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People often ask others when they knew what they wanted to be when they grew up. Anytime that question was posed to me, I always felt a bit uncertain of how to respond because, for me, deciding to become a teacher didn't feel like a decision at all; I simply knew that it was what I wanted to do with my life for as long as I could remember. Being a teacher has brought incredible joy to my life, and I still have to pinch myself at times at the realization that I get paid to do what I love every day.

I earned my teaching degree from the University of Southern Indiana in the spring of 2012, and I received my first teaching job shortly thereafter. Unbelievably, I have been teaching middle school language arts for thirteen years and am about to embark on my fourteenth year in the classroom. Though I have always perceived myself as a lifelong learner, I am currently pursuing my master's degree from the University of Southern Indiana in Curriculum and Instruction.

In my classroom, I try to model for my students the importance of constantly pursuing knowledge and understanding of the world around us. I tell them probably too often that books are mirrors and windows. Books help to expose aspects of ourselves that we were previously unaware of, and they also act as windows into understanding the lives of others. From my perspective, books and reading are tools that can help us become better versions of ourselves. Through books, we can become more empathetic, compassionate, and kind humans, and this, in turn, can help make the world a better place.

Because I believe in the power of reading, I have put a great deal of energy and effort into cultivating my classroom library over the last three years. I travel to thrift stores, used book shops, and yard sales looking for literary treasures. Additionally, after reading an online blog post written by a teacher who used grant money to purchase books for her classroom, I began pursuing grants to purchase new books for my classroom library. I am eternally grateful for the generosity of programs like Penny Kittle's

Book Love Foundation and many others who have allowed me to further develop a classroom library that is inclusive. I believe that my classroom library helps to provide students a sense of belonging and acceptance as well as puts books in their hands that can both foster a love of reading within them and also expose them to the lives of those who are different than they are.

Students in my classroom read independently every day, and they are encouraged to choose to read the books they want. Most days, while my students are reading, I am curled up in a corner doing the same or sitting with my reader's notebook at a student desk writing notes of my favorite lines or ideas that a book sparks in my mind. During independent reading time, I have read books like Jared Amato's *Just Read It*, Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer*, Penny Kittle's *Book Love*, and Kyleene Beers' *When Kids Can't Read*, and these books have changed me. They have transformed the way I teach and the way I live, and I feel so grateful to be able to share and integrate the innovative ideas and ideologies from those texts into my classroom instruction.

On the outside of my classroom door, I have a laminated poster with the words of Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." In a world that often feels irreparable, my classroom, my students, my kids, give me hope that positive change is possible. Thank you to the Book Love Foundation for helping me put transformative books into the hands of my students.