

Untapped Resources

By: *Kimi Romey, OSSA 2015-2016 Teacher of the Year*

For a teacher, the road to the classroom is often fueled by the desire to share content and skill with the next generation, so that young minds can flourish, allowing each student to achieve his/her potential. Commonly cited reasons to become teachers are to impact future generations, to make a difference, to ignite the fire of learning and to give back. In the pursuit of a teaching certificate, we focus on what we can give to students, but do we stop to ask what skills, interests and talents they already bring to us?

One of the most underappreciated resources in schools might actually be the students themselves. We revel in the successes of students at science fairs, athletic events and theatrical performances. We cheer when they churn out great art and achieve high academic marks. We even encourage them to share their school-honed knowledge with each other, but do we take the time to find out what skills or interest areas they already possess? Each one of those creative and interesting humans has something unique to contribute apart from what we give them in school.

Recently, I have had the opportunity to explore that untapped resource, which now results in me, every Wednesday, walking into school with a guitar strapped to my back. An English teacher laden with a musical instrument is bound to draw some attention. As I make my way to my classroom, I invariably get asked if I play, to which I answer an embarrassed, "no." I didn't play until two months ago, when I had a casual conversation with one of my musically gifted students, Cody, to whom I expressed my lifelong desire to learn to play the guitar. Motivated

by my interest to learn a skill in which he is quite talented, Cody then made it his mission to find a guitar for me and started providing weekly lessons during my prep period. Throughout this process, I have not only been able to learn more about this very talented student, but I have also felt the same insecurity and frustration that many students experience. I've also realized how valuable it is for a student to be recognized by his teacher for a skill he's honed through his own interest and effort.

This shift in teacher-student roles was not a natural or entirely comfortable one. We are supposed to be master teachers -- highly qualified and having



all of the answers. The authority usually resides in the front of the classroom, but this is not the case during my guitar lessons when Cody is the highly qualified teacher. The confidence gained through the recognition of an adult, especially one in an authority position, can create as big an impact, or bigger, as any praise for success on a test or school project. By teaching teachers, students can learn that their interests and personal pursuits are valuable to others who truly cherish learning.

The impact of this process has been not only in the learning with Cody, but in other students who have been surprised to see me do the unexpected, especially

something with the risk of failure that comes with new learning. The echoes of bad guitar filter through our small school's hallways, and many students have witnessed one of my very bad jam sessions. They seem curious to watch me struggle to grasp guitar technique, because most of what they see me do in the classroom has been developed through years of study and practice. They have seen my accomplishment elsewhere, but they seem intrigued, even a bit uncomfortable, watching me go through the same process they experience daily. Learning is hard. We are supposed to be master teachers, but students rarely see us struggle for that mastery. It has been humbling to watch them recognize that I am a slow musical

learner. When I do something well they are generous with their praise for my successes, which serves as a weekly reminder that I should acknowledge the steps of their success as regularly as they acknowledge mine.

Small school environments are ripe for such experiences. Conversations that can flesh out the hidden talents of

students happen on a daily basis. From that we need to create opportunities that allow students to gain confidence by sharing what they know. Their pursuits have value from which we can benefit not only in the knowledge, but also in the reminder of what it means to be a learner. It's a win-win situation. I get free guitar lessons, and Cody gets to be the master teacher, sharing his musical proficiency. As a participant in this invaluable experience, I am already on the lookout for my next learning opportunity... skateboarding? Fishing? Motocross? Golf? Maybe welding. Small schools are an ideal place for us to discover those talents and to take advantage of them.