

Teachers as Caretakers: The Difficulties of Translating Ideals Into Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student-centered learning communities require intentionality, reflection, and an endearing commitment to care. This chapter demonstrates that despite years of experience teachers can still experience disillusionment when the ideals they hold tightly are challenged. During times of disillusionment and struggle it can become easier to let go of personal ideals of care for individual students, the collective learning community, and for teacher's self-care. However, students are competent human beings who can rise to the challenge of caring for each other in beautiful ways, reminding us all of the importance of student-centered learning.

INTRODUCTION

"It is important for pedagogy not to be the prisoner of too much certainty but instead to be aware of both the relativity of its powers and the difficulties of translating its ideals into practice" (Gandini, 2012, p. 37).

As the door to my light-blue office closed behind the dejected father, my heart sank. How had I let this happen? It was the most difficult exit interview I had ever facilitated. Sure, over the past eight years at a small, religious, private school many students had transferred to other schools. It was our school policy to facilitate exit interviews with each family that chose to withdraw so we could gather data to report to our school board and make the necessary changes to become a better school. Exit interviews invited me to reflect deeply and examine how I could shift my leadership as academic dean to more effectively create a school where all students could thrive. It was a time where I could strategically plan changes to create a system where all students were cared for. However, this interview was particularly poignant. The girls were transferring to another local, religious private school. They were not moving to a new community. They were not leaving to go to a free-tuition institution. They were not leaving because

they were striving students who needed more services. My school was losing two elementary students because we had failed to fulfill our responsibility to care for them.

During the exit interview, this loving father had emotionally explained that he had been concerned about his oldest daughter's learning experience early in the year and considered transferring her despite how difficult mid-year transitions can be. He now wished he had acted upon his concerns because he feared her love of learning had been permanently squelched. He had left her enrolled at our school despite his hesitation because he trusted me. He had trusted that under my leadership healthy learning would be facilitated in the classroom. His trust in me had negatively impacted his daughter's education. His words were not expressed in anger. His words were not misdirected. His words were not a surprise attack. I had failed to care for this young learner. As these realizations sunk in, I was determined that never again would a parent's trust in me be misplaced. Never again would a student in my care have their love of learning squelched. If I could not protect students' learning I would walk away from the administrative job. Six months later I resigned.

CARE FOR EDUCATIONAL IDEALS

With a passion and love for all things school, I had completed my bachelor's degree in elementary education. I then began my teaching career as a teacher in a combination first and second grade classroom. During my second year of teaching I started my master's program studying curriculum and instruction. I continued to teach a variety of grade levels in small, private schools until I left the K-12 system to earn my doctorate. After completing my doctoral studies, I returned to the K-12 system as an academic dean but continued to teach part time even while I worked on the administrative team.

My twenty-four years of teaching and learning have engrained in me certain values. I believe in the transformative power of education (Robinson, 2005). I strongly believe in the competence of the child (Baker, 2015). I agree with Howard Gardner (2012) that healthy school systems are "a collection of schools for young children in which each child's intellectual, emotional, social, and moral potentials are carefully cultivated and guided" (xiv). I enjoy the nuances of systems thinking in connection to all things educational (Cadwell, Ryan, & Schwall, 2015, p. 112). I believe that "the principle educational vehicle involves youngsters in long-term engrossing projects, which are carried out in a beautiful, healthy, love-filled setting" (Gardner, 2012, xiv). I know that creativity is the heart of learning (MacKay, 2015). I know that the spirit of play should be foundational to the construction of thought (Gandini, 2012). And, I want classrooms to be places that honor "the hundred languages of children" (Malaguzzi, 2012, p. 3).

Because I did not feel I could enact these values as an administrator in that small private religious school, I walked away from my administrative role. Instead, I decided to re-enter the teaching realm where I believed I could live out the values in the micro-space of the classroom (Dewey, 1956). I envisioned, the students and I working together to create a beautiful culture of care (Noddings, 1993). Together we could overcome whatever small systemic barriers we might encounter to joyful learning (Mraz, 2016) and engage in the transformative work of student-centered learning (MacHemer & Crawford, 2007).

As schools in my area posted elementary job openings, I confidently submitted my resume. I was excited when I received an invitation to interview. I carefully researched the school's published vision, mission, core values, and curriculum guide. I painted my fingernails and selected a coordinating notebook, pen, and bag. I prayed that if this was the right fit for me at this time, I would know it and the opportunity would develop.

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