Views from the Field: Teaching, Relationships, and Time

Ms. Johnson: But a lot of these teachers are just there for the paycheck.
Jermaine: They [teachers] just want the money. They’re not trying to teach you.
Ms. Rodriguez: So we’re saying that when we used to go to school, it’s like the teacher was there to teach, not just get her paycheck. And it seem like they [teachers today] just get their paychecks.
Ms. Mason: Because we’ve had people that really care, that you know that they want to see the kids. Then you have the one that’s just there for the paycheck.

I open this column with recurring talk about teachers and paychecks that highlights parents’ and students’ beliefs that teachers should teach for reasons beyond money. This teacher/paycheck discourse is one of several ways that parents and students talk about teachers. In this column, I assert that there are lessons about that we can learn by listening to the words of students and families. The voices I present belong to a group of my former first grade students and their parents. Over a ten-year period, I have regularly visited the families to talk with them about literacy and schooling.

In this column, I explore the connections students and parents make between teaching and time. As I write, I fear that the critiques of students and their parents are harsh. We hear frustrated voices that certainly do not apply to all teachers. In fact almost all the participants in the study readily identify teachers whom they loved deeply. In addition, it is clear that many participants were not fully aware of the pressures and constraints that teachers faced in terms of covering curriculum and preparing students for tests. I offer their voices, not as a critique of the profession, but as an opportunity for their concerns to be heard and as a space for us all to self-reflect.

Providing, Making, Taking, and Giving Time

Perhaps the most prevalent and striking references to time and teaching relate to the ways students and parents describe teachers’ proclivity to provide, make, take and give time to students. In the following section, I focus on temporal language (e.g., “go slow,” “not hurry up,” “help kids more,” “every time”) and implied temporal references (e.g., “you’ve got enough attention,” “goes over [reviews] what we have done,” “don’t just brush them [kids] off”) to examine four temporal dimensions of students’ relationships with teachers.

• Providing time referred to allowing students time to work through difficult concepts. This data often focused on teachers who moved too quickly through material or failed to review material that had been taught.
• Making time referenced teachers carving out time to help students according to their individual needs. This was sometimes described as occurring despite large class sizes and curricular demands.
• Taking time referenced getting to know students as individuals and included communicating with parents.
• Giving time referred to teachers’ willingness to barter time with students, allowing them to occasionally use class
time for social purposes once their work was completed.

**Providing Time**

Several students were concerned that their teachers did not provide them with the time they needed to learn material and complete tasks. Jermaine, a struggling student who was eventually retained multiple times in middle school, critiqued the temporal expectations that his teachers imposed. When asked what advice he would give his teachers, Jermaine said, “I’ll tell them to slow down with the math, go slow for some students that don’t get it, and help the students that don’t get it.” He complained that in language arts “we do like a book like for a week, [then] we go to another subject” and when he asked his Spanish teacher about a vocabulary word, he reported that she “say it all fast.” As he reported, “they do like a week of this and then next week they do something that’s different”; “they just go too fast.” As Jermaine lamented, “They must think we [are] smart.”

Other students echoed Jermaine’s comments. David, a more successful student, made the following comment about teachers and the pace of instruction. “[Teachers] have to be ready. [They] have to have good plans to make people learn. Not hurry up and just get going - do nows, do stuff.” Confused, I was not sure what David meant by “Do nows?” I asked him to clarify. David explained “Do nows? Like when you come to class, you have to do this right now!”

Providing time entails not only allowing students time to work through difficult concepts but also allows students to work at their own pace without them inferring that they are not “smart.” Quick-paced and insensitive instruction can leave students feeling incompetent and frustrated suggesting to the students that even well-intended teachers do not care.

**Making Time**

*Making time* involves teachers helping students, explaining concepts, and meeting the needs of individual students. Teachers must actively carve out time to ensure that not only is material presented but that time is allocated to helping students master that material. Parents intrinsically retained faith in students’ ability to learn and worried that their children’s abilities were not recognized or developed. Throughout the comments presented below, parents recognize structural issues including large class sizes, curricular demands, and large student/teacher ratios. While they attested to teaching as hard work, they did not relieve teachers of their responsibilities and were adamant that teachers must find ways to help children learn.

Mr. Sherwood, whose mother was a teacher, was particularly sensitive to the challenges teachers faced. “It’s hard being a teacher because like I says I know I could never be a teacher. That would be out of my mind.” He explained that he would love Marvin to be in a class with two teachers saying, “that would be great for him”. Similarly, Jermaine explained that having a second teacher in his classes would be helpful. Jermaine’s mother, Ms. Hudson, highlighted the importance of individualized instruction – working with children one-on-one as needed. The mother of a student who had consistently struggled in school, she reported “a good teacher, she can’t go to everybody at the same time, Okay? She has to do individual, you know.”

While both students and parents recognized the challenges created by large classes and understaffing, they held teachers responsible for teaching. As David reported, “To me teachers do what they got to do. . . . I understand that they don’t feel like teaching it thousand of times because they get tired of it, but they should [teach], that’s what they get paid for.” Jermaine, perhaps due to his frustrations with school, was less understanding. His advice to teachers was to “help them [students] out.” He continued, “Like if you ask for [help on] the problem, they like say, ‘Do this and divide this’. They don’t like show you or nothing – just tell you. They need to show you . . . [and] do not tell us, a child, to shut up.” Jermaine suspected that his teachers “just don’t like helping me” and was not alone with his concerns.

Christy: [Teachers have to] “break it down to us.”
Ms. Johnson: [I’ve heard teachers say] “If you don’t get it while I am teaching, oh well”
Bradford: “They should “help us more to read” and “help us sound out the words more better.”
Marvin claimed that teachers only paid attention to him only when he was doing something bad.

Conversely, David draws on this discourse to describe his favorite teacher, “He tries to give us help us on what we need help on, questions and he goes over what we have done before we take a test and stuff.” This account positions the teacher as a partner who helps students master material in order to do well on tests. As David noted, “very few [teachers] explain what’s on the test.”

Making time for students requires teachers to help students when they encounter difficulties, explain concepts, and work with individual students. In this role, teachers are positioned as resources that students can draw upon to learn material and prepare for tests. Teachers are positioned as trying to help children succeed not documenting what has not been learned. This involves taking time with students, explaining things, and “break[ing] it down to us.”

Taking Time

Taking time involved getting to know students as individuals. It entailed talking with students, learning about their lives and being in contact with their families. Christy’s adopted mother, Ms. Denver described taking time:

[A] good teacher [as] one who shows interest in the kid and when they come tell them and ask them a question, they don’t just brush them off. They stand and listen to the kid’s problems and stuff. If you know there’s something they can’t handle, you know, maybe [they] call the parent and get in touch with the parent.

Alicia noted that teachers should “talk to the kids one-on-one.” Marvin agrees saying, “You should already listen to a student before they go and do something [they shouldn’t].”

Peter, a successful student, compared his teachers to his image of teachers from the past.

Nowadays, they’re [teachers are] like talking like the students and things. And they know mostly what’s going on in the schools [and in] a lot of students’ lives and I don’t think they could do anything more. I mean they’re acting like a student now.

While Peter believed that impersonal teachers who did not relate to students were occasionally problems, he explained, “most of the time they are our friends” and shared suggestions for how teachers could learn more about their students - “Visit where they live, talk to the people they talk to, know what they [are] going through. Know about their life and their struggles, things like that.”

Ms. Holt worried about specifically teachers who taught in low-income communities.

They need patience because there’s some of these kids, they come from hard, hard, hard lives. And these teachers aren’t educated to deal with the hard life this kid is going through. . . . they don’t understand the children of this city.” She noted that he teachers are in the community from 7:30 until 3:30 but that she has “never seen a teacher walk to the corner store. . . which they should do.”

Marvin, who in grade eight was struggling with both school and with the law, did not have strong relationships with his teachers. As he indicated, “I don’t pay no attention to my teachers. . . I don’t like looking at my teachers.” Concerned, I asked “Mmm, why not?” Marvin did not respond. I tried again, “Are they trying to help you? Or don’t they really like you? Or what do you think is going on?” Marvin just mumbled, “I don’t know.”

Another way that teachers took time with students, was by staying in contact with families. Throughout the interviews, parents spoke about the importance of teachers calling home. Ms. Hudson described “nice” teachers as being willing to call. Ms. Rodriguez reported that she knew that Alicia had good teachers if they called her when there was a problem. Before eighth grade even started, one of Alicia’s teachers called home. Ms. Rodriguez thought this was great, “She [the teacher] was like, ‘If you have any problems take down my number’. . . she says, ‘I’m not going to only call you for a bad report. I’m going to call you for good report’ and I’m like, ‘Ok.’”

Taking time with students involved getting to know students as individuals and entailed forming personal and friendly relationships with both students and their parents. It means learning about their lives and understanding “the children of this city.”

Giving Time
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Many students valued teachers who bartered time – making deals with students so that if they worked hard and completed assignments, they would be rewarded with time to socialize or engage in enjoyable activities.

Javon: Like every time that the teachers give us something to do and when we finish it, they should give us like a two-minute break.

Jermaine: [When we are good] we drink pop, [eat] cookies, watch TV, do work, activities, a lot of stuff . . . [and] go on field trips.

Javon: Sometimes he [the teacher] gives us candy . . . but if we really good, he lets us sit around and talk for a couple minutes.

Javon: The best part is when it’s lunchtime. They let the kids go outside if they’re done with lunch . . . we just sit around and socialize until lunch is over.

Peter highlighted this negotiation between teachers and students. He reported, “[Teachers should] sometimes give us a break. The students won’t take advantage of them, but every once in a while, yeah, you have your class clown and they’ll probably do something.” While Peter does not suggest that bartering will solve all behavior problems, he argued that it could address problems with some of the children.

**Considering Time**

In these accounts, time is treated as a commodity that teachers could give or take. They could take time with students or barter time in school. Time could be used as a tool to build relationships with students and families and to help students to learn content. Perhaps more importantly, time was a factor that recurred in students’ discourses and distinguished the teachers who cared – those who were there for more than their paychecks. It is my hope that the voices of parents and teachers can help us all to rethink the expectations we place on teachers and allow teachers the time they need to create spaces that allow students to grow, thrive, and learn.

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