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Living Your Values in the Classroom: The Connection Between Beliefs, Pedagogy, and Personhood

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Abstract

New teachers face challenges as they acclimate to the profession. One of the toughest obstacles is finding ways to hold onto beliefs about teaching and students when faced with systemic obstacles. In this reflective essay, a second-year teacher describes the challenges she has faced, as well as the strategies she uses to maintain both her belief-system and her passion for teaching. The essay ends with recommendations for both new and experienced teachers to match values with actions for the preservation of self and benefit of students.

Keywords

New Teacher, Teacher Beliefs, Induction

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Living Your Values in the Classroom: The Connection Between Beliefs, Pedagogy, and Personhood

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New teachers face challenges as they acclimate to the profession. One of the toughest obstacles is finding ways to hold onto beliefs about teaching and students when faced with systemic obstacles. In this reflective essay, a second-year teacher describes the challenges she has faced, as well as the strategies she uses to maintain both her belief-system and her passion for teaching. The essay ends with recommendations for both new and experienced teachers to match values with actions for the preservation of self and benefit of students.

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Editorial Note: *The editors of the Northwest Journal of Teacher Education feel strongly that understanding the experiences of new teachers is critical for the field of education. As teacher educators, we prepare those coming into the profession as best as we can to enter a challenging educational system; however, the work is difficult and exhausting, causing many to leave their classrooms after a very short number of years (citation). Of course, teaching is also exhilarating and immensely satisfying; schools are filled with passionate educators who persistently work to educate all children. We reached out to second-year teacher Bailey Ellis-Wiard to find out how she has navigated her first two years of teaching. Below is her reflective essay.*

Introduction

I believe that the way that we teach comes directly from the most essential beliefs we hold about our students. Classrooms where teachers believe their students to be capable scholars feel vastly different than classrooms where teachers believe their students to be lazy hooligans. Our beliefs shape our pedagogy, whether we have articulated them or not.

Unfortunately, a lot of undeveloped young brain behaviors may be perceived by adults as lazy hooligan shenanigans, and there is a tendency to let temporary frustrations infiltrate and contaminate our approach to teaching--whether we recognize it or not. If you have spent any

amount of time in a staff lounge, it is likely that you know these types of frustrations: Students who do not put in effort, students who are absent often and never check in, students who make strange choices about how to use their class time and disrupt their peers, and on and on into the trenches of schools. These issues can feel unwieldy when you are wrestling daily with the lives of young people--sometimes 100+ young people for high school teachers--and likely not supported with enough systems or resources to meet their varying needs. Teachers can not do it all for every student, and it can break our hearts and overwhelm us if we let it. There is so much that we do not control. Who gets breakfast in the morning, who has supportive parents, who is dating whom... Yet, there is much that we can control, and it starts with our beliefs about students, and the role of education in their lives.

Why I am a Teacher

I am a teacher because I believe that education is the most powerful tool with which to change the world, and I believe that our world needs a lot of changing. Therefore, the more that students can be empowered by education to see themselves as change-makers, the wider the impact of my work. However, the education system in the United States as it currently stands does not place the same value or intentionality on raising students to be the change. This is evident through standardized testing, inflexible curriculum, compliance-based grading, and highly punitive discipline resulting in the school-to-prison pipeline--and the list could go on. This system creates challenges for teachers like myself whose values and beliefs are put to the test every day by factors outside of our control. It requires flexibility and vulnerability to navigate, but it is not wholly unpleasant, and it is certainly worth the effort. For me, teaching is not worth doing if I am not doing it in a manner aligned with my values. In fact, if I am not teaching values-first, I am harming students.

Challenges to Holding on to Ideals

When I was preparing for my first year of teaching, I had many ideas for how things would go in my classroom--and a lot of them promptly changed or adapted when I was faced with real students, real colleagues, and the system as a whole. Living your beliefs as a teacher every day requires a lot of reflection and commitment, and that can feel like extra weight to top off an already huge load to carry. And no matter how much work a teacher does and how consistent they try to be, one person in a school (or one person in a whole education system) simply cannot be a wholly functional, values-driven island on their own. Our daily work as teachers is still impacted by the faulty system at large.

Whenever I notice this, I try to reflect and examine the way that I can flex my practice to the system I am faced with, and, if possible, how I can push the system to flex with me. I think about my essential beliefs about students, and the way that the challenge I face may contrast with that belief. Below are some challenges that I have faced in my first two years of teaching.

Working at a college prep school for first generation college students. I teach at a small public charter school whose mission is to prepare first-generation students for college. I have always had mixed feelings about charters: I think that when they are run well and work to meet an honorable mission, charters can support students who thrive in smaller environments to achieve great things. Too often, however, this is not the case. I admire the administrators of my charter for their growth mindset; it is not a perfect place, but each year they reflect and plan for strategic growth in the organization based on data and feedback. This commitment to growth is what gives me great hope that the organization will adapt and become stronger as time goes on, and reflects an essential belief that I hold: As educators, we must model for students the type of reflective and change-making behaviors we want to see from them.

As it stands, however, there are some things about working in this setting that challenge my values. I believe that there are many life paths that students can take after high school, and attending a 4-year college is just one; however, this option is pushed heavily at my school. That being said, students have opted to attend a college prep charter. In most cases, this is the vision my students want for themselves as well, although I think it is potentially limiting to focus on 4-year institutions as the ultimate goal for all of our students.

Homogeneity of students. Additionally, based on the geographic location and mission of our school, the institution is highly segregated--96% Latinx. I have many feelings about this as well. On one hand, supporting predominantly Latinx students to reach their college-going dreams is a great honor, as this population is historically underrepresented in universities, and I believe that opening the doors for students of color is essential for the growth of our country, socially, economically, and otherwise. On the other hand, the homogeneity creates a classic echo chamber effect: Most of the students share the same culture, religion, economic status, and political beliefs. While they are still individuals, of course, diversity of discourse and thought at the school is almost non-existent. It is challenging to develop critical thinking, skillful communication, and empathy for difference when there is nobody different to practice with.

As a teacher, I believe that it is important for students to navigate difference, so it then becomes my responsibility to bring in new ideas and perspectives through literature and tough philosophical questions. As it turns out, my students sometimes have more differences of opinion than I would have predicted. In these cases--especially because they are not used to disagreeing--it is essential to have a structure for communication. Using discussion strategies like Response Groups (Burke, 2007), which provides sentence frames and requires turn-taking for everyone to share, keeps the conversation productive. Still, things can get heated. Teachers need to set

expectations for respect each time they bring in a hot topic, and follow up with students if the conversation takes a sour turn. This helps to create a foundation of trust in the classroom allows students to take risks and share their ideas, knowing that the teacher expects and demands respectful communication.

Having the skills and resources to create student buy-in for my ideals. Navigating difference, and intentionally bringing that difference to the homogeneous environment, provides me an opportunity to live my values, even in the face of some systemic flaws. No matter what happens outside of my classroom, within the classroom I can use these opportunities to teach important skills like nonviolent communication and empathy. Ideally, in a magical school environment with fully funded resources and staff buy-in, these things would be whole-school initiatives built into classroom curriculum, school culture, and discipline. Unfortunately, a holistic, consistent, and equitable system like that is something I have never personally seen work successfully in a school, despite the fact that the goal is written in many district equity plans.

On the classroom level, I use the experiences of characters in texts as a way to enter conversations about difficult topics. Lennie and George from *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937) give us the opportunity to discuss what it means to be a good friend. Even students who giggle and scoff initially when I ask if they believe that *they* are a good friend feel comfortable judging George, and by the end of the unit, they comment more deeply about themselves. For any subject we tackle, there is always a process of warming up. My students come to school with many challenges in their lives that may at times cause them to freeze people out and reject genuine, vulnerable connection. I do not blame or judge them for this, but I know that they are going to need to connect in order to grow as human beings--and that is my main goal for them.

As an English teacher, I use literature as a vehicle, but if they are not happier, healthier, smarter people at the end of the unit, how much does it really matter that they read a book and wrote an essay?

The happier, healthier, smarter people approach to education is messy--and messy processes are scary. It can feel like the teacher loses a lot of control when students start to talk passionately about topics that matter to them. Nonviolent communication is a thread that I weave throughout every unit of study. Any time we tackle difficult topics, I give them sentence frames to use, such as:

- “I believe ____ because ____,”
- “I disagree with the idea that ____ because ____,”
- “When people ____, I feel ____.”

I also use sentence frames as a way to keep the conversation focused on ideas and not people. Students do not intentionally attack one another, but passion about a topic can take their filter away, and outside conflict with peers can creep into the way they approach the conversation as well. I notice that over the course of practicing these communication strategies, students eventually start to use them without my enforcement. It also helps when we need to discuss something emotional or behavioral that is happening in class as students already have a frame for productive and respectful conversation.

In multiple English 1 classes this year, students were frustrated with their peers’ disruptive behavior--and I was, too. To communicate their frustrations, they started by exploding at one another with “shut up!” Since “shut up” is not a particularly effective long-term strategy, I gave students sentence frames to use, and an opportunity to write to their peers about their negative impact on the classroom environment. At first, some students wrote things like, “You act stupid

in class because you don't care about your education, and that's on you because you'll never go to college." Although this may be how they felt, it was not a helpful message to build our community. Luckily, I read the messages before we read them out loud. I did a mini-lesson on how to switch your message from blame to impact, and we revised. The tone of the conversation changed for the better. For example, the initial personal attack became instead, "When you talk and goof around, I can't focus on my work, and that's not fair to the class." We also did a response round, where students wrote about how they felt after hearing everyone's reflection. Ultimately, not every single person in the room had huge revelations and behavior changes, but I was able to refer back to the conversation when students were disruptive, and it wasn't just about me as the teacher, but about their class community.

Overall, English 1 students still have many communication skills to learn, but I believe that they have a foundation to grow from, and will continue developing these skills in other classes. Making the space for these conversations is often the first thing to go when teachers get behind on the curriculum map, but in the happier, healthier, smarter human model of education, these skills are essential and well worth the time.

When the school does not have a consistent or equitable behavior management system. The biggest challenge I have faced is consistent and equitable classroom management. I have not yet worked in a school where there is a successful school-wide behavior management system that gives teachers the support that they need in the classroom. When the school lacks a system, the individual teachers must become their own systems, or abandon systems entirely. With all of the work that goes into creating consistent and manageable practices, and then following up with students and parents, other teachers, and administrators, it is no wonder why most teachers would fall to the latter option.

I have not perfected this at the classroom level either. As a second-year teacher, I feel like I am as consistent or inconsistent as the system my school uses. This year, that system has been very inconsistent, so in my classroom, although expectations have not changed over the course of the year, consequences have never quite leveled out. However, one thing that has always been constant for me is considering equity in discipline. I used to believe that all punitive discipline was a shallow excuse for totalitarianism, and harmful to students. Now I understand that students need clear structures to learn classroom behaviors. There are many factors to consider in this, and the tone of communicating about discipline to a student should always be about growth. The underlying belief must always be that the student wants to participate appropriately in the classroom environment, but may need to be taught what that looks like. So, I would say that at a belief level, I am consistent and treat students with respect in discipline; in consistency of routine, both my school and I need to grow.

With regard to discipline, one way that I live my values while managing behavior is to try to keep students in class rather than send them out. This is necessary, as we currently do not have anywhere for them to go if we do send them out, but it also helps me talk to students about their behavior and coach them on the skills rather than sending them away from the learning. On the other hand, I occasionally hear students comment that there are no consequences for disruptive behaviors at our school. This indicates that they are not learning the behavioral skills that they need, and may benefit from stronger boundaries with higher consequences. As an individual teacher, I have not successfully figured out how to impose those higher consequences without adding more to my workload than I am willing to take on.

For next year, our school will be better staffed to address this issue, and we plan to meet before the year starts to discuss a system that will be equitable and supportive to our students. At

the classroom level, I plan to adapt my system to be somewhat self-sustaining but also manageable. This will include a strong focus on teaching routines and expectations at the start of the year, scheduling time in my week to make phone calls home, and scheduling reflective time where the students in my classes can discuss what is working and not working for them openly with one another. All of these practices fit my belief that classroom management should not be unnecessarily or inequitably punitive, but should teach students the expected scholarly behaviors and support them to practice those behaviors, fitting with restorative practices that support all students (Ayers & Dohrn, 2000).

Teaching advanced placement courses. The 2017-18 school year was my first teaching Advanced Placement (AP) Literature to eleventh and twelfth grader students. In terms of curriculum, this has been the biggest challenge to maintaining my values as a teacher. I first recognized this challenge at AP training over the summer--an expensive ordeal in which I learned little about teaching meaningful literature for the purpose of engaging students in critical thought, and everything about training students for multiple choice and timed essay-writing. At this training--the only AP training I would receive--teachers were explicitly told to teach to the test. This is basically the opposite of my values as a teacher, as test-taking does not really relate to change-making in the world. It certainly does not result in happier, healthier, smarter humans--not to mention that this approach is the opposite of a lot of research, which proves the teach-to-the-test pedagogy to be ineffective. Needless to say, I was unwilling to flex here.

Luckily, my school does not allow this type of teaching in any class, AP or not, so I wasted four days and a few hundred dollars of school funding at this training, but left without too much harm done. Still, I knew that throughout the year, I would have to intentionally prepare my students to be successful at the AP test, especially because most of them entered the class

multiple years below grade level in reading and writing. To clarify, I do not think that the skills tested in AP exams are obsolete. Multiple choice questions about literature can help train students to zoom in and closely examine elements of a passage or poem, which I believe helps them read all kinds of texts with a stronger critical eye; timed writing requires a student to quickly read, plan, and respond to a prompt thoroughly and with evidence, which helps them to problem-solve and create fast responses. For college prep students, both skills are valuable in the context of higher education, and even though after they leave those environments they may never see a multiple-choice question again, the skills involved still bear some transferable value.

Did I want to spend the entire year teaching only for this test? Absolutely not. That would be a great disservice to my students. So, I decided to incorporate the practice of those skills throughout the year, but focused more on the skill of reading, analyzing, and discussing literature with others, like students would do in a college literature course.

Text selection is another place where the idea of college-readiness for my specific demographic of students raises a lot of questions for me as a teacher. I believe that the texts historically taught in English Literature courses do not encompass vast swaths of important literature--particularly created by people of color--and that literature encompasses many genres. Despite this, I know that my students may be at a disadvantage entering college if they do not have a firm grasp of the classics. However, many classics do not speak to their experiences. To compromise, I tried to balance the Western canon with rigorous and engaging multicultural texts and choice reading, which included graphic novels, music, and film as well as the traditional novels and poetry. As the test approached, I was concerned that I had not adequately prepared them for the older texts; students do not go out of their way to choose Socrates or Ovid--though they did surprise me with their love of the Victorians--but I believe that the work they did on

other texts hopefully carries over. We will find out this summer! In my pedagogy, what is more important than passing an AP test is fostering a love of literature and an understanding of art as a way to create change in the world.

My Goal: Creating Change-Makers

Students need a lot of skills in order to be change-makers, but these skills are not the ones traditionally emphasized. This is where my focus on happier, healthier, and smarter humans comes into play. First, change-makers need strong communication skills. Although listening standards are technically part of Common Core (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), I find that it is still rare to witness true listening in classrooms. In many ways, listening is harder than reading, writing, and speaking, because when done genuinely, it is complex and relational, personal and vulnerable. It is scary. But there is no way to feel the need for change without it.

Listening is foundational in developing another essential skill for change-makers: empathy. When I was in high school, *Of Mice and Men* was not read with a lens of empathy--rather, the entire unit focused on the history of the Great Depression, which misses many empathy-building engagement opportunities. Steinbeck also offers so much potential for discussion of ethics, morality, and decision-making. Is it ethical for George to make choices for Lenny? Should you give up on impossible dreams? Change-makers need to wrestle with difficult, relevant questions; they need to see the grey area, particularly as it applies to being a human and interacting with other humans and the world.

Raising students to be change-makers also requires a different approach to the role of the teacher. Perhaps the most important part of this process is for students to see themselves in this role, which does not come easily after years of disempowering school practices. Students must

be told that they have power, and given opportunities to practice using it. This can be scary for teachers, because it requires that we hand over a degree of our power to students, and being an authoritarian is, in many ways, easier. Teachers must be willing to take risks, just as they must ask their students to take risks--and the more willing the teacher is to take bigger risks, the more willing students will be to match their risk-taking energy. This does not mean that the teacher turns over the whole classroom to the students: That would be chaos. The most successful risk-taking teachers have a high level of structure to support the students in feeling safe to take those risks.

Risk-taking teachers also need a high level of love. To feel safe, students need to know that their teacher believes in them, cares about them, and wants to see them do well. They need a teacher to facilitate positive peer-to-peer interactions and build community in the classroom. They need to see their teacher living the values that make it safe for them to take risks. Really, they need to see a human being doing their best. This is comforting; all of the limitations of time and resources that teachers face in schools cannot get in the way of that. By letting students into our teacher-brains, being transparent about our values and how those values show up in our classrooms, and asking them to participate in the process, teachers can raise change-makers: happier, healthier, and smarter humans who will grow up to help us with this work.

It is not enough, however, to pretend to take risks, and to see students as change-makers ... *kind of* ... to believe that they can do it--well, most of them. It is a whole-heart pedagogy based in the belief that all students can and will do amazing things for themselves and their communities when given the support to do so, and a willingness to reflect, flex, turn over the power, and be uncomfortable in order to make it happen.

Concluding Thoughts

Everything in the world of teaching seems a lot easier said than done. The amount of time management that goes into the work of a teacher never ceases to amaze (and kind of overwhelm) me, but I also know that the better I am at managing my time, the more I can do for my students. I recommend that teachers prioritize reflection in their practice. I keep an ongoing document simply titled, “Teacher Thoughts”. In it, I make notes of lessons that went particularly well, how I would change them next time, questions that I have about things I am noticing in my classroom, and random ideas to use later. It is not organized at all, but I try to update it at least once every other week, because documenting my ideas is essential for growth.

Speaking of prioritization, I would recommend that all teachers (new teachers in particular) think in terms of *priority*, because it is clear from day one of student teaching that we will never be able to do all of the things that we want to do in this role. Therefore, we must decide what is most important. For example: *Is it more important for me to get grades updated today, or to choose a different article because the one I used with second period didn't work out as planned? If I take 10 minutes to call two parents now, how much will that throw off my copy-making routine?* It sounds trivial, but I find that keeping a to-do list of priorities, and actively using prioritization strategies, helps me stay organized and be efficient.

Staying organized around my priorities also helps me maintain boundaries. Teachers could easily work 24 hours, seven days a week if we let ourselves, so it is important to know how to put work away, and say no when we need to. My ultimate efficiency goal is to become so prepared and streamlined in my routines that I only work my contracted hours--no late nights, no weekends. I think this will be important as I consider continuing my higher education and having a family. However, the reality of teaching is that there is so much to do that streamlining feels like an impossible dream. Right now, I work my contract hours most weekdays. Occasionally, I

will stay late to grade or change plans, and I usually spend one weekend morning making sure that I am ready for the next week. Given that I am only in my second year of teaching, I think this is excellent progress. In my first year, I worked at least two extra hours per weekday, and two-thirds of my weekend. I believe that teachers are at their best for students when they have a healthy work-life balance, and my boundaries help me achieve that.

Lastly, I recommend to actively reject the isolation that teachers so often experience. My colleague-friends have been so helpful in keeping me grounded and helping me think through different classroom issues. It is worth the time it takes to build relationships with other teachers, seek their advice, and observe their teaching. It is not helpful to attend to the staff lounge lunchtime complaint-fest; that is not the type of community teachers need. Find helpful colleagues who build you up and share your essential beliefs about students. Connect with them regularly. As we greet our students at the door, my classroom neighbor often asks me, “What is going well in your classes right now?” so when we talk about what is not going well, we are solution-oriented and remember the positives.

The work of a teacher is monumental, both in scope and moral responsibility. Nothing about this work is easy, but when teachers recognize that they are guided by the essential beliefs they hold about students and education, the gravity of reflection and living ones’ values in the classroom becomes clear. As I continue my teaching career, I will keep reflecting and trying new things, turning over power to students, and sharing my values with them, so that the consistency of my values and actions grows with each new class. I challenge other teachers, new and veteran, to do the same.

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