

Teachers and their Super Powers

Speech by Dr. Sally Yahnke, associate professor of curriculum and instruction. Yahnke is a longtime faculty member of the college, serving as teacher educator for family and consumer sciences education and coordinator for career and technical education.

Dean Mercer, Distinguished Platform Guests, Faculty, Graduates of the College of Education, Parents, Relatives and Friends. I am truly honored to have been asked to deliver the commencement address today.

This fall I've been on a soapbox, talking to everyone I can about a sign in a parking lot in Manhattan. You see in this parking lot there is a sign that indicates a particular spot is reserved for heroes. The list on the sign identifies servicemen, veterans, EMTs, firefighters and policeman as heroes who could park in the reserved spot. Now don't get me wrong, I certainly do believe all of these people are indeed heroes and it is wonderful to have a reserved parking spot for them. What I've been riled up about is that the list on the sign does not include teachers. When I think of a hero I think about someone who protects us and makes our community, state, country, and world better. When I googled hero, other definitions included: brave, courageous, special and outstanding achievements, abilities, or personal qualities and someone regarded as a role model. Don't you think, given these descriptions, that teachers belong on the hero sign? Over the last several years there are many examples of how teachers have shone as heroes by being on the front line when there has been a tragedy, just like yesterday in New Mexico some giving their lives to protect the students in their classrooms. Teachers and counselors are there to comfort after a disaster strikes in the community or in a time of need. Still other teachers are there to help a young person cope after a loss or a personal upset.

The more I thought about teachers as heroes the more I began to think that teachers might be super heroes who indeed have super powers. These might not be the same super powers as Superman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman or Thor. None the less they are super powers that impact and change the lives of the students in classrooms every single day and year. So, I wondered what super powers faculty in the College of Education possessed. I'd like to share what I discovered.

The first super power example is from Dr. Lori Goodson.

"I first realized my super power when I broke up an ugly verbal fight between two eighth-grade girls in the first month of my teaching career. They were yelling at each other in the commons area, and other students were circling around to watch—just like a scene from Jack London's Call of the Wild. Not knowing what to do and not wanting it to escalate into a physical brawl, I stepped between them and said the first thing that shot through my mind: "You guys need a hug?" It worked. They both laughed so hard that they walked away."

Yes, a sense of humor can be a super power.

Dr. Thiele knew she had a super power when one of her students, who struggled with math for many years, came to her and said she had made her think more about math than ever before, because Dr. Thiele got her involved in tasks that she really wanted to know the answers to, so she had to learn and do the math!

Choosing and implementing high quality tasks that engage and challenge students, even if they don't want to be engaged is a super power.

The next two examples of super powers are from Dr. Sherbert and Mrs. Wood.

The super power Dr. Sherbert would like to be known for is matching the right book to the right reader. When she taught middle school, she remembers the day a student came up to her, beaming. He announced that he'd read the whole *Among the Hidden* book series. Prior to that class, he told her, he'd never finished a chapter book." Mrs. Wood's super power is knowing what makes students "tick." She learned that once you figure this out, you can educate the whole student—which oftentimes extends beyond the classroom. If you get to know the person underneath the "student," you will often be successful in teaching that student.

Taking time and really knowing your students and respecting and valuing them can be a superpower.

Dr. Levin's super power was realizing that even though she was a terrible off key singer, her students thought she was the greatest vocalist ever. They appreciated her out of tune singing and never complained, but joined in the chorus with her!

Having fun with your students and not taking yourself too seriously can be a super power.

Dr. Burenheide cried at the end of student teaching when a student gave him a note saying he was the best teacher she ever had. He knew he had found his calling and that his super powers were caring and compassion. He still has the note in his teaching box.

Yes, caring and compassion are necessary super powers for all teachers.

Dr. Martinez had a student named Adam, a big, ornery 11th grader who walked in late the first day and shouted "I hate English!" He was a tough student and probably still the biggest challenge of her teaching career. She realized she had a super power on the last day of school. Adam stayed after everyone had left and walked up to her. He reached out, shook her hand and said, "I still hate...there was a pause and he smiled. "I still hate Shakespeare, but I really liked your class." She'll never forget that moment. Working with and connecting with challenging students can be a super power.

Dr. Todd Goodson reported that middle school lunch room supervision is a super power unto itself. He learned to keep his back against a wall, positioned to keep the entire space in his field of vision, he learned to scan the room for any sign of trouble and make eye contact with the instigators with a stare that could melt away misbehavior.

Dr. Goodson's super power may not be x-ray vision but teacher vision is very close and being able to see everyone and everything at the same time is indeed a super power.

Dr. Allen might have the most unique teacher super power. "One year when I transferred to one of the country schools in the district, I discovered that it was a teacher's responsibility to sweep the playground for rattlesnakes prior to letting kids go out for recess. Additionally, when the students were at recess I had to carry around a stick in case snakes wandered onto the playground or one was missed in the initial sweep. So, I guess my super power is snake charmer/catcher/destroyer."

Keeping students safe, in every situation, is indeed a very important teacher super power but I will admit not every teacher gets to have a super power that involves snakes!

Last, but definitely not least, is Dean Mercer's super power. I remember distinctively and consciously realizing that I never "left" teaching. You don't leave the classroom at 4:00 and convert to someone else. Teaching is in my soul, I continually thought about how to improve, how to present a lesson, what resources to create, how to draw parents in as partners...the thinking was constant and continual. If teaching is truly your calling, it is a way of life. That realization was so profound!

I'm going to call this super power passion and I think it is the super, teacher super power. Without passion for teaching it is hard to achieve the other teaching super powers.

So, what will your teacher super power be? Just like all of the teacher super powers identified by the faculty in the College of Education you will one day be walking down the hall, standing in front of a classroom, working individually with students or supervising a lunchroom or playground and realize you too have a teacher superpower. We can't wait for you to tell us what that super power is. Finally, whether you know it or not, we all believe you are super heroes with super powers. As you leave here today, remember you are wearing an invisible purple cape with a Power Cat on the back.