

IN THEIR
OWN
WORDS

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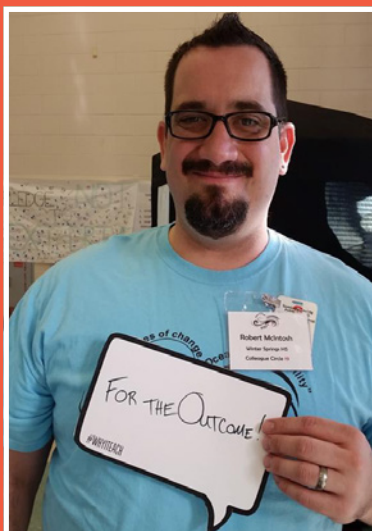
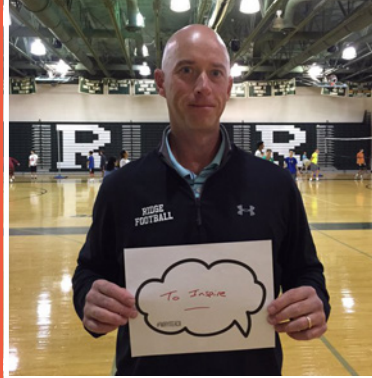
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ABOUT THIS BOOK



In Their Own Words originated from the desire to better understand teachers' ideas, to hear them describe their experiences in their own voices, unfiltered. We wanted to find out: What are the pressing issues for teachers? What are teachers sharing with one another? What are they commenting on publicly—outside of research questions, focus groups, and private conversations?

So we closely analyzed what teachers were saying online from January to May 2014. We looked at over 2,400 blogs, 12,600 tweets, and 16,900 Edchats to get a sense of teachers' views of their work. What we found are patterns across their comments.

We are calling these patterns teacher narratives. Teacher narratives are teachers' words taken directly from social media. They are a collection of statements teachers actually wrote themselves.

This booklet is designed to share these teacher narratives with you. We have a saying at the Gates Foundation: *Nobody knows teaching like teachers*. Anyone who wants to have an impact on education should understand teacher narratives because they are reflections of how teachers view everything—their classrooms, their profession, and the whole education system.

We also hope that by sharing, we will encourage more teachers to join the conversation. Narratives are not static, nor are they singular. Narratives change over time. They are complex and they are many. We want to invite more teachers to help shape the narratives, so that the results will encompass the widest possible range of perspectives.

A LITTLE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

There are so many voices on social media and so many teachers engaged with different sites, we were curious to find out if we could sort through the abundance of comments and conversations. We wanted to sort through, pinpoint, and distill the commonalities of teachers' exact words and statements as they shared them with each other and the public.

The narratives were identified through a process that Monitor 360* calls Narrative Analytics™. This research methodology, in simplified form, included:

- Identifying the data sets:
 - Teacher blogs, because the format allows teachers to write unfettered on whatever topics they want and for as long as they want.
 - Twitter, to gain insight into teacher reactions to events.
 - Edchats, to see teacher views and responses to a question, or within a moderated discussion.
- Validating the data sources: Verifying that the comments are indeed from teachers, and the content is relevant to the question of teacher beliefs.
- Identifying the narratives through text-analytic software tools: The tools clustered the content based on similar themes or as stand-alones, and developed and tested the emerging narratives.
- Validating and refining the working narratives with various teacher groups.

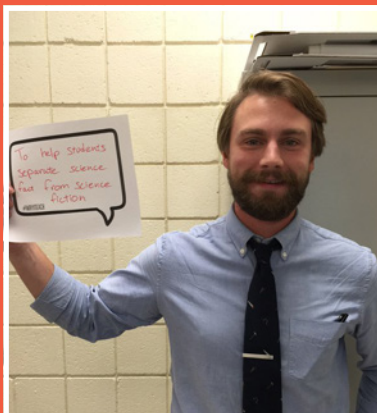
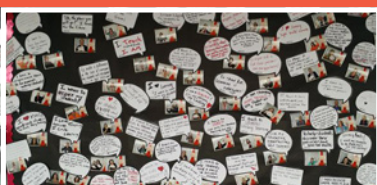
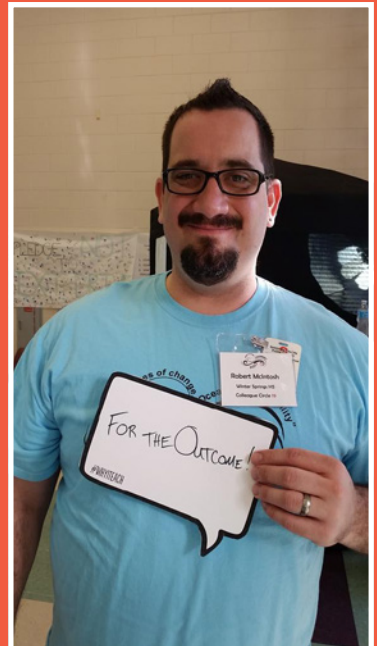
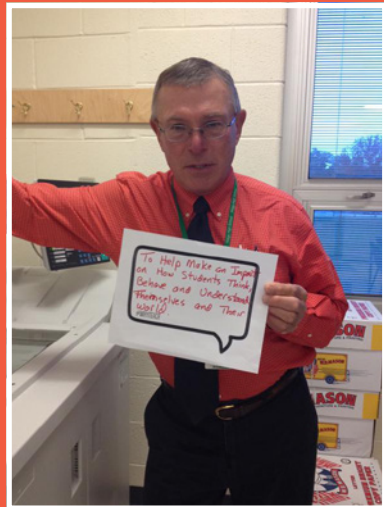
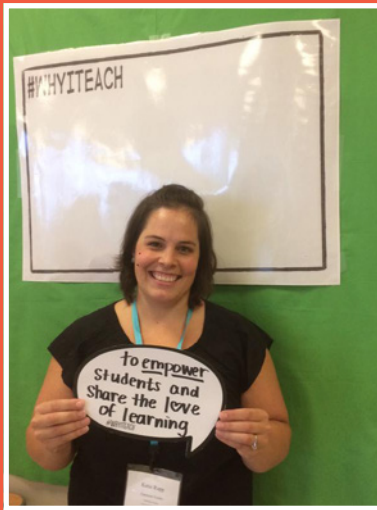
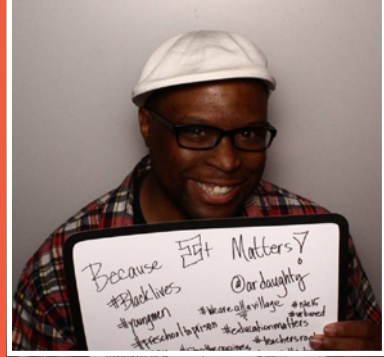
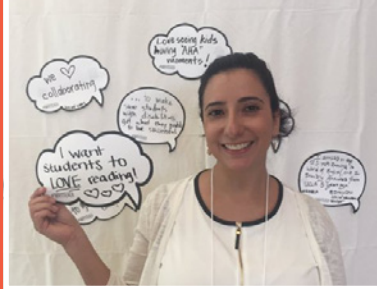
Nine narratives emerged from this research: three around the classroom, three around the profession, and three around the educational system. In addition, we conducted face-to-face interviews with teachers, and one more narrative emerged about the system. We gave titles to these ten narratives to identify them, as you'll see on the following pages, but the words of the narratives themselves all come from teachers.

***For more information about Monitor 360, visit www.monitor-360.com/about**

TEACHER NARRATIVES

The following ten teacher narratives provide an important window into teachers' beliefs, experiences, and perspectives.





1. ART OF TEACHING

Every school, class, and student is different. Adapting to diverse student needs and challenges every year is what teachers love about teaching; it is what makes them educators. The essence of good teaching will therefore always be an educator's leadership, creativity, judgment, and decision-making. So-called "evidence-based" practices rarely transfer to most classrooms. Nonetheless, reformers act as though education is a science, treating teachers like robots that implement "data-driven" lesson plans. Either because they are misguided or simply attempting to cut costs, politicians and administrators are also imposing supposedly scientific reforms that overlook community differences and reduce the craft of teaching to reading off scripts. Teaching is an art; while research can improve education, true pedagogy will always demand talent and flexibility. Teachers can improve their practice by consulting research, but there is no one template for great teaching. The only way to guarantee the quality of instruction is to give teachers the resources, experiences, and freedom they need to make judgment calls every day based on their unique understanding of their students and the subject matter.

2.

21ST-CENTURY TEACHING

America's schools are out of date. Current classroom techniques, curricula, and learning models are relics of the 20th century, when teachers simply delivered knowledge to a passive audience of students. All of this can—and must—change. Teachers have never had as many tools to increase student engagement or share ideas on practice as they do today. Innovative educators are using these new techniques and tools to give students a voice, allowing them to take center stage in their education. While technology can help facilitate this transition, it is no silver bullet. New educational technology has sometimes been deployed too quickly, without needed infrastructure or before teachers were ready. Teachers need time to adapt—and training on new technology—in order to lead the transition to the learner-centered classroom of the future. If they do, teachers will finally be able to align learning with real-world needs. Future classrooms should emphasize relevant, hands-on, project-based learning. This will sharpen critical-thinking skills, increase rigor in K–12 curricula, and empower students to take charge of their own education. This is the way to ensure that American students have the skills to succeed in the 21st century.

3.

TEACH THE WHOLE CHILD

Educators nurture children in ways that go far beyond filling students' heads with facts. Great teachers connect with children, inspiring hope, igniting imagination, instilling a love for learning, motivating students, and helping them mature socially and emotionally. Nothing is more rewarding for a teacher than seeing a student's eyes light up when they grasp a new concept or reach a personal milestone. Moments like these are the heart and soul of teaching and learning, which test scores can never capture. Reformers' obsession with reducing teaching and learning to a single number is more than misguided; it's killing education. The amount of time spent on testing is out of control. Standardized tests stress out teachers and students, damage students' self-esteem, and restrict teachers' ability to address non-academic needs. The high stakes placed on these tests narrow curricula, pushing teachers to "teach to the test" and dumb down learning. Administrators and policymakers need to rein in their obsession with standardized tests. Schools should use test results as one of multiple measures for assessing student and teacher performance. Only then will America's school system finally reward teachers for cultivating true learning and student development.

4.

DESERVING PROFESSIONAL RESPECT

Most teachers teach because they want to make a difference in students' lives. Teaching is the profession that makes all others possible, and being a great teacher requires expertise, passion, and years of hard work. It also requires support—teachers need planning time, resources, and the freedom to make tough calls. However, school systems and parents don't respect teachers' expertise and refuse to empower teachers to succeed. Higher-ups who have never taught micromanage educators from outside of the classroom, constantly dictating new “flavor-of-the-month” policies before teachers have had a chance to adapt to the previous initiative. Teachers' salaries and district budgets continue to shrink. School buildings are decaying. Meanwhile, class sizes, paperwork, and demands for more “rigor” and expensive technology grow day by day. Even worse, the media, politicians, and the public call teachers lazy or greedy. As a result, many good teachers are burning out, losing their passion, and leaving the profession. America needs to show teachers the respect they deserve and provide teachers with better pay, more support, and a genuine voice in decisions that affect the classroom. Real reform must happen with teachers, not to them. Treating teachers like professionals will do more than prevent teacher burnout—it will lead to better education policy and improve student achievement.

5.

TEACHER AS LEARNER

Great teachers are lifelong learners. They constantly reflect upon and develop their practice in order to better help students succeed. However, teaching has traditionally been an isolating experience, making it difficult for teachers to grow and develop. Teachers across the country face common challenges—inspiring students, conveying content, and managing classrooms. Yet they face these challenges alone, working behind closed classroom doors and constantly reinventing the wheel. While some teachers embrace this isolation, many would prefer to learn from fellow educators. Unfortunately, school cultures don't allow teachers to develop a sense of community with other adults in or beyond their school. Teachers do not have time to connect with other educators and share best practices. Instead of being allowed to discuss teaching with other teachers, educators are forced into one-size-fits-all, “drive-by” sessions with gurus who have not been in the classroom for years. Administrators and teachers need to work together to open the classroom doors. Administrators must encourage teachers to build relationships with one another, swap ideas, and exchange meaningful feedback on their practice. Only then will teachers be truly empowered to improve their craft, reach their full potential, and boost student achievement.

6.

NEW ROLES FOR TEACHERS

For too long, teachers have spent much—if not all—of their careers in the classroom. Seniority was traditionally the only path to higher pay or status. If a teacher wanted more responsibility, they had to leave the classroom for administration. Today, some teachers who remain committed to classroom teaching also aspire to grow professionally in ways that the classroom alone cannot provide. Administrators and policymakers need to support ambitious teachers by creating a new career ladder for teachers. Entrepreneurial teachers should have the opportunities and support they need to pursue “hybrid” roles. These roles should allow teachers to continue teaching, while taking up leadership and mentorship positions in schools and getting involved in the education policymaking process. Though many teachers will continue to be fulfilled by a career in the classroom, these new hybrid opportunities will empower master teachers that yearn for greater responsibility with a means to share their expertise, strengthen the profession, and contribute to system-wide success. This enthusiastic and ambitious group of teachers is growing. Creating a new career path will not only help schools retain high-performing teachers, it will also attract more talent to the profession.

7. OUTSIDE FACTORS MATTER

Students spend most of their time outside school grounds. Teachers cannot control if their students show up behind grade level, if they are traumatized by violence, or if they arrive at school hungry or tired. Nor can teachers stop parents from shirking their responsibilities to their children. All of this affects student learning. Student performance depends equally on the teacher, the parent, and the child. Evaluating teachers based on their students' standardized test scores makes about as much sense as judging doctors based on their patients' waistlines. Firing teachers and closing schools for those results is even crazier. Nonetheless, districts insist on using black-box algorithms to pass judgment on teachers. Instead of accounting for outside factors and tackling the effects of poverty and poor parenting, administrators and policymakers seek to weed out bad teachers or fire teachers they do not like. Teachers deserve fair evaluations that incorporate multiple measures and are constructive, not punitive. Schools in challenged communities need “wraparound services” and additional resources. And parents must be held accountable—instead of blaming educators, parents should ask teachers how they can help their children learn. Public education will only succeed when the system recognizes the realities outside the classroom.

8.

EDUCATION IS NOT A BUSINESS

Public schools are a cornerstone of American democracy. They provide an essential public service: preparing all Americans for the responsibilities of citizenship and adulthood. Today, this institution is under attack. In the post-NCLB era, a corporate reform movement composed of misguided foundations, profit-driven companies, and other ideologues has attempted to privatize education. This movement has chosen to blame teachers' unions and the public education system for an exaggerated "crisis" in American education. As a solution, so-called reformers seek to impose inappropriate and harmful market principles—de-unionization, austerity, standardization, competition, and an obsession with data—on public education. They want to transform public schools into private businesses, make districts into markets, change students and parents into consumers, and turn knowledge into a product. Testing and technology companies and other profiteers openly prioritize making money over doing what is best for students. This hijacking of public education is bad for students, bad for teachers, and bad for learning. Only teachers, not corporations, can close the achievement gap. Americans must protect public education so that it remains committed to educating American children, not cutting costs and maximizing profits.

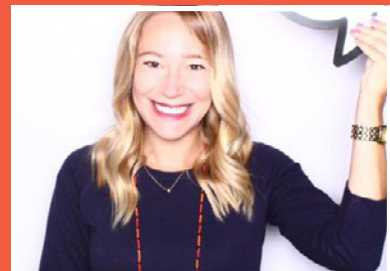
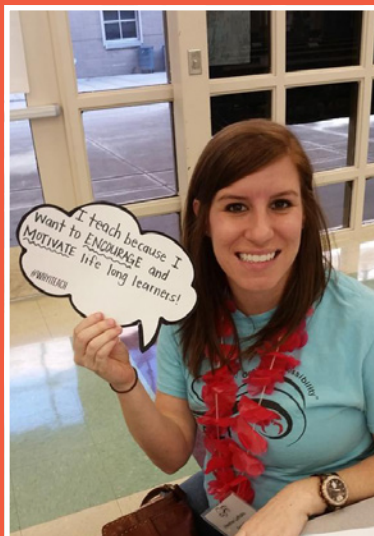
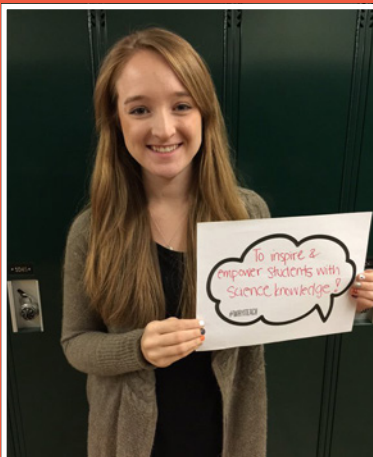
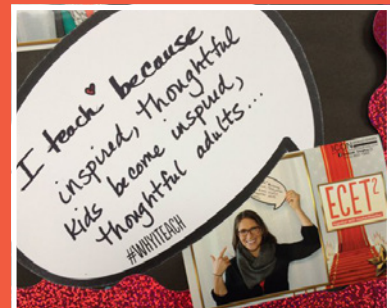
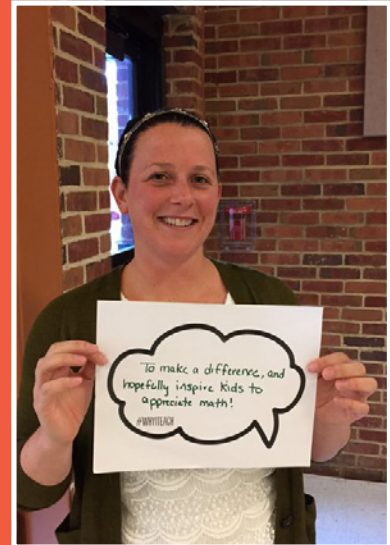
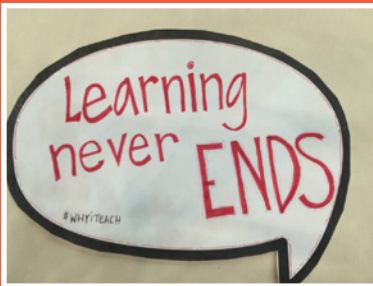
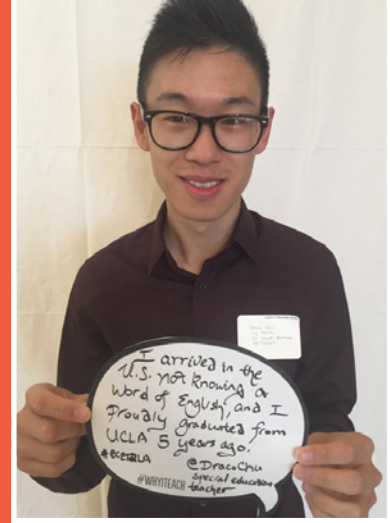
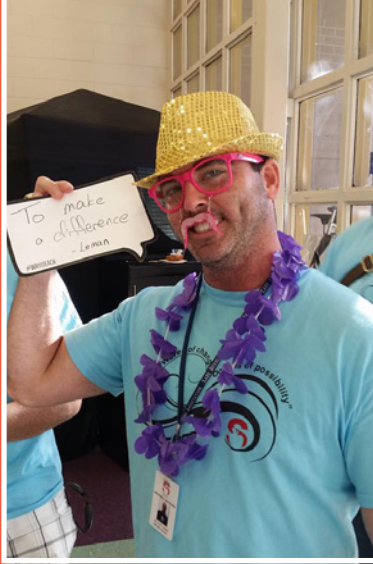
9.

EDUCATION IS A CIVIL RIGHT

All Americans should have equal access to a high-quality education regardless of their race, income, or ZIP code. America must give every child the chance to succeed. Education should be the great equalizer—even children born in poverty should have access to a high-quality K–12 education and the opportunity to go to college. But across this country, American children have vastly different opportunities depending on their background. The resulting achievement gap between privileged and low-income students is a disgrace. Closing this gap is the civil rights issue of our time. Leveling the playing field means giving every child access to great teachers and great schools, regardless of how wealthy their neighborhood is. Americans need to acknowledge the immense challenges that teachers and students face in high-poverty areas and give those communities the resources they need to provide every American student with high quality teachers and facilities. Only then will our society finally close the achievement gap and ensure that every child gets a shot at the American Dream.

10. COLLEGE IS NOT THE ONLY PATH

Communities need plumbers and mechanics just as much as they need doctors and lawyers. However, too many Americans look down on blue-collar work, while education reformers try to push every student into college. In reality, not every student will go to college—nor should they. For many children, the “college-ready” goal is worse than inappropriate; it is damaging. Pushing all of our students toward college sets some of our children up to fail, demoralizing them and damaging their potential to become productive members of their communities. Common standards and high-stakes testing are the latest example of out-of-touch elites dictating that public schools prepare every student for college. A school should encourage students to take any path to a productive life. States and districts need to stop forcing a one-size-fits-all system on children. Americans should learn from other countries, bring back vocational tracks, and give those degrees the respect they deserve. Then our schools will provide every student—and not just the college-bound—an education that prepares them for life.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

For teachers:

Which parts of the narrative resonate with you?

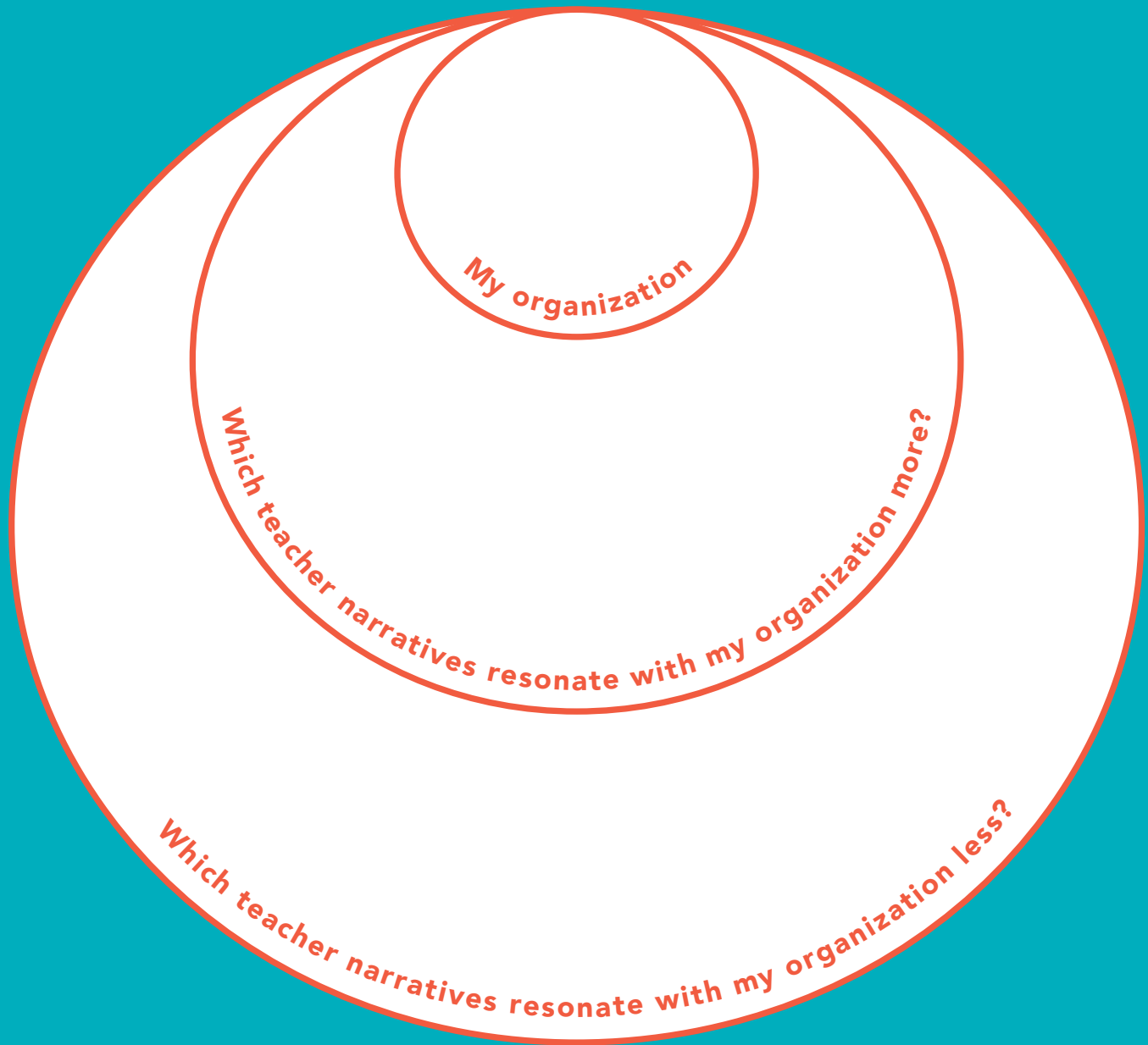
Which parts are less relevant? Why?

How would you frame your narrative?

Is there a new narrative you would like to see?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

For organizations:



Is there a narrative that doesn't resonate at all with my organization?

SO...

NOW
WHAT?

We have gathered together these narratives in the hopes that teachers will reflect on which aspects resonate most with them, and that teacher networks can better focus on which aspects align with their values. If you are a teacher, you might want to ask, what is the new narrative? If you are part of an organization working with teachers it should influence how you think about your work and how you communicate with them.

We shared the research findings with ten teacher networks, our Teacher Advisory Council, and with a set of teacher leaders from a variety of teacher networks. These were some of their reactions:

““ If the national conversation was about NCLB. And now it’s about CCSS... What do we want the new narrative to be about?”

““ These narratives sound familiar.”

““ Some of these felt offensive.”

““ Where are the moments of agency for teachers?”

““ Teachers don’t own their own narrative.”

““ How do we help teachers go back and forth between their stories and the larger narrative?”

““ How does context color the narratives?”

““ Teachers are here for students, but the narratives are pulling us away.”

WHAT TO DO WITH THE NARRATIVES?

Here are some ideas for teachers:

Why do you teach?

#WhyTeach

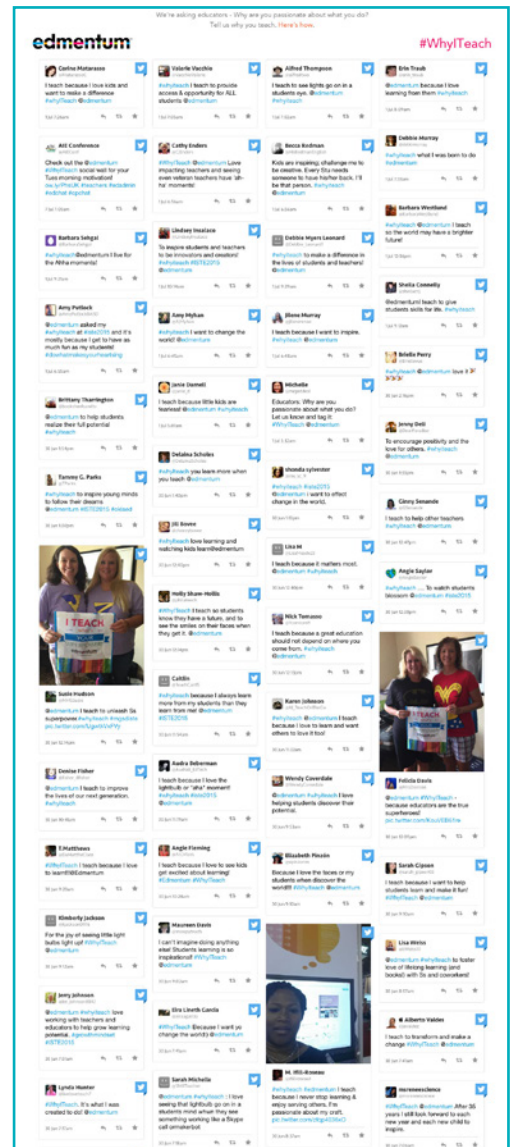
As an extension of our conversations with teachers, we sponsored a storytelling booth as way to encourage teachers to share their stories with others at the Oppi Learning Festival in New York City in May 2015. We asked teachers to respond to a question, post a picture of themselves with their response, and share these via Twitter with the tag #WhyTeach. It was an immediate way for teachers to share the essence of their stories and connect with each other at the conference, while also contributing to the larger teacher narrative online.

Elizabeth Maine, a K–6 literacy and language teacher from Highline school district in Washington, created a DIY kit so that teachers could take #WhyTeach to their own communities, and invited our partners to take the kit to other conferences. You can find their stories on Twitter @Teacher2Teacher and find the kit here: www.Teacher2Teacher.education/storytelling-toolkit.pdf. Join the conversation!

Ms. Wendi's World Wonders

Here is how one teacher did it:

www.mswendisworld.blogspot.com/2015/09/whyiteach-takeaways-and-how-to.html



Capture stories of the little moments and celebrate them

At a meeting of teacher leaders, we asked teachers to write a story about what was going on in their classroom in five sentences or less. Which of the narratives do you think these statements align with? Or do they suggest a new narrative? What does your five-sentence story sound like today, right now?

Chris Bronke

Hope Is the Unseen

She never said much. I wasn't sure she cared. The year ended with a four-page, handwritten thank-you note. I cried.

Eric Russo-Maikia

Reconnecting

As she walked past the fence of the neighboring high school, she smiled and hid her face for a moment before breaking away from her friend. "I have to talk to my teacher." She said, "Hi, you probably don't remember me." But of course I did—she was my favorite student of all time.

Jeffery Cipriani

Supported, Not Empowered

"I don't need to be empowered; I know what I want to do, why I want to do it, and I trust myself to get the job done. I need you to recognize the challenges I face and create solutions. Don't empower me. Share power."

William Anderson

Why You Here So Early?

Y'all just don't get it. The world is a tough place and that will chew you up and spit you out if you are not ready. I do this to help you get ready.

Brandon White

Perspective

A former student's father of mine has cancer. She said that if he passes away soon, she wants me to walk her down the aisle when she gets married. Five minutes before this, I broke up a fight in the library.

Brice Hostotier

The Place In Between

We all break somewhere. I learned that meeting students in the middle places—between struggle and success, between trauma and healing—is the best place to be.

Get in the game: start blogging

National Blogging Collaborative (NBC) is a free service created for teachers, by teachers, in an effort to get more educators contributing their voices to the national education narrative. It was born out of a conversation in New Orleans in October 2014. The founders (all teachers) wanted a venue to support and encourage *you* to write—write with each other, write independently, write on topics of professional importance, and/or write on topics of personal interest. NBC cultivates and supports the capacity of all educators to use their unique voice to elevate the craft of teaching and learning.

Need help finding your voice and connecting? Teachers and blogging coaches at National Blogging Collaborative will lend a hand as you share your own narrative: www.nationalbloggingcollaborative.com.

Meet Jamie Ponce

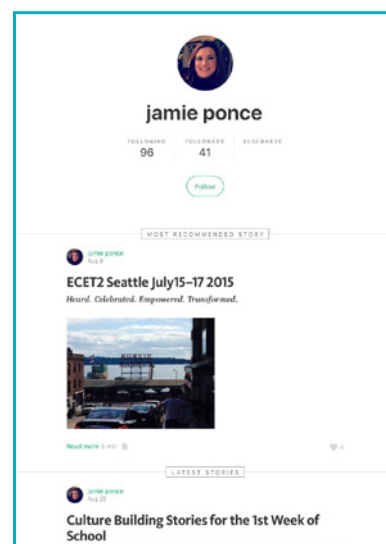
Wife, mom. Teacher for 12 years. ELL and early-education advocate. Literacy builder.

Jamie treated Twitter casually and was new to blogging. Until she went to a conference in Seattle called Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teachers and Teaching (ECET2), and found an outlet for her voice through blogging. She wrote a post about that experience at www.medium.com/@jamie_ponce/ecet2-seattle-july15-17-2015-a350221a3dcd.

She then became involved in planning the ECET2 Chicago event, and had a session there to pay forward the message of sharing one's voice and being connected—here's a tweet from an attendee: www.twitter.com/SofiaGeorgelos/status/657671720963350528.

As Jamie says, "I was using Twitter for pop culture and didn't have any idea what I was doing. After a Connect2Grow session, I changed my profile and filled it with educators and people I wanted to follow. It was amazing how much information was out there that I had no idea was available to me. Now I use Tweetdeck to search hashtags and subjects that interest me. Get connected with someone who has figured Twitter out to shorten your learning curve."

To read about her writing process, and about her work with 4th graders (who are loving the journey as much as she is) you can follow her [@jamie_ponce](https://twitter.com/jamie_ponce).



Here are some ideas for organizations, schools, and districts

Host a conversation online

One of our partners, the Teaching Channel, suggested that teacher networks might post a few of the narratives and hold an online chat with teachers about which narratives resonate and what a new narrative might do. Do you have an online teacher community that you might share the narratives with? How do you think they might react? How might they help inform the development of a new narrative? Find a teacher leader in your network to host the conversation, and let us know what emerges!

Follow the Teaching Channel's chats on different topics at:

www.teachingchannel.org/videos

Change up your next staff meeting

Use teacher narratives to facilitate a goal-setting conversation among colleagues. Ask questions like: Which narratives reflect who you are as a teacher? Which narratives do you strive to be part of? What narrative would you add as you think about your professional aspirations?

Each teacher has different goals and needs. The teacher narratives offer leaders a way to identify those needs and better support their faculty. Which teachers are reflected in which narratives? How are you supporting them with respect to those narratives? What obstacles are you removing? Create a plan for supporting your faculty, and share it with other school leaders.

Some topics and feelings aren't easy to discuss. Use the teacher narratives to put some of the delicate issues on the table. As one partner told us, the teacher narratives are personal but they aren't personally owned by one person. They can allow hard conversations to happen in a way that doesn't put individuals on the spot.

**Let us know how you use these narratives,
and what new narratives emerge
as you share your stories!**

**Email us at
college.ready@gatesfoundation.org**

Follow other teachers

@Teacher2Teacher

www.gatesfoundation.org/teacher2teacher

TEACHER  TEACHER
together, teachers do