



## **Teachable Moments**

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Everyone understands the importance of a good education. Yet large numbers of children and youth never experience the epiphany that can lead to lifelong learning. In efforts to improve learning outcomes, teachers and parents often refer to these as "teachable moments" - opportunities for accelerating and deepening learning that is provided by local, national and world events.

Last summer, three widely covered media events provided rich material to those interested in learning and teaching. One was the abduction of Erica Pratt and her escape by chewing through duct tape and racing to freedom through a window in a house in a poor section of Philadelphia. In escape, she exhibited an indomitable spirit born of intelligence. I hope Erica's teachers are able to tap into her problem-solving ability and motivation and use them to help Erica and others to solve the puzzles of reading, math, science and social studies.

Another story was of the Los Angeles County teenagers who were abducted and taken on a harrowing ride that could have ended in their deaths. The teenagers survived thanks to the national Amber Alert system, which notified the public that they were missing. And they survived because of the leadership provided by community officials, a caring community and systems that were put into place to help rather than hinder. Similar strategies and commitments were used to rescue the trapped coal miners in Pennsylvania. What do these events have in common? Each instructs us in the power of collaborative partnerships, leadership, goodwill and the importance of unanimity in communities. And those themes can be powerful tools in the classroom.

The world now witnesses U.S.-led coalition forces as they attempt to bring democracy to Iraq through the removal of a totalitarian leader. Residents in Connecticut and throughout the nation are bombarded with information about the war. This, like last summer's events, is an opportunity to use the "teachable moment" to accelerate learning. Teachers and parents once again have an opportunity to guide their children and students to deeper understanding through the knowledge gleaned from media reports. Stories of rescue abound. Missing soldiers are saved because of the bravery of Iraqi citizens and coalition forces. Iraqi children find safety after witnessing the agony of war firsthand.

Data from the war provides background experience that can deepen the learning experience. For example, a lesson that uses the war as a framework might involve the following activities at various stages of student development:

- observing (looking at the students' world and problems);

- comparing (identifying differences and similarities or fitting the "new" into the familiar);
- identifying assumptions (sharing background knowledge, expressing opinions, recognizing values);
- collecting data (reading newspapers, magazines and stories; listening to the radio and watching TV to deepen "critical thinking");
- organizing data (classifying and categorizing);
- interpreting data (summarizing, generalizing, hypothesizing, theorizing);
- inquiring further (designing projects, identifying and interviewing specialists, doing library research, reporting new findings);
- analyzing and evaluating (synthesizing, criticizing and reflecting on new ideas; re-evaluating assumptions, problem-solving); and
- decision making (volunteering, participating in workshops, community service, collective action).

By using targeted current events, we are in essence leveling the playing field for learners. The starting gate is what we all are exposed to - common experiences (such as the war) that can lead to improved reading comprehension, as well as reflective, critical and flexible thinking. When our perceptions and expectations expand to recognize the power of culture, language, individual differences and belief systems, we can explore the endless opportunities for creating the bridges between differing point of views and what emerges through collaborative leadership. These bridges allow students and citizens to see connections and relationships between their world and the world opening to us through national and global engagements.

Let's not lose out on the opportunities that current events present to engage more of us in solving problems our community face. Let's not forget those past, present and future stories of leadership, perseverance, emotions and strength of mind that saved Erica Pratt, the two teenagers and the miners last summer, and more recently, coalition soldiers and many citizens of Iraq. They provide a common base for exploring endless opportunities for creating the bridges between differing point of views and solutions to problems, and discovering what emerges through collaborative leadership. Our common goal must be to help one another recognize that as citizens, we need to become more focused on the common good -- not entirely on personal interests.

It takes commitment, the community and systems for all to succeed. As my son's Little League coach exhorts: "We are One!" In times of crisis or conflict we must act like it.

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