I am curious and welcoming to my students from other backgrounds. I invite them to share their culture and to be a part of our classroom.
 - + For three years, I taught in a juvenile corrections setting. This experience opened my eyes in a big way to the struggles of kids from poverty and those who come from very damaged family backgrounds.
- *What are the negative outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*

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- + Though my heart is in the right place, I think I am still naïve about what it would really be like to be a part of a minority culture in America. I try to read books and talk with friends to build understanding, but I think I need to listen more.
- *What could you do to reach the students you struggle to teach? What do you know now about what makes culture different and causes culture clashes?*
 - + I could ask them to share their stories. I have learned a lot about cultural understandings from Alicia and from other friends of varied cultural backgrounds.

My Social-Emotional Self

My History

- *Describe what was happening socially and emotionally at home when you were growing up.*
 - + My parents were born in Europe. Each of them lost family members in World War II, and my father was severely wounded. My parents lost my four-year-old brother, Peter, less than two months before I was born.
 - + My dad was bipolar and in the grips of the disease by the time I reached adolescence. He was in and out of institutions for many years. There was fear and threats of violence. One time he pulled a gun out on my mom, brother, and myself. Another time, he chased another brother through the yard with an ax. It was pretty crazy in my world. My younger brother and my mom acted like things were not that bad (from my perspective), so I thought I must be crazy because

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things felt really bad to me. I would say now that their response was more covert to my overt response. As my dad got more ill, my grades went down, my weight went up; I started hanging out with different kids and experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

- *Describe what was happening socially and emotionally at school. How did you respond socially and emotionally in each situation?*
 - + I tried to pretend like I was okay, but I wasn't. I was scared and hurting and felt like no one at school really saw my pain. Only one teacher had the courage to ask me how I was doing (thank you forever, Mr. Connelly!), even though it was a small town and everyone knew things were bad at our house.
- *What are your current triggers when working with students that are related to your social-emotional experiences?*
 - + Because my dad yelled a lot, I am triggered my students who get in my face and get loud. Because I have been through some tough stuff, I am also impatient with kids who whine or have a "poor me" attitude.

Effects of My Social-Emotional Profile

- *What are some positive outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*
 - + I feel that kids really need to be seen as people first, so creating an emotionally safe classroom is always my primary focus. While I don't think I should share my

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whole life journey with my students, I do believe it's important for them to know that I have worked through many difficulties and challenges, too. I am okay being vulnerable and reaching out to them human to human.

- *What are some negative outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*
 - + As I mentioned in the previous section, my dad yelled a lot, so I feel triggered by students who are loud and more aggressive. I also can be impatient with students who complain and want sympathy when things aren't that bad. This is because I have been through some very difficult things in life myself.

- *What could you do to reach the students you struggle with and reduce your triggers in order to be more healed and helpful to your students?*
 - + I think awareness is the key to being able to change how I respond. I have found that knowing what my triggers are and knowing how I respond has made me more able to establish better boundaries when working with challenging kids (and adults, too).
 - + I also know that I need exercise, rest, meditation, and yoga—basically a more balanced lifestyle. When I am exhausted and out of balance, my emotional control goes out the window with kids who are challenging to me.

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- + I can also develop greater empathy for kids who are dealing with emotional challenges and realize that they are hurting and scared, not bad and trying to be mean to me.

MaryAnn's Story

My Academic Self

My History

- *How academically successful were you in school? How hard did you work in school? Did you enjoy the academic or social aspect of school? Were you motivated by grades or learning even if you had to struggle?*

- + I was a B student and had to work hard. I only cared about grades—not about learning. I enjoyed academic lessons if they were presented in an engaging manner and involved hands-on activities. I liked things chunked and sequential. I believed nothing was easy; you had to work hard to be successful.

Effects of My Academic Profile

- *What are some positive outcomes from your academic experiences, and how have they impacted your teaching and the students you teach?*
 - + I developed good study habits that I share with my students. My lessons are engaging. I break steps down into small chunks and use concrete examples.
- *What are some negative or challenging experiences or outcomes from your academic experiences, and how have they impacted your teaching and the students you teach?*

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How could your past academic experiences impact how you respond to students you teach who have special academic needs?

- + I am not reaching all learners. I can stifle conceptual learners and not provide gifted students with enough challenge. It's possible for students to work hard and still not get concepts due to disabilities.
- *Have you gained any insights into how you need to shape your teaching mindset and skill set in reaching the students you struggle to teach?*
 - + I need to present lessons in a variety of ways to meet all learners' needs. I need to teach students how to work smarter, not harder.

My Cultural Self

My History

- *Describe your cultural self.*
 - + I went to a white, middle-class school.
- *Describe the majority culture of the schools you attended.*
 - + The school culture was mostly white, middle-class students.
- *Was your school culture similar to or different from your cultural identity? How? If you were the person from a different culture, how did it feel? Was your understanding of your*

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school culture at the surface level or at a deep cultural level? How did you feel when you were with a person from a different culture?

- + I was not aware of other cultures and how they are different. I felt I was being accepting and kind and nice to people of different cultures. By talking to them, I felt I was showing them that I was not biased.

Effects of My Cultural Profile

- *What are the positive outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*
 - + I can relate to white, middle-class students.
- *What are the negative outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*
 - + I had a surface-level understanding of culture and a false sense of respect for other cultures. I never gave any thought to the fact that people have lives very different from mine. I was not reaching or relating to other cultures on a more authentic level.
- *What could you do to reach the students you struggle to teach? What do you know now about what makes culture different and causes culture clashes?*
 - + I need to gain a deeper level of understanding of cultural differences and incorporate that knowledge into my interactions with students and my lessons.

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My Social-Emotional Self

My History

- *Describe what was happening socially and emotionally at home when you were growing up.*
 - + There was great deal of yelling and hitting in my home. In order to avoid being yelled at or hit, I tried to be the good kid—positive and happy. I would try to make others happy so they would not be angry.
- *Describe what was happening socially and emotionally at school. How did you respond socially and emotionally in each situation?*
 - + School was place of put-downs, shame, and fear of making mistakes. I was in fear of making adults angry both at home and in school.
- *What are your current triggers when working with students that are related to your social-emotional experiences?*
 - + I am triggered by students who act like victims because they are not dealing with or facing their situation.

Effects of My Social-Emotional Profile

- *What are some positive outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*

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- + I have great respect for kids' feelings and needs. I am highly sensitive to what emotions are behind behaviors. I am comfortable working with aggressive and violent students because it feels familiar to me.
- *What are some negative outcomes from your experiences and their impact on the students you teach?*
 - + As noted previously, I tend to have little patience with students who act the victim. I do not allow students to feel their pain.
- *What could you do to reach the students you struggle with and reduce your triggers in order to be more healed and helpful to your students?*
 - + In the future, along with continuing mindfulness, I will allow myself to feel the pain, shame, and hurt of aggressive or disrespectful behaviors. I will meditate and sit with uncomfortable feelings rather than dismissing them. This will enable me to allow my students to feel their feelings, which will enable them to process those feelings.

Alicia's Story

My Academic Self

Academically, I was successful with all As and some Bs. I never got a C in any class. I didn't have to work very hard until I reached advanced level classes, but even then studying resulted in solid grades. I enjoyed the academic aspect of school and learning one new thing a day excited me. I was driven by grades but was also a curious student.

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The positive outcome for me as a teacher is the academic tone I bring to my classes. I like making my classroom a place of challenging thinking, inquiry, and generating curiosity.

The negative effect is my frustration with students who are disengaged from an academic setting. I need to consider how to make challenging work engaging to them.

My Cultural Self

The majority culture in my schooling was white and middle-class, with mostly autoworkers who had basic educational levels. I fit the majority to a T. It wasn't until college that I encountered a large, diverse body of students. I felt very curious and fascinated around people from different backgrounds!

This curiosity became my calling and my passion. The positive outcome of my cultural experience is my ability to be a role model for lower-middle-class students who have no academic role models or aspiration of academic achievement.

The negative impact was my lack of skill and comfort level in intercultural interactions. I didn't understand enough about deep culture and I judged the behaviors of students without understanding the values that were underneath those actions. I needed to learn more about my student populations and their deep cultural values.

My Social-Emotional Self

At home, I had loving and very supportive parents who were unaware that I was being sexually abused on a regular basis. They emphasized hard work and used silence as an emotionally controlling mechanism to get children to act according to expectations. At school, my social-emotional experience ranged from positive in elementary to very withdrawn and isolated by various bullying situations in middle and high schools.

I tried to look perfect at school to keep the abuse secret hidden and preserve the appearance of a happy family with no problems. I tried to keep the bullying secret out of my home. I didn't want my parents to know I had problems. I was their golden girl. I played a lot of cover up. Teachers would have never known I was being abused or bullied.

I developed tenacity to keep going in the face of adversity. I developed stamina to deal with difficulties, and I developed insights for a certain type of student who is terrified of being known, of teachers looking too close and seeing behind their facade. I am sensitive to students who demonstrate over-compensation strategies, and I can use this awareness to forge a relationship of trust and support with them.

As a teacher, I was triggered by students who couldn't control their emotions because of my own post-traumatic stress disorder from being abused. Students with violent tendencies scared me, and I didn't feel I had the skills to deal with them. I even avoided nonviolent crisis intervention because I didn't want the qualifications that required me to handle crisis or trauma situations.

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I had to overcome my own triggers and pain through therapy, yoga, developing a spiritual life, and working with experts in the field of social-emotional responsive teaching (thank you, MaryAnn!) to become a more healed person who can be thoughtful and supportive to my students who have strong emotional or violent behaviors.