

For the first 16 years of my teaching career, I would come home from school and tell my husband Jon stories about my day teaching. I taught at a school where the students were mostly high achieving, their parents valued education, and students generally did what I asked them to do. The stories I told could be funny, especially when I told him things I had said and how the students had reacted. Sometimes they were dramatic, like when a fight broke out or we had to go on lockdown because of a nearby bank robbery. Other times they were sad, when students shared the death of a family member. I absolutely loved my job and on some days I would come home and share how I had “killed” that day, just like a stand-up comedian. I rocked it! I was funny and engaging and the kids loved me. My stories were not so much about the learning, though my students were learning. Students definitely did some math and they got smarter.

For my 17th year of teaching, I went to a new school. My new school was the lowest performing school in my district and my students would not always do what I asked them to do. I was still funny and engaging and the kids loved me. We also did math, but the kids didn’t seem to be getting smarter. My magic wasn’t working. I had to change how I did things. More importantly, I had to change how students did things in my math classroom.

That year, when I came home to tell Jon about my day, it was different. Sometimes I would tell stories, in tears, because my students were pushing back as I was asking them to think in ways they hadn’t before and it was hard. Every couple of weeks I would come home and say, “It was magic in there today.” I would go on to tell him something amazing I had heard a student say or seen a student do with mathematics. I had gotten smarter about that student that day. It was Jon who pointed out that my stories had changed. The magic was coming from my students. I started to have more and more days that I could say, “It was magic today.” The magic came from them. It was now about the learning because the learning mattered so much. When the stakes got higher, the magic had to come from them.

My classroom went from a place where I was having a blast hanging out with students and teaching them math to a place where I was still having a blast with students but it was while they were reading, writing, thinking and talking together about math. I was getting smarter about them as they were bringing the magic.

What I see as the most profound change for both me and my students is my intentional thinking around teaching and planning. Figuring out how I will know what students know and what I will do with that information to challenge, support and encourage them to get smarter. The best way to accelerate student learning is to know where they are now, how they're making sense of mathematics, and what they'll need to get to where they are going.

5 Promises is all about how to intentionally plan in order to challenge, support and encourage students to get smarter every day in the mathematics classroom. I hope that this process helps you and your students as much as it helps me and mine.