

KALEIDOSCOPE:

EDUCATOR VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES



Photo by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi



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KALEIDOSCOPE:

EDUCATOR VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

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FROM THE EDITORS' DESK

Welcome to the new issue of *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*. We've spent the past few months newly at the helm of this incredible venture, steadied by KSTF's shared vision to make public the work of teaching and learning that happens in our nation's educational institutions every day.

Our new editorial staff has worked relentlessly to encourage teachers to write. Members of the staff shared our own reflections on the importance of teacher voices on the KSTF blog (www.kstf.org/blog). We revisited the *Kaleidoscope* mission of giving teacher voices a megaphone and opened the journal to more varied and colorful stories, ideas, reflections, and information.

As this process continues, we find ourselves contemplating the immensity and variety of pressures teachers face, both individually and as a profession. In this issue alone, our authors grapple with how to:

- process "great teacher" stereotypes,
- reach students of differing languages and cultures,
- address disparity between the training that is provided to teachers and the training they need and deserve,
- overcome the often-crushing feelings of inadequacy and isolation teachers experience,
- prepare students for complex information both in and out of the classroom, and
- prepare themselves financially for the future.

These pressures create a heavy load, especially when experienced alone.

The narratives of this issue of *Kaleidoscope* will leave you in awe of the bravery, compassion, and wisdom of those in our profession and help us shape our nation's discourse about education. Equally important, we hope our authors' voices show you that they—and you—are not alone. In the act of collecting and publishing stories of teaching, we hope to overcome the isolation and frustration we can often feel in our profession.

The experiences in this issue compel empathy; if we ourselves have not been in an author's shoes, we certainly can imagine it. In turn, these experiences become another piece of our practice. They inform, they shape. Then these stories can be shared with other educators to inform, to shape. And we are all no longer struggling alone.

Lastly, we would like to thank Dina Portnoy, who started this grand idea for a journal written and edited by KSTF Fellows. We hope to continue to carry on her vision of a safe and welcoming place for teachers to share their voices.



Kate Blaske
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LEARNING SPANISH IN GUATEMALA

BY RICK BARLOW, KIM HARTUNG, AND KATIE WADDLE



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WHY STUDY SPANISH ABROAD?

We all work in schools where being able to communicate in Spanish is helpful. We all teach high school math to Spanish-speaking English learners (EL students) in the Bay Area in California, where there are many Spanish speaking immigrants. Rick and Katie teach classes of newcomer students, and Kim has mixed classes comprised of native English speakers, English learners who have been in the U.S. for several years, and newcomers. Many of our students speak Spanish as their primary language, and we interact with parents whose primary language is Spanish.

The possibility of communicating with students and parents in their primary language was a major motivation to study Spanish. However, we all felt that studying in a classroom setting didn't quite work for us. We picked up some vocabulary and grammar, but weren't comfortable communicating in Spanish. We only rarely understood a sentence spoken at a normal pace and couldn't really put together a coherent sentence to say what we actually meant. With this in mind, we each decided to submit a proposal to KSTF for a professional development grant to travel to Xela, Guatemala to study Spanish at La Democracia Spanish School (lademocracia.net).

La Democracia is a woman-run Spanish school where students can study for any length of time. Rick, Kim, and Katie each spent three or four weeks there in different summers (2016, 2015, and 2010, respectively). Students are paired with a tutor and taught in a one-on-one setting. Any level of prior Spanish knowledge is welcome—Rick had no prior Spanish knowledge, Katie had two quarters of college Spanish, and Kim had studied Spanish in high school. At the school, students work with their teacher for about five hours a day and then have the remainder of the day to explore Xela or go on cultural excursions. La Democracia usually organizes several afternoon excursions a week like visiting local pueblos or amazing hot springs. There are also weekend activities, like hikes to local volcanos or extended trips of nearby cultural sites.

One of the highlights of the La Democracia school is the home stay. Students that study at La Democracia are placed with a local host family. The host family provides housing, meals, and a priceless exposure to the local culture of Xela.

Is it worth it? YES! After three weeks of studying, Rick is comfortable speaking in present tense and knows the basics of past and future tense verbs. Kim is more confident about communicating in Spanish and is learning about more nuanced phrasing. Katie speaks with students and parents regularly, mostly in present tense, and feels comfortable translating in meetings. However, second language proficiency isn't the only take-away. The benefit of being immersed in a second culture is cogent for any teacher working in a diverse school setting.

WHY CHOOSE SPANISH IMMERSION RATHER THAN CLASSES?

Studying in Guatemala with a homestay offered the opportunity to learn through an immersive experience. Being surrounded by Spanish extended well beyond past classroom experiences, where we reverted to speaking in English as soon as we walked out the door. We were pushed to communicate in Spanish, even when we weren't sure about what we were saying, simply because we needed to communicate about something and English wasn't an option. Asking for small bills at the money exchange, asking about unfamiliar food at a restaurant, and sending laundry to the lavanderia all happened in Spanish. This pushed us to learn more, faster, and in a much deeper way.

The grammar, vocabulary, and phrases we learned were connected in a more meaningful way—whether it was talking through a recipe with our homestay mothers, watching *Intensamente* (Inside Out) or *Toy Story 3* in Spanish without subtitles, learning about the daily lives of the people around us, or taking a bus alone to another city. This experiential learning really expanded our ability to communicate in Spanish.

With one-on-one lessons, we were able to learn at our own individual pace and focus on areas that were important to us. We had the opportunity to talk through points of confusion and some nuances of choosing one phrasing over another. We could ask about vocabulary and phrases specifically related to teaching, and found it much more effective to ask a native speaker than to guess from the list of 10 words we might find in an English-Spanish dictionary. We were even able to request an entire lesson focused on what we could say during a phone call to a student's

home in Spanish. In Kim's case, she started with what she wanted to say and how she would phrase it, and ended up with really helpful feedback on how to effectively communicate those ideas in Spanish.

IMPACT ON TEACHING: KIM'S SPANISH COMMUNICATION

My main reason for going to study Spanish in Guatemala was to be able to communicate with my students and their families in Spanish. Sure enough, learning Spanish has been really helpful for the little things that come up in teaching.

When I call a student's family, language is less of a barrier now. Either through the basic Spanish I know, or through a combination of English and Spanish, I can talk about how a student is doing in class and ask questions that will help me improve how things go in

Studying in Guatemala with a homestay offered the opportunity to learn through an immersive experience. Being surrounded by Spanish extended well beyond past classroom experiences, where we reverted to speaking in English as soon as we walked out the door. We were pushed to communicate in Spanish, even when we weren't sure about what we were saying, simply because we needed to communicate about something and English wasn't an option.

class. I still need to ask someone to help translate for more complicated conversations, but I can call home for the more frequent things—something a student did well in class, an assignment they missed, or when they should come see me for help with a particular topic.



Photo by Katie Waddle

Personally, I would consider the in-person conversations the most important benefit to learning Spanish. At back to school night and at parent meetings, my conversations in Spanish can go beyond a quick greeting. I have been able to talk through a student's progress and areas for improvement, and it means a lot to be able to communicate directly with parents. For example, in one conversation, a student's mother stopped her son from translating so we could have a conversation, even in the very slow and basic Spanish I could pull together, and I could tell it was more important to her that we speak without translation than to catch every little detail. And when the student protested, "No, now she thinks you're saying I talk a lot in class!" I was able to confirm that yes, I was telling his parent that he does a lot of great work but has too many side conversations.

I still need to ask someone to translate for the more complicated or delicate conversations, but even then I can follow most of the conversation that happens in Spanish. Students and parents are able to pull together the words much faster and more elegantly than I can at this point, but I am able to follow along and repeat any important parts that were missed in the translation. Though I wouldn't have a student translate anything where they might be tempted to change the information, it is helpful to double-check and add to what they're communicating when I ask them to translate or explain something in Spanish.

My conversations in Spanish have been incredibly valuable in connecting with students and parents. Even the smallest conversations meant more

when I was able to communicate in Spanish rather than relying entirely on English. Each situation I encounter also motivates me more to continue learning and practicing Spanish for future conversations, and perhaps someday I won't need to rely on a translator.

IMPACT ON TEACHING: RICK'S EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE

One of the classes I teach is algebra for students who have immigrated to the United States. Many, but not all, of these students are from Central America. Thus, knowing basic Spanish is helpful.

While in Guatemala, however, I learned more than just basic Spanish. I also learned what it is like to live in a country where the primary language is not my own. Menus, food labels, conversations with the cashier at the grocery store and announcements at the airport and bus station were all in Spanish. And, while the people in Xela are very friendly, most locals do not speak English. Thus, I got to experience the frustrations and anxiety that many of my EL students must feel. I have a new appreciation for the courage and resilience my EL students have: what is routine, and even mundane, for English speakers can be a struggle for EL students. Taking the bus to school, going to the school cafeteria, and interacting with employees at convenience stores and fast food locations all happen in a language they don't speak fluently.

This year, I am using my experience in Guatemala to inform my practice as it relates to EL students. For example, while in Guatemala, I often found myself exhausted in the afternoon after having spent the morning in class speaking Spanish and lunch speaking Spanish with my host family. Just trying to understand the basic idea of what someone is saying in a language

While in Guatemala, however, I learned more than just basic Spanish. I also learned what it is like to live in a country where the primary language is not my own.

which you are not proficient is mentally exhausting. Now, when my EL students are not engaged on a Friday afternoon during the final period of the day, I know it is because they've already given 110% just trying to access and understand what's going on around them during the week. Instead of a lesson or task, I now use Friday afternoon for students to engage in an interactive game or get-to-know you activity.

IMPACT ON TEACHING: KATIE'S SENSE OF CONNECTION

Many of my students are immigrants from Central America: Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. I, however, am from Minnesota, land of snow, ice, hotdish, and canoes. The gap between my experiences, my life, and my understanding of the world and my students is wide and deep. I often question what exactly I bring my students, and who I am to stand up in front of them every day. I don't want to pretend that going to Guatemala for three weeks suddenly made me a cultural ambassador, able to bridge cultural differences with a wave of the hand, but it made a big difference in my practice in two ways, as well as those described by Rick and Kim above.

The first is that I have a mental image of Guatemala that I can draw on when I am talking to students about where they are from. They have grass and trees like us, I've ridden on their buses, I've bought pastries with quetzales, I've gotten caught in the Guatemalan rain, I've watched Toy Story 3 at the Hyperpais mall in Xela. Guatemala doesn't feel like another planet to me. When I speak with students from Central America, they don't feel as "other" to me because I can imagine where they come from. The distance between us feels smaller, and it's easier for me to see them as people just like me.

The second is that I can make a connection with students much faster. I share as soon as possible with new students from Central America that I have visited Guatemala (and went to Mexico on a separate trip). I exclaim about how beautiful the country is (usually something about how I had never seen volcanoes before), and talk about the cities I visited. If I have time, I tell my story about bargaining a price up in a market because I wasn't very good at numbers larger than 20. Guatemalan students talk about how close or far those cities are from their own, and Honduran and El Salvadoran students tell me I should visit their own

beautiful countries. While this clearly doesn't make me some sort of honorary Guatemalan compatriot, it allows me to connect with students on their terms, not mine. They are in a new country, in a new school, surrounded by new people, and getting to talk about something familiar, even for a moment, can be a blessing.

OUR ADVICE: GETTING STARTED

Decide where and when you want to go study Spanish. Guatemala is a great place to learn Spanish because people tend to speak more slowly and with less slang than other countries, and the programs there tend to be less expensive. Xela is a less touristy city where you can get a more immersive experience. There are many different schools to choose from, and you should do your research to find the right fit. At this point, at least five KSTF Fellows have attended La Democracia, so we are strengthening a good relationship there.

We recommend at least two weeks at a Spanish immersion program, so that you really get the chance to build up some momentum in developing your Spanish skills and also get to know the local area and culture. Any amount of time can be helpful, but keep in mind that you should expect a full day or so of travel on either end, due to travel time on busses and planes and the time zone differences.

AFTERWARDS

Putting the Spanish we learned to good use is the most important thing we've done after studying in

Whether through relating to their country of origin, empathizing with the struggles of learning a new language, or communicating in their native language, we now build stronger connections with our students.

Guatemala. It can be difficult to maintain Spanish skills when you're once again surrounded by English speakers, so Meetup (meetup.com) groups or classes can be really helpful for maintaining Spanish skills between conversations with students and their families. La Democracia also offers online classes via Skype for around \$10 per hour if you want to continue your studies remotely. And if you ever need a conversation partner, let's schedule a Google Hangout!

By spending two weeks or more in a Spanish immersion program, you will definitely learn basic Spanish. However, spending time in another country also imbues a multi-cultural competence that is useful in a diverse school setting. Whether through relating to their country of origin, empathizing with the struggles of learning a new language, or communicating in their native language, we now build stronger connections with our students. Our experiences in Xela left us with a clearer sense of our own cultural identities and how, in our classrooms and schools, our identities intersect with our students'. In turn, this has helped us be more effective with students from cultures different from our own. While traveling to Guatemala to learn Spanish may seem like an atypical professional development, it has improved our teaching practices on more levels than we could have foreseen. Definitely well worth the trip!

CITATION

Barlow, R., Hartung, K., & Waddle, K. (2016). Learning Spanish in Guatemala. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 3(1), 2–6.

TEACHERS' LOUNGE: TO 403(B) *OR NOT* TO 403(B)

BY ANNE WATSON



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KSTF Fellows are largely young teachers. As a group, we are the demographic of teachers least likely to be concerned with retirement. But we're also over-achievers, so it's likely that you probably know you ought to be planning for retirement. Have you looked into it, though? Seriously, who has time for that between differentiated instruction and becoming a teacher-leader?

I recently spoke with an investment manager to find out how 403(b)s work so I could decide whether or not I ought to invest in one. Here's a snapshot of what I learned. Hopefully, this information will be useful to you as you make a decision about whether or not to start a 403(b).

CHOOSING AN INVESTMENT MANAGER

It doesn't happen all that often, but every now and then my bank account actually has more money than I need in it. I don't know about you, but I don't like to see too much money in my checking account. It inevitably means I will spend it on some new gadget that was too expensive to consider in my leaner days or ship it out to pay down my mortgage. It wasn't until recently that I started sending money monthly and automatically to my Roth IRA, a retirement account that allows me to withdraw money tax-free after I turn 59 and a half.

In a moment of clarity, I remembered that some of my colleagues had 403(b)s, a type of retirement account specific to teachers and a few other types of workers. I knew that some of them had worked with this one investment manager at a particular firm who also happened to be my friend (you can imagine that Vermont is the kind of place where everyone knows everyone). So I called him up to get the skinny on 403(b)s and determine if I should be splitting my retirement contribution between different types of accounts. I felt like I could trust the advice of my friend to be forthcoming and sound, even though, of course, no one can guarantee future profits when the stock market is involved.

WHAT IS A 403(B), ANYWAY?

My investment manager friend told me to think about retirement income as a three-legged stool. You'll get Social Security, your pension (a mandatory contribution from your paycheck, put into an account managed by the state), and any retirement account you set up. But you have to set it up. It's not the sort of thing that is built-in when you sign a contract. It doesn't happen automatically.

Headshot by Eric Camden



And, when you do go to start a retirement account, there are a few choices to make. Do you want an individual retirement account where you get to manage it (if you want), or do you want an employer-based retirement account? The latter may be a little safer, but it's also more regulated. If you're looking for an individual retirement account (an IRA), then you should be looking into either a traditional or Roth IRA, but that's another article. Employer-based retirement accounts, like 401(k)s for the private sector and 403(b)s for the public sector, are sanctioned by your employer. While you can't invest in just anything (stocks, for example), there is some degree of flexibility and decision-making power you can have over your retirement investments (again, if you want. You could, alternatively, pay someone to manage it for you). 403(b)s tend to be more regulated than IRAs, so they also tend to be a little more vetted as they're part of an investment firm's package offering.

OK, SO HOW DOES THIS WORK LOGISTICALLY?

As with any retirement account, there's a maximum amount you can contribute each year. For Roth IRAs, it's \$5,500 per year; for 403(b)s, it's \$18,000 per year or 100% of the match limit of your employer, whichever is less. Retirement plans in general incentivize people to only access it once they're 59 and a half years old by making them pay a stiff fee if they make withdrawals before then.

Because 403(b) plans are highly regulated, they're only offered through investment companies like

Edward Jones, Fidelity, Nationwide, you get the idea, and your school district or union should have a list of companies approved to offer 403(b)s to employees in your school district. Of course every district is a little different, but your union representatives should be able to direct you to those resources. Supposing you wanted to move forward with a 403(b), you would set up an appointment with someone from one of these approved companies. It's just like setting up a savings or checking account.

IS THERE AN EMPLOYER MATCH OR CONTRIBUTION?

In the decision-making flow-chart of do-I-get-a-403(b)-or-don't-I?, if your employer offers a match, then your flow chart arrow skips all the rest of the chart and lands directly on "YES, DO IT NOW" (Figure 1, see page 10). Because then it's a 100% investment: for every dollar you put in, you make another dollar, automatically, from your employer before you even get started. The stock market only gets like 9.9%. Alas, my school district doesn't offer a match, so harumph, back to the flow chart.

Employer-based retirement accounts, like 401(k)s for the private sector and 403(b)s for the public sector, are sanctioned by your employer.

WHAT IF I ALREADY HAVE AN IRA?

If you already have an IRA, there's probably no need to get a 403(b) unless you're maxing out yearly contribution now or your household is making a lot of money. For dual-income households, where, say, one partner is making bank, then it probably makes sense to have multiple retirement accounts. Ideally, you want to be saving about 10% of your income, and you may be too limited by the yearly maximum contribution amount with just one account. If you're like me, you're not even close to hitting that mark. I'm certainly not maxing out my yearly contribution with

my IRA.

SO WHAT DID I DECIDE?

Since I have a Roth IRA (I pay taxes on the money I contribute now, but then this money will be tax-free when I draw it down once I retire), I don't invest the yearly maximum in my current IRA, and my school district does not offer an employer match, I decided to not start a 403(b) account. But if you don't have a retirement account, you should definitely look into it. I don't need to tell you about the value of compounding interest and why starting a retirement account early on is significantly more beneficial than starting it later, but just for kicks: according to the investment manager, if you put away only \$50 per month into a retirement account that sees the same growth as the stock market for 30 years, that'll be an extra \$150,000 upon retirement. That sounds like a worthwhile investment to me!

Keep in mind, none of this is advice from an actual financial planner. I am a mere mortal. For more information, meet with a financial advisor.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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CITATION

Watson, A. (2016). Teachers' lounge: To 403(b) or not to 403(b). *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 3(1), 7–10.

As with any retirement account, there's a maximum amount you can contribute each year. For Roth IRAs, it's \$5,500 per year; for 403(b)s, it's \$18,000 per year or 100% of the match limit of your employer, whichever is less.

SHOULD I GET A 403(B)?

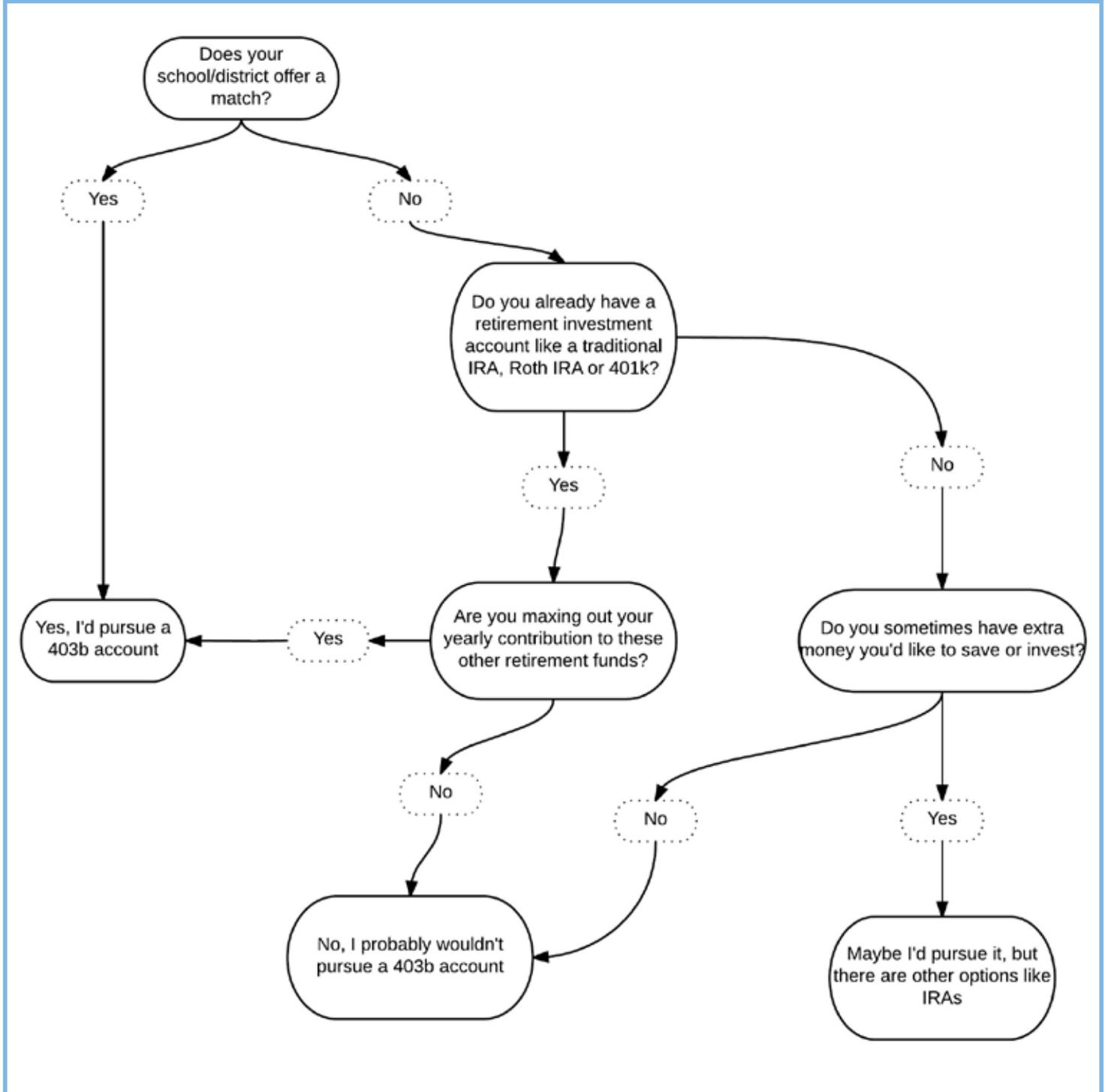


Figure 1: Should I get a 403(b) account flow chart by Anne Watson

TEACHERS ARE THE WORST STUDENTS

BY BRITTANY FRANCKOWIAK



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I'll be welcoming students into my classroom in five short calendar days—three even shorter business days. Like so many of my colleagues, I'm teaching multiple preps this year. I have three different classes to prepare. Only one of them is new, but the other two are being substantially revised (again!). Yet, like so many teachers across the country in August, I won't be spending today organizing my classroom, structuring material in our online learning management system, or collaboratively planning with my content team.

No, this morning I'm stuck in professional development (PD). My science team travels to a different school in our district, arriving across the county at 7:30 a.m. Budget restrictions this year have eliminated the ubiquitous coffee and donut offerings, which make us a little surlier than usual. For the first hour, we are shepherded into an auditorium—all 300 middle and high school science teachers in our large district. There is a Powerpoint. There are some acronyms. By slide four, I've pulled out my phone and am scrolling my Twitter feed.

"Teachers are the worst students!"

From the auditorium, we have break-out sessions. My team is paired with the teams from a couple of other high schools. Three team leaders are hurriedly conferencing over a folder and the room's projector. They are our leaders this morning, not because they volunteered, but because someone higher up had "asked" them to. The opening line: "We just got these materials yesterday, so bear with us." I log in to my computer and begin uploading some of my content into our learning management system. I review my mental to-do list: prepare portfolio rubric, revise my unit calendar, write warm-up prompts—eventually, the slides are ready to go. We—a roomful of professional science teachers—are asked to describe what "understanding" means in our classrooms. I half-heartedly offer up "application" before returning my attention to more urgent tasks. Three work days until students.

"Teachers are the worst students!"

And yet, a month ago, I sat riveted during an hour-long research talk. Our speaker had a piece of chart paper taped to a wall and a marker. He spoke quickly, jumping from topic to topic. His talk covered five different experimental set-ups and hypotheses. He scribbled some graphs and tables on his chart paper. I never once felt the urge to pull

Headshot by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi



Photo by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi

out my phone or work on something else, and I even wrote down some relevant questions from the talk. Why was that experience so different?

A few things immediately come to mind. The research talk was held in mid-July; the start of school was six comfortable weeks away, and I had no urgent distractions. I chose to attend the research talk. The topic and tone of the talk—how to collect and analyze data to determine the effects of climate change on populations, delivered by an expert—respected my professional knowledge and interests. Most importantly, though, the talk came at the end of a week-long professional development experience. During the week, some science teacher colleagues and I hung out with the research team in the field. We participated in data collection. We learned techniques. We had the opportunity to try things out for ourselves and plenty of “white space” for discussing how our experience could be translated into our teaching contexts. The week’s work engaged our scientific training and interests while also helping us think about how we teach climate change in our various contexts. My intellectual curiosity was engaged, I was challenged, and I left excited to translate my learning into lessons for my students. Am I really “the worst student”? Are my colleagues? How have things gotten so bad that the trained professionals in the business of learning have a reputation for being terrible learners?

Unfortunately, teachers (as a profession) have cultivated a reputation for hating PD. And this does

But! We don't hate learning. The solution is not to abandon PD. The solution is also not to increasingly micromanage our PD time.

have real consequences. As more and more teachers are more and more vocal about the time spent in PD, institutions have more ammunition for eliminating PD time from teachers’ schedules. In addition, teachers’ mindsets can start to erode—it’s tough to embrace a “life-long learning” stance when the “learning” proffered to you is routinely disengaging (at the least) and downright insulting (at worst). It becomes easy for teachers to become complacent when they are confident that their professional practice is more robust than what’s on display at required PD sessions. In a thoroughly scientific survey I posted to my Facebook during a PD, a colleague summarized thus: “unengaging activity → salty staff → determination to be un-engaged → more salty people.” So perhaps we should just eliminate PD for teachers, since it’s so widely despised.

But! We don’t hate learning. The solution is not to abandon PD. The solution is also not to increasingly micromanage our PD time. We deserve to have time allocated to professional growth. We want to be better. We want resources that will serve our students, that are relevant to our context, that illuminate truths about our content, that excite our curiosity. For most teachers, a love of learning at least partly motivated our career choice and drives our work. Most teachers are also able to readily identify areas of practice that they’d like to improve or would like to learn more about. The significant problems plaguing PD are familiar to teachers in all sorts of contexts all over the country, and many of them could be effectively addressed.

1. Professional development must start by presuming professional competence.

Teachers are professionals. We have extensive training and are highly educated. We are also practitioners, honing our craft through hours and hours and hours of actual teaching. When the content, tone, or facilitators of PD

fail to begin from a premise of professional competence, the audience of teachers will be lost. We have a great store of knowledge that is rarely harnessed or even assessed by standard district PD offerings. Effective PD respects the competence, curiosity, and experience of teachers.

- 2. Professional development must come at an appropriate time.** It is unreasonable to expect teachers to remain fully engaged in PD just a few days prior to the start of the school year. Even if teachers did leave the PD with the expected take-aways, there would not be sufficient time to integrate those take-aways for the imminent academic year. Teachers must constantly operate on multiple time scales: crafting long-term pacing guides, building instructional arcs, piecing together daily lesson plans. When teachers have so many pressing immediate demands—like getting a classroom organized, making copies for the first week, or finalizing a syllabus—there is no bandwidth remaining for spending a full day on lofty, big-picture discussions. We understand that those things are important, but is T-minus three days really the time?
- 3. Professional development must address actual needs.** Teachers and students have many needs. Standard district PD often fails to meet any needs, perhaps in part because teachers are rarely authentically invited into the planning and facilitation conversation. We often walk away from PD with nothing that we can immediately use in our classrooms—or with something that we are expected to use that we have no interest in using. Teachers are expected to accomplish a lot of high-quality work with scarce resources, and spending hours of our precious time in sessions that are not relevant to our most urgent needs can feel especially insulting.
- 4. Professional development must be coherent.** From the perspective of classroom teachers, schools and districts often seem to hop from initiative to initiative, from curriculum framework to curriculum framework. Sometimes, this means that our back to school PD feels like completely starting from scratch after spending two or three years working

within a particular framework. At other times, we might be engaged in work that feels meaningful to us only to then be derailed or redirected.

- 5. Professional development should be professional development.** Much of what teachers find frustrating is called “professional development” but does not actually engage us as professionals. Meetings during which we are provided with administrative directives or standardized testing calendars are not professional development. By calling those meetings PD, we devalue actual professional learning.
- 6. Professional development should be teacher-led.** Although administrations seem to be receiving the message that “bottom-up” teacher-led professional development is important, it still isn’t the most common approach. What seems to have become common is to have administrators or other district leaders provide a teacher (or team of teachers) with objectives and materials and ask that teacher to lead the PD. While there is a teacher in front of the room, this is hardly teacher-led: it doesn’t elicit teachers’ needs or harness teachers’ knowledge.
- 7. Professional development should model effective instruction.** Asking teachers to sit for an hour or longer while someone lectures them about relevance, engagement, and student-centered instruction is absurd. We appreciate the importance of those ideas—and because we are professionals, we know that a long lecture is not the most effective way to engage an audience or build an understanding.

Ultimately, teachers’ frustrations with professional development do not stem from a genuine disinterest in learning or professional growth. Our frustration stems from a feeling of disrespect. Our time is our most precious commodity, and when we are asked to spend hours of it on something that does not improve our students’ learning, we get antsy. We have accumulated knowledge through education, training, and practice that is routinely ignored. We know what would energize us and serve our students, yet we are not given time or space to pursue it. We want to work. We want to do our jobs

well. We want to learn more about our content, our craft, and our students.

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THE GREAT TEACHER MYTH

BY ERIN MARRON



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I had this one teacher in high school who changed my life. They set me on a career path. They saw something in me that no one else did. They sparked an interest, captivated my imagination, challenged me in a way no one else had. They changed who I am today.

When I tell people I teach science, I get this story a lot—the one teacher that really had an impact on them. It’s a mythical thing, that inspirational teacher who had the big effect. I suspect it’s the reason most teachers join the profession: to be that teacher. The teacher who was the only reason we graduated. The Mr. Keating of *The Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt, Thomas & Weir, 1989). The bringer of change. We all want to be “The Great Teacher.”

I think this notion does a disservice to teachers and students.

Depicting a past teacher as the lone teacher bucking the system is subtly couched in a larger assumption—that the surroundings are bleak and uninspired. When we glorify our own inspirational teachers, we quietly assume that our other teachers who came before and the teachers who came after “The Great Teacher” didn’t really do their jobs; we quietly assume that the other teachers who worked alongside our “Great Teacher” were just going through the motions.

Reminiscing on our time as students, it is easy to paint this black and white picture of our day. We write a narrative of our education that casts a few teachers as either protagonists or antagonists, based on personalities, interests, and preferences. Of the hundred teachers we study with, we will only remember a few who stand out to us, and fill in the blanks with neutral at best.

This dramatic narrative may be formed in adolescence, but it colors our perception of teachers into adulthood. I believe that these lingering memories, selective and mystified, set the stage for the politics of education today. They encourage the public to view teachers as mostly ineffective, with a few shining stars.

More insidiously, though, it colors the way we as teachers view our peers.

When I came into teaching, I was ready to change the world. I was lucky enough to have some incredible training, both through student teaching and through externally-sponsored professional

Headshot by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi



Photo by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi

development. My KSTF Teaching Fellowship did an exceptional job connecting me with expert teachers and researchers from across the field of education. As a result, I have been very fortunate to be inspired by teachers from every region of the country and a wide range of experiences.

Not everything is always so rosy, though. As we discuss the change we hope to see and the innovations we are excited to spearhead, we quietly vent our frustrations to our co-conspirators about our colleagues, schools, and larger educational system. We subtly fall back on “The Great Teacher” myth—the bleak sea of educational darkness with a few bright spots of light. We, of course, are the lights: the few tasked with changing the many.

We may talk about the importance of collaboration and working with peers, but envision convincing

What has changed for me, at least, is my view of my peers' inherent value as teachers. I have a much more profound respect for my peers, all of them, as educators.

our peers to teach the way we want them to teach—to work in unison towards our own personal vision of a classroom or department. We are hesitant to use our colleagues' materials and ideas and are quietly judgmental of their work. There is an air of competition when we talk about data, and a sense of smugness when we share stories. We work hard to be the best, carefully tailoring our classes to be an ideal class. Though we humbly admit that it's “a work in progress—it's nothing perfect,” we silently add to ourselves that “at least it's not what so-and-so does.”

I am ashamed to admit that I am often guilty of this “collaboration.”

The last few years have forced me to rethink this myth of “The Great Teacher.” In the wake of a school shooting, my peers and I found our ability to be “The Great Teacher” was significantly altered. Many of us—who used to take pride in being the first one in or the last one out—were barely able to stay at school longer than the students. The goal was no longer to have the perfect class, but just to have a plan for the next day.

With our hands tied by grief and trauma, we found ourselves sincerely relying on peers. Instead of simply dropping our own favorite curriculum into a shared folder that was never opened, we began to borrow each other's materials indiscriminately. There was little fear of judgement, because everyone was just relieved to have something to do for the upcoming class. While collaboration used to be a parade of competing personal successes, collaborative conversations became very quick: “You take Wednesday, and I'll take Thursday. There will be copies on your desk by first hour.” It was not an idealized, critical discussion of instructional technique and curriculum. but it was sharing at the most fundamental level.

Basically, I found myself teaching someone else's class more often than my own. I used their materials, slides, and goals without scruples. I learned how each of my peers functioned, what their “go-to” strategies were, and how much scaffolding they used. Each of us had a very unique style and strategy. The humbling thing, though, was that most of it was quite effective. In fact, there were lots of lessons I started skeptically, only to find that my peers had efficient or fun solutions to issues I hadn't even considered. Despite our hard-fought battles over

curriculum and instruction, we were all pretty darned good teachers.

Using others' work gave me time to communicate more closely with individual parents and counselors. It freed up time to grade at school and spend one-on-one time with students at a time that was critical for individual attention. More personally, it allowed me to work fewer 10-hour days and leave without bringing work home. I believe that saved me from what I considered to be pretty imminent burn-out during the most challenging time of my career. I would like to say that the story ends with us completely trusting each other as professionals, working together to use each other's strengths, and collaboratively building each lesson. Some days, this is true; we spend shared plan periods revising old activities together, building on each other's knowledge and strengths, and teaching the same lesson. Some days, we just share resources or split tasks—opening the rest of our schedule to grading, communicating with parents, or just having personal lives. Some days we can't find that common ground at all, and everyone works independently. I think there is still room for us to disagree—we are, after all, very different individuals—but I still wish we had an even stronger shared vision of what our collaboration should be.

What has changed for me, at least, is my view of my peers' inherent value as teachers. I have a much more profound respect for my peers, *all* of them, as educators. I have seen them give of themselves at a time when they had very little to give: coats during evacuation, firmly held hands as the school reopened, and one-on-one attention just minutes

The key is, though, that it's not really about being that one "Great Teacher." That's just not enough. It's about working together so that every kid has teachers who support each other to be great.

after wiping their own tears. Seeing them in a time of crisis has made it clear that they have the best of intentions for their students. Though I don't always choose to run my classroom in the same way—and I still believe that some strategies are backed by research more than others—I see my peers as valuable professionals who teach as individuals. I see their professional teaching choices as reflective of a much larger intersection of instructional skills, educational vision, and personal work-life balance.

As I have become more generous with my peers in our interactions, I see shifts in our collaborative work. Instead of subtly trying to pique my peers' interest in changing their classroom to be more like my own, I try to hear the concerns they voice and coach them to a solution that actually fits their educational philosophy. I try to take a more purposeful interest in recognizing their authentic strengths as a teacher, and pick their brain as a consultant. Though I won't profess any dramatic shifts towards a shared overall vision of education, sparks of collaboration have been born out of these conversations.

I no longer see my peers and myself as part of a dark sea with a few points of light. A grey-scale of bad to great wouldn't even describe my current perspective accurately. I think that, as teachers, we are a little less like Mr. Keating of *The Dead Poets Society* and a little more like the team from *Remember the Titans*: an unlikely group of individuals facing somewhat overwhelming odds together, each full of individual strengths, weaknesses, and a myriad of personal preferences that may have very little consequence on our effectiveness (Bruckheimer, Oman & Yakin, 2000).

The key is, though, that it's not really about being that one "Great Teacher." That's just not enough. It's about working together so that every kid has teachers who support each other to be great.

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WHAT MAKES “GOOD” TEACHING?

BY HEIDI PARK



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It's a simple question that started from a place of exhaustion: "What is good teaching?"

I'm in my fourth year teaching, and I've been thinking and reflecting more about what it really means to be a good teacher. My third year of teaching was exhausting on multiple levels: our chemistry team kick-started some serious day-to-day collaboration, I launched a three-minute observation club with my department, I informally mentored new teachers, I sponsored clubs and activities, and along with all of those professional demands, I was trying to have a life outside of school. Saying "yes" to so many things left me wondering many things, on both a personal level and on a broader level: When it is ok to say no? Why did I say yes so often? Did I say yes because that is what I thought it meant to be a "good teacher"? Is there a universal idea of what a good teacher does or does it vary? Are good teachers born or are they made? How do the public's perception and understanding of teaching more broadly play into the conversation about education?

So I decided to ask. I took to Facebook and Twitter, posting a survey to my social media circles and asking friends and followers to pass it along. I made this survey as simple as possible by asking only one demographic question, "Are you a teacher?" and one probing question, "In your own words, what do you think of when you hear the phrase 'good teaching' or 'that person is a good teacher?'"

98 TOTAL RESPONDENTS:

- 56 current teachers
- 11 former teachers
- 14 people otherwise formally involved in education (including two respondents who identified as "other")
- 17 non-teachers

Table 1: Demographics of survey respondents

I was pleasantly surprised by the number of times my survey was shared and retweeted and by the number of responses I received. While the result of this survey is not an exhaustive representation of what the American public thinks about good teachers, I was amazed by how much I learned by diving into it. Initially, I made a word cloud of the responses and discovered that students, learning, and



Photo by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi

responses (59%, or 10 of 17). Non-teachers were also most likely to specifically mention teachers' disposition toward their content, such as, "A 'good teacher' projects enthusiasm and a love for the subject being taught."

When I discuss the importance of content knowledge with my teaching colleagues both in and outside of my own school, we all agree that understanding and loving the subject one teaches is incredibly important, but it's not enough. Genuinely loving the content and finding it fascinating in its own right is not enough to be able to teach the content well. As a teacher, I must find a way to take the content and my love for it and make it accessible to my students.

My work with the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation (KSTF) has encouraged me to take a broader view of content knowledge, where pedagogical content knowledge encompasses many different facets including horizontal content knowledge (what they are doing in other classes), vertical alignment (where they are coming from and where they are heading), common mis- or pre-conceptions, and knowledge of the curriculum. As KSTF Senior Program Officer Jennifer Mossgrove summarized in her blog post, "Teaching requires making a multitude of decisions—both in the moment and over time—that require an understanding of the discipline and content, beyond just getting the 'right' answer" (Mossgrove, 2014).

In the survey results, non-teachers focused on a teacher's ability to explain content so that students can understand; for example: "The person can explain the topic so that the learners understand and retain the information." Another non-teacher replied, "[A good teacher is] knowledgeable about the subject being taught, [and possesses the] ability to effectively communicate said knowledge to students." These types of statements seem to indicate that someone who knows the content but cannot explain it would not be a good teacher.

Teachers and non-teachers alike agree that it takes more than just knowing the right answer to be a good teacher, but how is the ability to communicate information effectively developed in teachers? There are currently many accelerated/alternative teacher certification programs that only require a bachelor's degree in the subject area being taught, which suggest that anyone can teach if they just know all the facts. Even teachers who go through traditional certification programs are not necessarily supported after they are licensed to systematically develop this content knowledge further unless they take it upon themselves, often paying out of pocket, to enroll in professional development that goes beyond content and into pedagogical practices.

PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy is the method and practices of teaching. This term was explicitly brought up by only teachers, although all groups of respondents had some aspects of pedagogy implicit in their responses. There appears to be a general understanding that how a teacher teaches will affect how effective that teacher is, but teachers and former teachers have the vocabulary and experience to flesh out this idea. Non-teachers may be unaware of the complex interplay between content and pedagogy.

The main pedagogical practice mentioned was personalizing instruction and adapting to student needs. Thirty-six of 98 (37%) responses included comments along the following lines, "[A good teacher is] someone that is able to adjust to the needs of the students." This idea was most prevalent among former teachers (six of 11 responses, 55%) and non-teachers (eight of 17 responses, 47%), and was less prevalent among current teachers (18 of 56 responses, 32%) and other educational professionals (four of 14 responses,

29%). This may be the difference in the perspective of a learner, or the person who is receiving the services of teaching, versus the perspective of the teacher. Many public school teachers don't have the freedom to take the long view, as described by one respondent (who is a teacher at a private school and acknowledged that their context provided a lot of latitude in this respect):

You have to meet every single one of your students at their individual starting points, and move all of them as far along their own learning trajectories as you possibly can. . . . I think it's incredibly helpful to take an extremely long view when it comes to educating your charges, because that helps you get over the tyranny of right now. If your goal is just moving them forward as far as they can get, hopefully it makes it easier for you to let go of some things you (and the full resources at your command) can't seem to help them get.

Although many teachers I know would agree that meeting each student where they are and moving them along individually would be ideal, many public school teachers find this to be very far from reality. Teachers in America spend about 39% more time with students than those in other countries, although the number of hours worked is similar, meaning that other countries provide lower teaching loads and build more time for planning and collaborating into the school day (Walker, 2016). However, many non-teachers have the following expectation, "A good teacher recognizes when a student is struggling and puts forth extra effort for one-on-one time to help them understand." Additionally,

A good teacher is one who is able to explain and demonstrate concepts in a variety of ways for a variety of different learners and learning styles. A good teacher is a good learner—they learn how their student(s) learn—and modify their teaching accordingly.

Another teacher responded similarly, "A 'good teacher' is someone that is able to adjust to the needs of the students and make the material accessible to them while still challenging them to improve."

As a teacher, I do my best to help my struggling students and arrange for one-on-one time with them, but it is challenging as there is limited time during the school day for this kind of individualized

In the long run, the features of good teaching that came from my simple survey seem unsustainable by a single teacher working in isolation but require the support of colleagues, administrators, parents, and policy makers. And good teaching is something that can be developed in a teacher, rather than something that a teacher either has or doesn't.

instruction. I wonder how we can expect teachers, who may have 30–40 students in each class (and a total of 150–200 students on their rosters) to be able to give individual, personalized support to each student, even if we recognize that such support is the best for the learners? With all of the demands on teachers these days (particularly those of us who work in public schools), how can we better support teachers to be able to truly support all of their students?

All groups mentioned engaging students in learning. Most respondents focused on engaging students in content, but current teachers also mentioned engaging students in thinking (six), application of knowledge (six), and skills for learning (six) almost equally with engaging students in content (eight). Non-teachers did not mention engaging students in thinking at all and were most focused on engaging students with content.

Are these aspects of student engagement actually distinct, and does any one aspect have priority over the others? Although many responses focused on content, it seems that teachers would not say that engaging students in content is the most important thing. The Unity & Diversity 2015 Writing Project asked science teachers, "What is the most important thing we can teach our students?" and none of the essayists claimed their content area as the most important thing (Unity & Diversity, 2015). Many teachers I know see their content area as a vehicle

for teaching critical thinking, applying knowledge, and other skills for learning that students may use regardless of what they end up doing in life. One teacher responded to my survey, "My highest priority for good teaching is giving students room to think deeply about the content and share that thinking with each other." Another teacher who mentioned content elaborated that good teaching gets students to think: "I also think that person works really hard to ensure that their students understand material at a deep level. Good teaching gets students to think and to do more than they thought they could." A former teacher replied, "[A good teacher] teaches not just material, but how to think critically, and also why this is important." Some of the things we support and inspire students to do may be content related, but often the work goes beyond just the facts.

Although current teachers were the only ones to specifically mention pedagogy, all groups mentioned specific aspects of the classroom that could be linked to pedagogy. Some teachers mentioned specific practices (e.g., constructivist practices), others used the phrase "research-based pedagogy" or "researched practices." However, non-teachers joined current and former teachers in describing specifics about the classroom that could be linked to specific pedagogical practices such as making the classroom interactive, fun, and discussion-based, and making the content relevant and exciting. Other educational professionals and current teachers also mentioned understanding student thinking, and current teachers also discussed challenging students.

A fun and interactive classroom may be what students remember best about a good teacher. One non-teacher responded by recalling their favorite teacher:

The best teacher I ever had was passionate about the subject she taught (sociology) and it showed. She is who I think of when I think of "good teaching." She thought of interactive and fun ways to teach her point. The students were always actively involved in the discussions. She loved teaching, and it made the students love learning.

However, students may not fully recognize that simply making a classroom fun does not necessarily

lead to learning (surely we can also recall fun teachers from whom we didn't actually learn anything).

As one teacher responded,

I think a good teacher is passionate about learning, understands a teacher's role is to provide opportunities for learning, and is a good listener. Learning is how people make sense of their world, and it comes naturally to little children as they explore, investigate, and build. A good teacher nurtures and guides learning by designing diverse activities that lead to further "sense making."

Teachers understand that an engaging classroom is not engaging for the sake of being engaging, but that engagement should lead to further sense-making.

To go from engagement to sense-making, the engaging, interactive, and exploratory activities need to be tied to generating knowledge and understanding what is happening and why (particularly in a science classroom). As a current teacher put it, "In a classroom setting you may show/tell a little (or a lot), but you also give time for students to apply their knowledge in different ways. Giving students the opportunity to apply knowledge makes you a 'good teacher.'" Teachers are making instructional decisions when they make the classroom interactive, discussion-based, or tied to relevant or exciting topics. These instructional decisions come from pedagogical theories that go back to the beginning of the 20th century with John Dewey (1938). Current educational research also backs up the idea that a learning cycle where students engage with and explore and apply content leads to successful learning. The BSCS 5E instructional cycle that is used in designing many science lessons follows student engagement and exploration with explanations and an elaboration phase to lead to successful learning (Bybee et al., 2006).

DISPOSITIONS

Tying together content knowledge and pedagogy are dispositions toward teaching as a practice. Content knowledge alone and pedagogy alone are not enough to be a good teacher because teaching is not a stagnant profession and every year is different.

Current and former teachers were able to bring to light many of the more subtle nuances of teaching that are involved in the dispositions that teachers may have toward their teaching practice.

Current and former teachers focused on caring for students. While every category of respondents had some mention about caring for students (this included inspiring students to be their best, nurturing students, being compassionate and listening to students, connecting with students, being respectful, being patient, and making students feel comfortable and safe), 64% of current teachers (36 of 56) and 72% of former teachers (eight of 11) specifically mentioned something about caring for students. As one current teacher put it,

[A good teacher] cares about their students as people and treats them as people. And ideally communicates that care to students in an appropriate and thoughtful daily way . . . it is both really, really crucial, and also not nearly enough on its own. We know too much as a profession about what helps students that good intentions are not enough.

Teachers recognize that knowing who their students are impacts the way that they teach and their classroom. This may be implicit in the idea of personalizing and adapting instruction mentioned earlier: how can a teacher personalize instruction for students that they do not know? As one teacher put it, "A good teacher is one that values student voice and cares for students as whole people with unique experiences and perspectives. A good teacher works to understand their students academically and find ways push their thinking."

However, non-teachers were more likely to mention communicating with students and parents. Seven of 17 non-teachers (41%) mentioned communication with students and parents. Aspects of this category included having good people skills and communication skills and being approachable and accessible. Former teachers also mentioned communication skills and approachability; however, current teachers did not mention any of these aspects of teaching. As one non-teacher phrased it, "[A good teacher is] a patient person that is very communicative with parents and can easily make necessary adjustments to make sure that my child

learns and excels." Non-teaching stakeholders in education (students, parents) understandably want teachers to be communicative about how their students are doing and are responsive to students' needs. In my opinion, communicating with students and parents is another way of caring for students and personalizing or adapting instruction, because a teacher who cares about student success will communicate concerns about a student with that student and their family. And communication with students and parents often leads to interventions such as individualized help: for example: meeting one-on-one outside of class.

Current and former teachers were the only groups to mention specific attitudes and dispositions towards colleagues and the school setting. While only a total of seven respondents mentioned any of these specifics (listening to colleagues, collaborating, humility, longevity), all of those responses were from current or former teachers. As a current teacher put it, "[A good teacher is] someone who shares ideas and successes with colleagues and who is able to listen to ideas that others share." This counters the idea that teaching happens in isolation and that a good teacher can exist on their own with no help from others. I had the pleasure this summer of meeting the teachers profiled in the book *Mission High* (Rizga, 2015). The teacher and student profiles in this book highlight many, if not all, of the aspects of good teaching that came out of my survey. When listening to a panel of the teachers, someone mentioned that the support staff at the school were not included in the picture. Often stories of good teaching are unfortunately missing some of the nuances of the story because it would take too long to tell otherwise. But we must understand the supports required for good teaching to take place, otherwise, we are holding teachers to a standard that is impossible to achieve alone.

Current and former teachers specifically mentioned attitudes toward teaching practice. Responses that mentioned reflecting and being thoughtful about teaching came primarily from current and former teachers. Additionally, only current and former teachers mentioned dedication and hard work—other educational professionals and non-teachers did not mention this at all. One current teacher acknowledged that there was a lot that went into good teaching:

This is a lot, but: I think of someone who is not necessarily perfect but who does a lot for their students: someone who knows their students as people and learners; someone who strives, effectively, to allow students to engage with, be challenged by, and deeply learn material; someone who uses systems and teaching style that works for them and their students; someone who works to enact their teaching philosophy every day; someone who demonstrates their love for students and learning by crafting a safe and rigorous (and fun!) intellectual community.

Perhaps it is only those of us in the trenches who can fully appreciate how much work and dedication it takes for good teaching.

Teachers are the ones who recognized the role of reflection and collaboration on improving teaching. A current teacher differentiated between good teaching and being a good teacher:

Those two phrases actually inspire different things to me. Good teaching is . . . effective instruction in the classroom. . . the ability to inspire kids to do the bulk of the thinking about the subject matter . . . The person who is a good teacher, though, may or may not actually be an effective educator, or might not be one yet. But they care deeply about their students, they're working to improve their instruction, and they want to be effective. Basically, I see "the person who is a good teacher" as also including the people who someday will become effective educators, but aren't quite there yet.

I found the above response particularly interesting because it acknowledged that teachers have the potential to become good teachers, even if they may not be effective educators yet. Training and mentorship are vital in developing teachers, both in improving teachers and keeping them in the profession (Caneva, 2016). Other countries spend much more time on teacher training (NCSL, 2016); what would it look like for teaching and learning in America if we also spent more time on training teachers, both before and after teachers have their own classroom? I am personally convinced that the mentorship and training that I received informally in my school setting and more formally through KSTF have fast-tracked my development

as a teacher. Those outside the teaching profession, however, may assume that good teaching is a fixed attribute—you're either a good teacher or you aren't. This assumption seems to be more prevalent in the United States than in other countries with the result that American teachers are given less time during the school day to improve their practice. As Jon Synder, a Stanford researcher said, "I think there's a different notion in Singapore, and in Finland, and in other places where they think that teaching is actually complex, difficult work, cognitively engaging and challenging. [This is] as opposed to, 'Well, you know, anyone can teach. We just tell 'em the right words to use and the right way to do it . . . and it will be done.' But it's not the way it works" (Walker, 2016).

The results of my survey were much richer and deeper than I had anticipated—I confess, I didn't know what I would get from this. These responses provide a complex and nuanced picture of teaching, rather than a simplistic vision that would come from just asking one or two people. Everyone has something to say about what makes a good teacher because we have all experienced many different teachers over the course of our education. In the long run, the features of good teaching that came from my simple survey seem unsustainable by a single teacher working in isolation but require the support of colleagues, administrators, parents, and policy makers. And good teaching is something that can be developed in a teacher, rather than something that a teacher either has or doesn't. Having the voices of so many teachers and former teachers in my survey helped to unearth many different facets of teaching, and the results of the survey in general indicate the high expectations that we have of our teachers. In light of these high expectations, I am convinced of the importance of supporting teachers in improving. Any one teacher would need continuous support to develop all of these aspects of a good teacher, and research has shown that there is no one single professional development model that works for all teachers (The New Teacher Project, 2015). What would it look like, if, with this complex picture of good teaching, we supported teachers in achieving it instead of looking to just get rid of "bad teachers" and in the meantime burn out those who are considered "good teachers"?

I'm not going to lie, I'm still tired this year. I'm still doing most of the things I was doing last year (although I was wiser about not saying "yes" to many

more commitments this year). But when I reflect upon the results of this survey, I'm reminded that it's okay to not be that "perfect" teacher yet (and in reality, when is anyone a truly perfect teacher?). I'm reminded to depend on my colleagues to help me reflect on and improve my own teaching practice. I don't have a simple solution for anyone who also feels exhausted by the demands of teaching, but teaching is a journey for both the teacher and the learner. We as teachers should neither beat ourselves down nor become complacent, but take the long view for both ourselves and the students entrusted into our care.

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: LITERACY LEARNING

BY BEVERLY STUCKWISCH



Beverly Stuckwisch

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who teaches chemistry, AP Chemistry, and algebra at Licking Valley High School in Newark, Ohio. Beverly is also the advisor for the National Honor Society and the co-sponsor for the Gay Straight Alliance. Beverly was part of a group of teachers that piloted standards-based grading and helped roll it out schoolwide in 2014. She is currently helping the local middle school to develop standards-based grading practices.

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Course name: TE 846-Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners

Quick info: This course is centered around designing and implementing a case study of at least one student with identified literacy struggles. The majority of course readings come from *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*, 5th edition (Gambrell and Morrow, 2014), with the rest being online articles that can be accessed for free within the course. Since the course is taught online, the majority of collaboration takes place on an online discussion board. Lesson plans and literacy strategies are shared and discussed online. Pre- and post-assessments are administered to the case study student(s) to see if implemented literacy strategies have an effect.

Who should consider this PD? The course is offered to all teachers K-12, in any content area, and can be used to meet part of the reading education requirement to proceed to the professional license in Michigan. It can also be counted toward completion of a master's program at Michigan State University. One obligation for the course is access to two K-12 students for a course requirement to conduct two case studies. However, the section I completed only required work with one student.

Provider: Michigan State University

Location: Offered online

Duration: One semester

Cost: \$2226.25 (three graduate level credits).

Read more about this PD at this link:

<https://reg.msu.edu/courses/Search.aspx> (Course TE 846)

As my fourth year of the KSTF Fellowship and my third year of teaching full-time came to a close, I began to focus more on equity in my classroom, specifically when it came to my literacy instruction in chemistry. While I felt access to content was quite equitable in my

Headshot by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi



Photo by Andrea Cipriani Mecchi

classroom, I was concerned that when students moved beyond my room they wouldn't have the literacy skills necessary to access complex science texts. Working in a 1:1 setting had led me away from using textbooks and, ultimately, away from having my students read almost any scientific texts at all. I had good intentions—I tried to make the content as accessible to my students as possible.

I quickly realized, however, that I wasn't doing my students any favors in the long run. When they reached AP Chemistry, they struggled to decode lab procedures and lengthy free-response questions on the test because they weren't used to reading for understanding in science. I wanted my students to read and write more frequently in chemistry, but I didn't have much experience in literacy instruction, and I didn't know where to start. In taking this course, I hoped to compile some best practices, try some new strategies with a case study student, and learn from others' experiences as well.

I decided to take this online course, intrigued by how the structure would allow me to communicate with teachers across the nation via the online discussion board. The major goal of the course was to identify various differences that could cause literacy difficulties for students and then research or develop strategies to accommodate them in the classroom. Regardless of when teachers take the course, they learn about literacy by developing a case study of one or more students who struggle with literacy. Because I took the course in the summer, I worked with only

one student and we met on only three occasions. The intention was to use pre-assessments to diagnose literacy struggles for that student, teach two lessons utilizing strategies from the course, and then give a post-assessment to see if those strategies improved the student's literacy skills.

Reading about different literacy strategies led me to realize that I had already been implementing some in my teaching, just not as intentionally as I could have. For example, I used a Predict-Explain-Observe-Explain (PEOE) model for writing scientific explanations when I taught the gas laws, but I didn't focus directly on developing students' writing skills in each of these categories. I also learned strategies for reading that were very simple to implement. One example is using an "insert" note tool. On a small piece of paper, students have four columns: ? for items that are unclear, - for things the reader disagrees with, + for important ideas, and ! for surprising ideas. In an ideal setting, the student would fill out their own note tool as they read the new text and then share what they've written in a small group. This strategy helps students process the text further before moving onto the next activity, which requires them to apply what they've read to a new situation.

I tried implementing both of these strategies with my case study student. While I found it useful to see these tools in action, there were several reasons why I didn't get the results I hoped for. First, I was working with a middle school student for the first time and, therefore, had no personal experience with that reading and writing level. Most of the activities I used were too high-level for him to access without a lot of help from me, making it difficult for me to assess the usefulness of the literacy strategies themselves. Additionally, due to the short time frame of the course, we were only able to meet on three occasions. In those three meetings, I had to get to know the student, diagnose his struggles, attempt to address them in only two lessons, and then assess his progress. I don't believe two lessons were enough for me to really establish whether the tools made a real difference.

Since the course has finished, however, I've been able to start implementing these tools in my classroom. PEOE is now the central theme of my gas laws unit, and I have seen a huge improvement in the quality of student writing. Also, I am finding the "insert" note-taking tool is much more useful when students are able

to discuss what they've read with each other, rather than one student using the tool solo. For example, as my students begin researching historical models of the atom, I've noticed that a lot of great background information can be found in our textbook. In the past, I would have decoded this information for students and presented it to them in a more easily accessible way. This year, however, I wanted to place the responsibility of decoding the information on the students. In small groups, students were assigned to one of the models, read the information individually, and took notes on the insert. They then shared their notes with the rest of their group before putting together a presentation for the rest of the class. Their understanding of the models and how they progressed was much deeper than in years past, and students were better able to access the information in the text. Instead of lowering my expectations to meet students where they were, I realized I could achieve more equitable conditions in my classroom by giving all students the tools needed to reach the same high expectation.

Ultimately, I found the course beneficial, but I regret taking it over the summer. It would have been far more helpful to implement these strategies and discuss them with others taking the course during the school year. The course would have felt much less rushed had it been spread out over 12 weeks instead of six, and I would have learned more from other teachers in the course if online discussions were structured better. Despite these shortcomings, I think all teachers can benefit from professional development focused on literacy, and after my work in this course, I believe in fact it is our duty to teach students to read and write in our math and science courses so that they have equitable access to math and science content beyond our classrooms.

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FINDING SUSTAINABILITY IN STRENGTHS

BY CACIA STEENSEN



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It was a Sunday in late October my first year of teaching, and I was crying again. I was staring at a seemingly unending pile of grading and thinking about the 150 angst-ridden teenagers that would enter my classroom the next day. Other demands of my job were also rattling around in my head. The school initiatives, the newspaper article about the inadequate teaching at my failing school, my relationships with colleagues, paperwork for my students with education plans, parent phone calls I needed to make, evidence I needed to submit to yet another confusing online system as part of my evaluation—the list goes on and on. I felt like I was drowning.

The next morning, after a few fitful hours of sleep and three different alarms to get me out of bed by 5:00 a.m., I barely survived first period. A student who was in a fight with his dad expressed his feelings by throwing a stool across the classroom. Someone put a bar of soap (that I had bought for my students with my personal money) into my fish tank. I was overwhelmed and I felt like I was utterly incapable of success in my job. It was not that I was not trying, it was not that I was not passionate about the success of my students, and it was not that I was incapable of completing any one portion of my job. It just felt like there was too much to do and, as a result, I felt like I was not doing anything well. I walked into my principal's office and announced that I was quitting. He barely looked up at me from behind his computer and simply responded with, "No, you're not quitting. Now go back to class. Your class is about to start and I don't have time to deal with this today. We are short on subs."

He was right. I was not ready to give up on teaching yet. I had intentionally sought out a career where I would be consistently intellectually challenged and where I would feel like I was positively impacting my community. Now, six years into my career, I know that teaching is that career for me. But there are still days where the challenges feel too emotionally overwhelming.

I am not alone in feeling overwhelmed by the realities of my profession. Both anecdotal stories from teachers across the country and quantitative statistics indicate that teaching often feels unsustainable. Although statistics vary, it is estimated that 9.5% of teachers leave the classroom within their first year of teaching and 40-50% of teachers leave the classroom within their first five years of teaching. Turnover in teaching is about 4% higher than in other professions (Riggs, 2013). Attrition rates of first-year teachers have even increased by about one third in the past two decades (Ingersoll



Figure 1: A representative depiction of demands on teacher time

& Smith, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). Teacher turnover disproportionately impacts schools in high-minority and high-poverty communities (Boyd et al., 2005).

All of this supports addressing ideas of teacher sustainability as a worthy pursuit. To me, teacher sustainability means balancing the inherent challenges of teaching so that I am able to maintain my passion and interact with my work at a healthy, emotionally-satisfying level.

As much as I wish there was a silver bullet to increase teacher sustainability, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions in education. Instead, teachers need to take the lead in exploring small interventions that can collectively increase the sustainability of teaching. Over the course of the last year, I engaged in strengths-based observations of several of my colleagues. I found that these observations increased the morale of those teachers being observed, increased the morale of a teacher I completed the observations with, and increased my own morale. These improvements in morale contributed to feelings of emotional satisfaction and made teaching feel slightly more sustainable.

THREATS TO MORALE

In order to explore what makes teaching feel sustainable, morale must also be investigated, as both are intimately intertwined with emotional

wellbeing. Autonomy, sense of belonging, success, and celebration of accomplishments all contribute to morale. While there are patterns across departments, across schools, and across the country about threats to teacher morale, specific threats to morale are context-dependent. Last year was my first year as chair of the science department in my school. This leadership role compelled me to evaluate threats to morale at the department level.

To represent the demands on teacher time, I took a paper plate and stapled little colorful pieces of paper to the plate (Figure 1). On each piece of paper I wrote a single focus for the year. I meant for this plate to be a creative way to communicate with my department about the many things “on our plate” this year. The plate became a tangible way to discuss threats to morale throughout the year. Each thing on the plate, taken in isolation, is something that could be good for student learning. However, the plate as a whole was so full that each component lost its power. Plus, teachers had little power in choosing what was on the plate, and this lack of autonomy added to overwhelming feelings of discouragement. Feeling like teacher strengths were unnoticed, coupled with the incredible demands on teacher time, was crushing morale within my department.

I initiated a discussion during one lunch with the science department about morale. Several patterns emerged. For example, several teachers expressed not feeling recognized in the school for their positive contributions, as administrators in our building do not always know what is occurring in classrooms. The only time that teachers are observed by administration for extended periods of

As much as I wish there was a silver bullet to increase teacher sustainability, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions in education. Instead, teachers need to take the lead in exploring small interventions that can collectively increase the sustainability of teaching.

time in my school is during formal observations, which normally occur just once per year. Although administrators also complete informal observations for shorter periods of time, no science teachers had received any non-evaluative feedback from administration on their teaching. As a result, teachers felt that their successes in the classroom were going unnoticed. This feeling of being undervalued was made much worse by the incredible number of demands on teacher time.

Impacting the number of demands on teacher time felt beyond my control, so I instead tried to address the feeling of being undervalued by completing strengths-based observations of my department colleagues.

STRENGTHS-BASED OBSERVATIONS

While the many demands on our time impede much collaboration in our teaching, my department is rooted in trust. All 10 members of the department eat lunch together daily, and there are a lot of traditions in place that contribute to social connections between teachers. Therefore, all teachers within my department readily opened their classrooms to allow me to complete observations. A colleague and I observed another science teacher's classroom for an entire period about once a month during our planning period. While this partner was not able to attend every observation with me, I was able to observe nearly all of my colleagues within the science department throughout the course of the year.

A Google Doc was used to organize each strengths-based observation around the guiding question, "What strengths are evident in ___'s classroom today?" During the observations, we created categories on

the spot to capture each strength that was observed and then wrote down specific evidence to support that strength. We kept the categories organic and intentionally avoided using only the language present in the formal observation rubric. For example, in one classroom it was obvious that there were positive relationships between the teacher and his students. At the end of the observation, we shared our notes with the teacher who was being observed (Figure 2). Working in a school that has been labeled by the state as "priority-improvement" led me to begin the early observations with the expectation that I would be challenged to identify strengths. However, I was consistently surprised at how easy it was to identify strengths within each classroom. Some teachers initiated a dialogue with me later about the observation and some did not, but all teachers expressed gratitude for the experience.

THE OUTCOMES

Completing strengths-based observations had positive impacts on the morale of the teachers being observed. Following the observation, the observed teacher was asked to respond to a short survey. Eight teachers responded to the survey. One survey question asked the teacher to rank the experience of being observed (Figure 3, see page 33). All respondents (n=8) ranked the experience as being "extremely positive." Teachers were also asked, "Did the feedback from the observations have any impact on your morale? Why or why not?" Every respondent indicated that the feedback had a positive impact on their morale. Two major patterns emerged as to why. First, several teachers wrote that getting the feedback made them more aware of what was going well in their classrooms. This increased confidence, made teachers

2) Positive relationships between teacher and students are obvious.

Nicknames for students

Gave a girl money for lunch

"I thought you were a gymnast..." students show interest in knowing about their teacher, lighthearted feeling in the class

Student who made inappropriate "gay" comment immediately understood why his comment was inappropriate and understood his consequence (reflection consequence was based on learning and thinking about role in larger community - not strictly punitive), the student rejoined class and was able to explain the situation and his data fully

When CSI story was shared, students made comments like "oh, poor Mr." and laughed at the situation

Figure 2: Notes from strengths-based observation



Figure 3: Survey data from peer observations

feel more valued for their positive contributions, and increased morale. Second, three teachers wrote that the experience of being observed by colleague(s) from the department enhanced their relationships within the department. One teacher wrote, “I feel closer to my colleagues because we can feed off of those new perspectives.” This increased sense of professional belongingness had a positive impact on morale.

Additionally, completing strengths-based observations had positive impacts on the morale of the teacher that completed the observations with me. This colleague was new to my school last year and was only a second-year teacher. I audio-recorded a few of our conversations from the second semester so that I could reflect on patterns in her thinking. Throughout the year she had several points where she expressed feeling totally overwhelmed and discouraged. Although it was her second year teaching, she reflected that it felt more challenging than her first year teaching because she felt like there were far too many different initiatives, that it was challenging to learn how to navigate all of the systems in place within our district, and that there was an overarching sense of low morale in our school. She was not able to attend all of the observations, but she was positive about the observations she was able to complete. After the first observation, she commented on an engagement strategy that used stamps. She said, “It was helpful to observe our colleague as it made me reflect on my own practice. The stamp idea that he uses, I am using it now in my honors classes and they are super into it. They all want to stamp each other. The whole point of observing is to get ideas and reflect on how we can improve ourselves so focusing on strengths is good. Nitpicking my colleagues would not be fun for me so

I don’t want to do it—I want to focus on strengths.” In fact, after each observation that she attended, she had at least one new idea for how to improve her own practice. Towards the end of the year she said, “Observing was so much more helpful than the professional development that our school does. I was able to actually see what the strategies look like in classrooms. Also, because it is from our colleagues, I know that it will work with my kids. Some of the stuff the school does feels like it doesn’t apply to me.” Overall, completing the strengths-based observations positively impacted my colleague, her sense of efficacy in her own class, and her connections within the department.

Completing the strengths-based observations had positive impacts on my own morale as well. I left every observation feeling inspired by my colleagues. While it would have been easy to identify places for improvement in the instruction I observed, focusing on only strengths was far more powerful for me. I do not think focusing on strengths made me any less aware of weakness but, instead, made the observations more emotionally supportive for me. After the first observation, for example, I was impressed by the relationships between the teacher and his students. After the observation, he seemed apologetic that his students were not more focused on the lesson at hand. From my position as an observer, however, his students were engaged the majority of the time and their strong relationship with their teacher helped support their learning. This difference between how the teacher viewed his lesson and how I viewed his lesson put my own teaching in perspective. This was helpful in framing my own classroom successes, realizing I am often hypercritical of myself.

While I already felt like the social relationships I had with my colleagues were positive, completing the observations made me feel like I had a better sense of their actual teaching skills. As I became more acutely aware of their professional talents, I was filled with pride at being a member of such a capable team. This pride led me to value my identity as a member of the science department even more than I had prior to the observations.

The observations also increased my feeling of autonomy and expanded my locus of control about my teaching. Because I completed the observations

independently, without administration or district oversight and management, I felt I was in control of my own development and of the relationships within my department. This autonomy was emotionally satisfying. Though there were few tangible strategies I changed in my instruction as a result of the strengths-based observations of my colleagues, completing the observations had a significant positive impact on my morale. In turn, increasing my morale enhanced feelings of sustainability in teaching. Because the largest threat to feeling sustainable is time, it seems almost counterintuitive that the observations were a positive force as they took time away from my planning. But, the increase in my morale and the subsequent increase in feelings of sustainability were greater than the planning time that was lost.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE TEACHING

During my first year of teaching, I was on the brink of quitting nearly daily. While I now have fewer days when being a teacher feels impossible, I still feel that actions need to be taken to make teaching feel more sustainable, so that my fellow teachers and I can continue in this career, which we so value. Many of the challenges that make teaching feel unsustainable are beyond our control, but there are some concrete actions that we can take to improve feelings of sustainability and address morale. Participating in strengths-based observations is one such action.

The strengths-based observations increased the morale of those teachers being observed, as well as the morale of the teacher who completed the observations with me and my own morale. More seemed possible with renewed energy, joy, and hope to balance some of the challenges of teaching that can feel crushing. Completing strengths-based observations is, by no means, a comprehensive solution to address teacher sustainability. More time, more money, and more respect from society would help, for example. However, teacher-led, strengths-based observations are one tool that allowed me to feel like I can continue to pursue my passions in this profession. I no longer am regularly on the brink of quitting and intend to continue to build my own sustainability with strengths-based observations as one tool.

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ABOUT KSTF

The Knowles Science Teaching Foundation (KSTF) was established by Janet H. and C. Harry Knowles in 1999 to increase the number of high quality high school science and mathematics teachers and ultimately, improve math and science education in the United States. The KSTF Teaching Fellows Program, the Foundation's signature program, awards five-year Fellowships to promising early-career, secondary science and mathematics teachers, and supports them in their efforts to improve education in their own classrooms and beyond. The KSTF community includes more than 300 Fellows who taught science, math and related subjects to nearly 30,000 high school students during the 2015–2016 academic year. For more information, visit www.kstf.org.

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