

Teacher Stories

Everyone Has One. What's Yours?

Teacher Story Podcast Episode

Interviewee: Dr. Victor Rios, Professor of Sociology, U.C. Santa Barbara

Interviewer: Ken Futernick, Founder, Teacher Stories

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Victor Rios website: <http://drvictorrios.com/>

Ken Futernick:

Welcome everyone, this is Ken Futernick, your host of Teacher Stories. My guest today is Victor Rios, who is a professor at UC Santa Barbara. Victor has an amazing story to tell about a high school teacher named Ms. Russ, who Victor says saved his life. We'll find out more about what was going on in his life at that time, and how he ended up going to college, and eventually becoming a college professor. Victor is the author of several books, one of them called Street Life: Poverty, Gangs and a Ph.D., includes a chapter devoted to Ms. Russ. If you want to learn more about Victor's extraordinary life, I'd urge you to take a look at this book. You might also want to view his TED Talk on YouTube, which also focuses on his teacher, who will be talking about today. Victor, welcome to Teacher Stories.

Victor Rios:

Thank you, Ken, I'm very honored to be here.

Ken Futernick:

Can you tell our listeners about your position at UC Santa Barbara, how long you've been a faculty member there, and what you teach?

Victor Rios:

Yeah. So, I've been a professor of sociology at UC Santa Barbara since 2006, so about 14 years, and I teach juvenile justice, I teach education classes. I also prepare new teachers to go on to have careers in the education world. And then, I also teach methods courses, and finally, I'm also an associate dean of social sciences. So, I help other faculty in other disciplines to get their careers going.

Ken Futernick:

Thanks for giving us a little bit of background. Your path into higher education was pretty unusual, and the teacher you had in high school played a really important role in that. But let's start by having you share with our listeners something about your childhood, where you grew up, and really what life was like before going to high school.

Victor Rios:

Yeah, so my story really begins at a very young age in terms of transformational shifts in my life. I was born in Mexico, actually, and my mom was struggling. I didn't have a father. He abandoned me before I was even born. And so, my mom had me and my older brother, and she was desperate, so she crossed the border with us through the desert, and we were lucky in that we made it to the US, and we get to this beautiful city by the name of Oakland, California, and we try to survive there.

My mom, she got a job but her boss was exploiting her, he paid her below minimum wage, and pretty much just said, "If you go tell anyone I'm paying you less than minimum wage, I'm going to call immigration on you." So, she was very scared, took that little bit of money, and got us this little tiny apartment in Oakland. And it was a rough time, it was during the crack epidemic, it was during deindustrialization, so a lot of jobs were being lost. There was a recession at the time, and we were just struggling.

And we tried to get on welfare. She got a little bit of payments from that. She would try to make ends meet through her job. And the apartment we were in was just messed up. It was like, a lot of violence, a lot of drugs. The landlord wouldn't even fix the basic things, things would break down, we wouldn't have hot water, sometimes not even electricity because we couldn't pay the electricity bill. And then, one day... I think a moment that really hits me hard is when my little cousin... He was a baby, he was an infant, and he was my little neighbor, and rats came, crawled on his crib in the middle of the night, and they begin to chew his face up. And living in these conditions, as a kid, I was just like, "Whoa, I'm going to have to figure out another way to survive." And the education system in my mind, at the time, I thought school was not the way to survival. I have to figure out other ways to survive.

Ken Futernick:

You had teachers along the way before you got to high school. I wonder if some of them gave you the impression that they thought you had potential? Or if they thought you had potential, I wonder whether it was to be successful or to... Potential for something else?

Victor Rios:

Yeah. I had an amazing preschool experience. I think a lot of my foundation in reading came from my preschool experience at the time. I think the government was investing a lot more in preschool programs, so my mom was able to get me in this little preschool program, where they taught me to read, they taught me English, they taught me all these great things, values, virtues, character, you don't hit people just because you're frustrated, that kind of thing.

And I remember being in first, second, third grade, and loving to read. And I remember going to the library in third grade and getting Greek mythology books and getting lost in those books. I would hide from trauma by reading Greek mythology about these Greek gods and demigods that would be able to traverse the universe. And I remember people like Proteus, who could shape shift, turn into a rock among rocks, turn into water among water. And I wanted to be that person, I wanted to be a shapeshifter.

And then, I remember in third grade, sitting in the front of class, and my teacher, her name was Ms. Jackson, she said, "Victor, read this word on the board." And I just wouldn't, just nodded my head and say, "No." And she's like, "Victor read this word." And it was only a four-letter word, and it was a short word.

And I was like, "Nope." And she finally threatened me. She's like, "If you don't read this word, I'm going to kick you out of class." And I was like, "Nope." And she kicks me out of class because she thought I was being defiant. But what was going on is that I needed glasses, and I couldn't see the word on the board. I had blurry vision. And so, when I got up to leave, I finally was able to see the word, and the word was "echo."

And so, in that moment, being kicked out in this undignified way, where a teacher thinks I'm being defiant, and really, I'm having a healthcare condition, I remember, I shut down from the education system. I was just like, "I don't want to learn anymore. I don't want to be here." Because soon after she kicks me out, I go to the principal, and he thinks I'm being defiant because I'm not looking at him in the eyes when he's talking to me, I'm looking down at the ground. And he's like, "Look at me in the eyes when I'm talking to you." And I'm still looking at the ground like, "Nope, I won't look at this guy in the eyes."

And the reason is, at home, I had been taught like, you don't look people in the eyes, and that's a sign of respect. But in America, to close that business transaction, you got to look at me in the eyes and shake my hand, and this principal was trying to teach me something about being in the US, and being part of this culture, but in reality, right, he was also kind of not acknowledging where I was coming from. And he calls my mom, he has her come to school, it's a big fiasco. And this is why I shut down completely. Third grade, I remember clearly I was like, "Nope, no more reading, no more schooling, I'm done. I'm going to go find a way to survive on my own on the streets." And as early as that age, where I'm looking to the streets for knowledge and survival.

Ken Futernick:

And the irony is, or one of the many ironies is that, you actually loved reading, and you loved books, you loved going to the library. And I'm sure you could read the books when they were a few inches from your face, but you couldn't read the words on the board. So, here you were, a student with great interest in reading and learning, and because of that experience and probably other experiences during that time, you just decided to shut down. And you probably were still interested in reading, but you were going to have nothing to do with school, or your teachers, or anyone who was running the school.

Victor Rios:

Exactly. I was nearsighted, so I could see very clearly, and that's why I thought that was my world. The stars in the sky would look like these giant, massive, bright things, and I thought that's what stars look like. And it wasn't until I was 14 years old that I got my first pair of glasses, and I looked at the stars, I'm like, "Oh, my goodness, these things are little tiny dots in the sky." And so, yeah, I guess the moral of the story is that sometimes as educators, we think our kids are being either defiant or non-compliant, or in the era of remote learning, just phased out, checked out. I know a lot of teachers have been telling me, "Oh, my kid won't turn on the camera when we're on Zoom or Google classroom." And I'm like, "They probably just don't have a space to show you their environment, probably don't want to show you their environment, because they might not have a lot of pride in that environment, and it's not of their own choosing or making."

So, be okay with students meeting them where they're at, and students feeling like they could be comfortable around you despite their personal conditions or environmental conditions that they come with. And in that moment, I remember telling myself, I don't want to learn from these people anymore. These are not my people. Whereas in preschool, I was like, "Oh, these are my people, they're teaching me to read, I love these people." First, second grade, I remember... And then, third grade I was like, "These are not my people." That's the other piece, that sometimes we blame the entire system because of what one teacher did that really messed us up. And that teacher and that principal combined that day, really messed me up for a long, long time.

Ken Futernick:

And I know in your TED Talk, I recall you were saying that, too often, people make assumptions about what they think is going on inside the minds and hearts of people they see. And those assumptions are often invalid, and they're harmful and can be dangerous. And I think what you were urging people to do is to suspend their judgments and assumptions. And I gather in talking to you and reading a bit about the teacher we're going to come to in a moment, Ms. Russ, she didn't make those assumptions about you, or when she thought about potential, it was really about the potential you had to be successful. And she got to know who you were, and it took a little time. We'll get back to that in a minute.

But, Victor, can you say a little bit more about what life was like in Oakland growing up away from school, and the violence that you saw and experienced in your community, and what effect that had on your life at the time.

Victor Rios:

Yeah, I mean, I normalized violence at a young age. I remember being little, gosh, maybe 9 or 10, and I was playing in the front yard with a wooden stick, pretending it was a sword. And this older guy walks up, and no one was around, it was just me on the sidewalk. And this guy comes up and he pulls out a handgun and points it to my head, and he says, "Where are you from?" And I was like, "I don't know, from here?" He's like, "No, where are you from?" And I was like, "Nowhere." And then, he goes, "Are you a Northerner or a Southerner?" Meaning the gangs in

California, the prison gangs. And I was like, "I don't know." And I just froze. And he held that gun to my forehead, I was a little kid, and I was just like... Had no clue what he was talking about. And he just kind of like had this blank stare in his eyes. Now as an adult, I recognize he was probably high, didn't know where he was, and just was pointing this gun at me. And luckily, he just walks away. And I remember thinking like, "I got to figure out where I'm from." And so, I hit the streets to figure out where I was from, meaning like, what am I in the order of the streets? And the older guys started to teach me a little bit more about the streets.

Around the same time, I was very innocent, and a guy, another drug addict actually, came by one day around the same time, he says, "Hey, man, let me borrow your bicycle, I'm just going to go to the liquor store right down the street." And he pointed down the street where the liquor store was, he's like, "I'll bring it right back." And I was like, "Nah, man, this is my bike." He's like, "Come on, come on, just let me borrow it, I'll bring it right back, I promise." I was like, "Okay." He grabs my bike, and I see him riding the middle of the street down the road, and I see him pass the liquor store, and I see him turn into this little dot that disappears into the horizon. And that's when I knew my bike was gone, and I started to cry, I ran around the neighborhood looking for help, looking for him, looking for any sign. And I saw a cop car in front of another liquor store. So, I went up to the police officer and I said, "Officer, officer, my bike has been stolen, the guy is riding down the street, can you please help me?" And the officer looked at me, he rolled his eyes, he gave me a mean look, and he said, "You want your bike back, you go get it back yourself." And he rolled up his window.

And in this moment, I also learned a new lesson in life, that if I wanted justice, I was going to have to find it myself, that street justice was going to be the way to go. And so, the complicity of the system, whether it's education, or in this case, law enforcement, where they're teaching us, these marginalized kids, that the only way you're going to make it is to not rely on our systems, right? You're going to make it on your own and be self-reliant and rely, in this case, on street justice. And everyone's like, "Where did you learn about street justice from? From gangsters? From criminals? I said, "Nope, from a police officer." And the reality is that, we have to improve our systems, so that our children don't feel like it's us against them, that it's actually, those systems are there to truly protect us.

Ken Futernick:

Victor, you write and talk about your own involvement, I guess, in gang activity, and you were, I think, arrested a couple of times. I mean, that was your way of surviving and getting along. Talk a little bit about your own involvement with gang members, and with drugs, and so forth.

Victor Rios:

So, by age 13, I already know the rules, right? I can't rely on systems, I can't rely on education, it's not paying my bills. I can't rely on police when I'm getting victimized because they're probably going to tell me, you're on your own. So, I end up relying on the code of the street, on the rules of the street, I get jumped into a gang and I see it all, right? And I see it all in terms of violence, I see it all in terms of drug use and drug selling, and I end up in juvie for stealing cars.

My specialty at the time was to steal vehicles and sell them for parts, and I got caught. The first time I get caught, I end up in a juvie system.

And I remember that day I walked into juvie, I had... Some of the guards, one of them... They're checking me, they're inspecting... I guess they inspect you for contraband but also, they make you take a shower with this, I guess, anti-lice soap, they just really cleanse... wanting you to go in with a cleansed body, and just making sure you don't have any contraband. So, it's a very weird process and just... I don't know, it was very awkward. And I'm walking into the system, and as I'm walking in, this guard, he says to me, "We're going to teach you a lesson." And at the time, I'm a tough guy, I've been trained to be tough. So, I'm like, "All right, what's your lesson?" And then, he's like, "Oh, you'll see."

So, he puts me in a cell with a older boy, that's supposed to beat me up, and this boy was 17. And so, I'm in the cell with this older boy, terrified. And this older boy says to me, "Hey, man, what are you in here for?" And I said, "Man, I stole a car." And he says, "What kind of car?" And I said, "Man, this old 1982 Toyota, man." And I told him how I did it, I took a old key, I scraped it on the cement, it turned into a universal key. And I was able to open the car and the ignition. And then, this older guy, he says to me, "Hey, man, you're dumb." And I go, "I know, I know, I'm dumb." He goes, "You should be stealing high performance American vehicles, like a Chevrolet Camaro, a Buick, Grand National." And I said to him, "Oh, man, I don't know how to steal these kinds of cars." And he says, "Oh, I'm going to teach you." And in that cell, this guy taught me how to go back, buy a long screwdriver, and snap the steering column on these cars, to get the rod to open up, and you can have yourself a high -erformance American car. So, I get out of jail, all right, juvie, having learned how to be a bigger, better criminal.

Ken Futernick:

So, there wasn't at all about helping you change your life. It was... you're back on the street having learned how to commit more crime, and to do it more effectively.

Victor Rios:

Exactly. And I get out and I steal more cars. So, I end up with three felonies, and I still don't care. I'm 14, 15, still don't care. And then, finally, one day, my best friend is shot and killed, and this is when I have a quick kind of revelation. I was like, "I'm going to end up dead like him or in prison for life." And before, it was very abstract, I don't care, but now it was very real. And I was like, "Oh man, what do I do?" I didn't know who to turn to, I didn't know where to go, I had no one. And no systems of support, except my friends who were trying to go shoot the guys that did this, so it was a deeper cycle of violence I was going to get myself into.

Ken Futernick:

And then, you go to high school and you get assigned to a teacher, Ms. Russ. Tell us what that experience was like at the beginning. Did you hit it off right away? I said earlier at the top of the story that she's someone who saved your life, but what was it like at the beginning when you first met her? How did she treat you? And what did you think of her?

Victor Rios:

Ms. Russ, she was the kind of teacher that was always in your business. She was the kind of teacher that would always have a smile, smirk on her face. Even if you were trying to be mean to her, she would not respond with meanness, she just smile at you. I would even cuss at her, and she'd still smile at me. She would tell me, "You need to leave because you're not ready to learn. And afterwards, I'm going to talk to you, we're going to have a conversation as to why you shouldn't call me the B word. Because I've been called as a woman, B word many times in my life, and it's affected me, it's affected women in history. And I'm going to teach you how that word affects women. And we're going to talk about this later on."

And at the time, I didn't recognize this as incredible teaching from her in terms of wanting to teach me a lesson. I was just like, "Whatever." And I left. But all to say that she always had a lesson to teach you, even if you were being defiant. And what she recognized was that we had an adolescent brain. We were kids, literally, developmentally, we were kids, and she was the adult. So, she took charge in terms of reasoning, and being rational. And that's how she would approach us, always smiling, always trying to teach us a lesson. And none of us wanted to learn from her, because we were all up to no good, those were the kids she helped. And so, when I first met her, the first two years really, is when I dropped out of school, I would only come occasionally, and I would drop out a whole semester, freshman year and then sophomore year, so I only knew her for a little bit. And I would leave and then not come back.

But in the moment that this happens to my friend, I started to take inventory. How many adults in my life do I have I can count on? Couldn't count on my mom. She had too many issues herself. My brother, he was just a few years older than me and he had practically raised me, I didn't want to strain him anymore. I only had this one teacher that had once told me that she would be there for me, and that was Ms. Russ.

So, I go back to school, I'm walking down the hallway, I hadn't been there in weeks, maybe months, and she comes out of her classroom, she spots me, and she says, "Victor, I heard what happened to your friend, I'm very sorry. Are you okay?" And I'm trying to be a tough guy, so I'm like, "Yeah, I'm okay." And this was passing hour, so picture hundreds and hundreds... It was a big school, 3000 students, hundreds of kids walking through the hallway lockers, and I'm trying to be a tough guy in front of all these kids while she's trying to talk to me, I'm like, "Yeah, I'm all right?" And she taps me on my shoulder, and right when this lady taps me on my shoulder, all my pain, all my fear, all my anger begins to grow, and I began to cry like a little kid in front of the whole school, this tough guy from the streets crying.

And in that moment, I wanted to just roll into the gutter with my tears and never come back. This teacher, she opens her arms, she gives me a hug, she says, "Victor, I'm here for you. Are you ready to change your life around? I'll be here for you. But you have to do the work." And so, I went back to the street, back to school, weeks going back and forth debating if I was going to change my life. And I made my decision, okay, I'm going to take on Ms. Russ's challenge, I'm

going to do the work and she's going to help me. And so, she starts to help me, I start to try to do better. And then, she had to convince these teachers, her colleagues, that I actually was going to improve. Because a lot of them had already been done with me. A lot of them had already kicked me out. A lot of them were like, "Nope, this guy is not going to make it. I'm just going to expand my efforts on the kids that will make it."

Ken Futernick:

Did eventually those other teachers begin to see some promise, or to see that you were being serious about changing your life, and whether other teachers along the way eventually began to support you? Or was it kind of an uphill battle, the rest of your time in high school?

Victor Rios:

Most of those teachers were willing to give me a second, third, fourth, fifth chance, absolutely. They just needed another adult to vouch for me, right? Sometimes in education, we don't necessarily want to be the first to take a risk, but if our colleague talks to us, we're willing to take that risk.

Ken Futernick:

Victor, I remember a story you told in the book, in the chapter that you focused on Ms. Russ, and you described the story about her driving out to your house, and there she shows up in a car and gets out. And I think you were pretty surprised and worried that, what did I do? Describe what happens and why she decided to come to your house, and what impact that had on you?

Victor Rios:

I'm telling you, Ms. Russ... At the time, we just thought... And we would describe her as crazy, right? She's crazy. And so, one of the crazy things she would do is she would drive into our neighborhood, and through the apartment complexes that we all lived in. And these were in the hood, these were places where no teacher would necessarily want to drive into on their own, and she would do it. And then, she'd park, she got out of her car. And we would be on the corner, and we would spot her, she waved at us and smiled, we just mean mug her.

And then, she would walk and knock on every one of our apartment doors and talk to moms. And in the case of my household, right? She didn't know any Spanish. My mom didn't know much English. So, you could imagine their conversation. Here she is, trying to check on me, and then talk to my mom. And so, she would knock on the door, my mom would open the door, and she'd say, "Senora, your son, I'm worried about him, he hasn't been in school." And my mom not knowing much English would just nod her head and say, "Sí, maestra, Sí, maestra, Yes, teacher, Yes, teacher." Right? And Ms. Russ would just say like, "Well, I want him to succeed. Do you want him to succeed, or do you want him to fail?" "Sí maestra, Sí, maestra."

Ken Futernick:

Were you translating at the time at all?

Victor Rios:

I was just kind of in the background, trying to hide from her. And what I remember in those moments, is my mom gaining a sense of respect for the educator, right? There was no... The linguistic translation, what was trying to be said, was not there. But it was a little deeper than that. It wasn't about wasting time trying to talk to people that don't understand you, something was being understood. And it was the message that this educator was willing to step outside of the box and enter the world of her students and their family's life.

And because of that, I think my mom really recognized like, oh, this teacher cares. And as much as she cares, I should care to go to the school, and go to those parent meetings. I should care to go to the school and drag Victor over there. And that's what my mom would try to do. And I wouldn't pay much attention at the time, but my mom was at school, talking to my teacher and going to parent meetings and stuff, while I was on the streets.

And when I started to recognize, I realized, like, "Well, my mom's at school, in my school, and I'm over here on the streets?" I started to feel a little shame about that. And that's another factor that made me go back as well. So, my teacher doing these unorthodox things, visiting families, right? In areas that are hard to reach, allowed for us to feel like, oh, the teacher cares, and in turn, to say, "Then the system must care."

Ken Futernick:

Victor, I want to ask you about something else that you wrote, so I'm curious to know what you meant by the sentence you wrote, which is, "She knew..." and, she, being Ms. Russ, "she had to ask our permission to teach us." And you go on to say that sometimes, the opposite was true for other teachers. What did you mean by that?

Victor Rios:

Yeah. I think it was Herbert Kohl, the famous Harvard education scholar that wrote a book called, *I Won't Learn from You*. And in that book, this is what he talks about. He says that, as educators, we have to get permission from our students to teach them. And unfortunately, the system we're in today, the assumption is, I'm here to teach you knowledge, you're there to learn that knowledge, and I'm going to start class now.

When in reality, what we need to do as educators is to gain permission from our students in order to teach them, and Ms. Russ did that. And the way she did it is that, she first understood where we were coming from, she knew our environment, she knew our needs. And based on knowing our needs, based on knowing our environment, and our backgrounds, and our stories, and valuing those stories, then she would start to teach us. And by the way, Ms. Russ was a computer science teacher, a STEM teacher, and she still managed to find a way to connect with us in a social, emotional way, before teaching us the hard science.

Ken Futernick:

Ultimately, you said somewhere that she saved your life. In fact, I think you... I want to ask about your connecting with Ms. Russ because it wasn't for a few years that she actually found

out that she had this impact on your life, and she didn't know for a while. Talk a little bit about how it was that she found out about it. And then, I seem to recall, you had a conversation with her about that, and it was at that point when you said that, "You saved my life." And at first, she wasn't willing to accept that.

Victor Rios:

Yeah. I wrote a book for teenagers, and it's called Street Life: Poverty, Gangs, and a Ph.D. And essentially, it's just really short chapters that are meant to inspire teenagers that might be going through some of the stuff I went through. And so, it's my little life story, right? For teenagers. And in that life story, I have a chapter. It's called Ms. Russ. So, I wrote this book, I wrote this chapter, published the book. And then, it dawned on me that, oh, maybe I should share it with Ms. Russ.

So, I mailed her a copy, she read it. And she called me, and she said, "Victor, I like your book, it's really nice. I'm so proud of what you've done." And then, she says, "But I didn't save your life, you saved your own life." And I said to her, "Ms. Russ, you just proved my point. What I'm trying to say here in this book is that, a great educator, a transformative educator doesn't live in existence, saying, "I'm going to save lives." They're just seeing it as part of their job." And that's what she told me, she said, "It was just my job to help you." So, she was kind of like brushing off the fact that she helped me, and I would have this debate with her.

And finally, one day, a few years later, someone asked me, "Hey, where is Ms. Russ from? Where did she grew up? What's her story?" And I said, "Oh, I really don't know much of Ms. Russ's story." So, then I called her, and I said, "Ms. Russ, I don't know much of your story, can we meet up for coffee? And can I interview you about your story?" She says, "Sure." So I meet her, we're at a cafe in Berkeley, we're sitting outside, it's a beautiful day, it's sunny, and we start talking. And she's telling me this beautiful story as her background. She's from Ohio, she's from a Jewish family. And she was one of the first... Her district was one of the first districts in the nation to integrate. And so, she was in a predominantly, African American community, so her high school was mixed, actually, mostly African American and white.

And this is where she says she learned her first lessons in multiculturalism, in getting along with various populations, and understanding people where they're coming from. So, she's telling me this beautiful story, how at the time, as a woman, you were only supposed to do two things, be a teacher or a secretary, so she became a teacher, just telling me all of these stories. And it was a beautiful little afternoon, we're talking. And then, towards the end of her story, she comes to her students she's helped.

For 40 years, she's helped black and Latino students that are struggling in school. And so, she's telling me about all of her students, all of her alumni, it's not just me. And I'm writing this down, I had the recorder on, and then all of a sudden, she gets a little teary eyed, and she says, "Wow, Victor, I guess I really did save your life, didn't I?" And I'm like, "Ms. Russ, I've been telling you this the whole time. Yes." It finally dawned on her that the culmination of her life had been to save lives, and that she was willing to recognize herself for it. It was a beautiful moment.

Ken Futernick:

I suspect there were lots of other students whose lives she impacted, and perhaps even some whose lives she might have actually saved in the same way that she did for you, and she will never know about it. And I guess as teachers, you have to remind yourself that you're having an impact and know that you may never hear the story, and still go on knowing that it still really matters even if you don't find out what effect you have.

And I think it's one of the reasons that I wanted to create this Teacher Story podcast, is so that, even if you're not hearing about...or you're not the one telling the story about your teacher and thanking them, vicariously, if you are an educator, you might be thinking, maybe I had an impact like Ms. Russ on some of my students, even if I didn't have the pleasure of meeting some of those students like she did with you.

Victor Rios:

Exactly, exactly. I think that the way that we think about the seeds we plant with students as educators is that, some students are like tomatoes, they'll sprout in a season, right? Three months later, you got some nice tomatoes, you're like, "Yes, I did it. I changed this kid's life in three months." And then, some of us are like trees, you're not going to see a blossom for 10, 20 years.

And so, we just have to keep being relentless with our pursuit of a positive transformational teaching approach, that just has faith in the fact that, what we keep pushing to our students, the support, the emotional component, I got your back, I believe in you, that at some point, those seeds will sprout. And I would say 90% of the time, you'll never hear back from these students. But 10% of the time, you'll hear those students that took your class or that had an interaction with you in the hallway and say, "I remember, you told me this, and I was like, Whoa. And I went home, and I thought about it, and now, I'm a lawyer." "Whoa, really? I did that?" And those stories from educators are everywhere, right? And so, we just have to have faith that the positive work we're putting in, will come back, and we'll hear about it. And even if we don't hear about it, we're still changing lives in unknowing ways.

Ken Futernick:

I suspect you've had some students of your own at Santa Barbara who you've had an impact on, and have any of them come back and told you a story about what you did for them?

Victor Rios:

Yeah, there's a couple, there's one that was really, really nice. One of them, she became a lawyer, and I guess some Law Review did an article on her because she's very prominent now, and she sent me the Law Review piece and it was like, "What made you want to become a lawyer?" And she had taken my juvenile justice class, and she said, "Dr. Rios." That was a beautiful one.

And another beautiful one, it's just happened in the last 10 days or so. On my LinkedIn account, this young man posted the story, and it was pretty powerful. And essentially, he said that when he was 14, he was in juvie and drugged up, he was a drug addict. And his punishment for being in juvie was to come to UCSB for an event where I would inspire high school students. And the speaker at that event was Victor Rios. And his name is Victor, his first name, and he heard me speak, he said, "Maybe I could be Dr. Victor one day." And he left.

He started to change his life around, graduated high school, got out of the juvie system, went to community college, transferred to UCLA, and is now starting his doctorate program. So, it was real powerful, right? That those few words I was saying to those kids that one day, telling them my story, would have this effect, full circle on this young man that's now helping others. He works in East LA, also working in a outreach and drug treatment program. And that's just some of the recent ones. But yes, as educators, we... And every educator I meet, they tell me about someone that came back and told them, "Because of you, I am who I am today."

Ken Futernick:

Victor, I want to ask you about one other thing that you talk about in your TED Talk, you say something to the effect that it's not enough to have someone provide encouragement, and it doesn't help, I recall you were saying, to tell someone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, if they don't have straps on their boots. And Ms. Russ did a lot more than just tell you to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. But even then, I suspect you'd argue that having access to great teachers like Ms. Russ is still not enough to overcome the obstacles that children living in poverty face. Can you talk a little bit about poverty and the role that education and teaching can play, and whether you think teaching can overcome the obstacles that poverty poses for children?

Victor Rios:

Yes, absolutely. I think that our teachers are overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. And I think that as a society, we expect our teachers to solve all the ills that children have to live in. Structural ills, whether it's poverty, abandonment, health issues, et cetera.

And so, what we need to do is to provide educators the resources to be able to truly support our students, so that the educators are focused on the social, emotional, plus the academic, and then that, once they're done with their job, providing that social, emotional and academic piece, then they could refer the students to social workers, to what I refer to as success coaches. So, instead of security guards, success coaches at schools. That children are getting maybe into conflict in class, and the teacher is able to refer them to the success coach. And then, they have a meeting after, if they need to, with the teacher, or other kids with their success coach, this restorative justice base that's circle time, that's about making amends and learning from their mistakes.

And so, we need to invest in our teachers. We need to allow our teachers more time and autonomy. We need to provide them the right resources. Because most of the teachers I meet

out there, they want to go back to their purpose. And their purpose was to change lives. When they signed up to become educators, they did it because they wanted to inspire. They did it because some teacher helped them along the way. They did it because maybe, no teacher ever helped them, and they wanted to make sure that some children had teachers to help them, and they wanted to be that teacher. There are so many reasons, so many purposes, for why teachers go into education.

And so, to help an educator live their purpose, is by providing them the right resources, so they can truly transform lives. I think that's critical. So, we can't just... It's a setup to tell teachers, oh, just inspire kids, tell them to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. It's more like, look, inspire kids, teach them right, be focused on the social emotional piece as you teach the academic, and here's some tangible resources for you to use. Here's some grocery store gift certificates to give to their families. Here's some mentors and counselors you can call on when the kids are not doing well. And then, here are some trainings in social emotional work that really allow you to bring that classroom to a level where the kids are ready to learn, where you can gain their permission to teach them, and now you could push the academic piece.

Ken Futernick:

Victor, one last topic I'd love for you to reflect on a little bit, and it's the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, which really came about catalyzed by the killing of a black man named George Floyd by a police officer. Talk a bit about what that movement represents to you as a Latino, and what it means for Latinx people, and perhaps the role you think teachers should play in dealing with this topic with their students. And I guess, one final question to tie it back to your teacher story, how do you suppose Ms. Russ would handle it if she was still teaching?

Victor Rios:

Yeah, I mean, this is a cultural revolution that's taking place, Black Lives Matter. It's important then for us as educators to recognize it as a piece of history that we have to acknowledge. So, when our students come back, even if it's through remote learning, to allow that space and time to say, "Hey, you're living a moment in history. You will be written into the history books. Go ahead and talk about your feelings and experiences with Black Lives Matter. What were you doing? Where were you at?" You'd be surprised as educators that some of your students went to some of those protests, went to some of those rallies, that their families were some of the leaders in those protests and rallies.

And to have those courageous conversations about race and anti-racism is only going to benefit your students. Because otherwise, you're just participating in erasing their history. And that's a long legacy of erasing a lot of people of color's history already to begin with. So, that's crucial. For me, to talk about Black Lives Matter is, your struggle is my struggle. In other words, I support Black Lives Matter. I mean, in Español, siempre hablo con todas las redes sociales y las noticias de que las vidas negras importan.

So, I always talk in Spanish speaking media about Black Lives Matter. I think it's crucial. Latinx populations, many of us are black, many of us are of black origin. So, we can't deny that, we can't be colorist or anti-black. And then, one day, right? As we continue to promote Black Lives Matter, one day someone, maybe not a Latinx person is going to say, "Hey, immigrant rights matter. What about the immigrant children that are locked up in cages right now? Let's go rescue them. Let's go help them out."

So, your struggle is my struggle, Tu lucha es mi lucha. And that's what we need to be about, that we learn about the richness of all the cultures, all the races, all the ethnicities and their contributions to this country, and how we need to support each other's struggle. It's much more powerful for someone to come and support my people's struggle than for me to constantly be like, "What about my people? What about my people?" So, that's crucial also to talk about with our students, when they're saying, "What about my people? What about other lives that matter?" And that we say, "Of course, these conversations are important, and that's why Black Lives Matter matters, and that's why we continue that struggle."

And again, we're in a cultural revolution, a lot is happening, and it's important to really bring it out in the front of the conversation, front end, and just talk about it. Because many times, especially in communities that come from collectivist cultures, we don't go to college for ourselves, we go to college for our communities, we go to college for our families, we go to college to promote where we come from, for our people.

And so, Black Lives Matter is a moment where we could be like, "Look, you could be supporting these movements by becoming a lawyer, by becoming an officer, by becoming a teacher, by becoming an historian that writes about these struggles." And so, really giving children the opportunity to feel like they truly are a part of history, is a powerful phenomenon.

Ken Futernick:

Victor, there are so many other questions that I would love to ask you about, but I'm thinking we probably have to bring this episode to a close. So, I want to thank you so much for sharing the story about Ms. Russ, the stories about your life, and through your reflections about poverty and teaching and education, and even the Black Lives Matter movement, and how it fits into this story. As always, I want to encourage Teacher Story listeners to submit a Teacher Story, if you have one you'd like to share. Well, this concludes another Teacher Story. Once again, I want to express my appreciation to my guest, Dr. Victor Rios.

Victor Rios:

Thank you. Thank you.