Under the Bleachers
Teachers’ Reflections of What They Didn’t Learn in College

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Mercer University, Macon, USA

“The field of education can be a rewarding but ever challenging career. This book is an essential read for new teachers and veteran teachers alike. The insightful stories that Dr. Joseph Jones has masterfully chosen as part of the book will inspire a new sense of resolve and hope for those who are feeling the weight of seemingly impossible demands placed on teachers. These compelling excerpts will assist the reader through the maze of uncertainty that many new teachers face.”

–Wendi West
Veteran Teacher
Elementary, Virginia

Under the Bleachers: Teachers’ Reflections of What They Didn’t Learn in College is a unique text because the chapters offer insight into the daily chaos of teaching. The chapters are written by practicing educators and provide advice to both future educators and current teachers. It is important to mention, the text is not an avenue to criticize teacher education programs; rather, the book opens a dialogic space in which all educators can begin discussing and reflecting on the realities of the schooling process.
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Teachers’ Reflections of What They Didn’t Learn in College

Edited by

Joseph R. Jones
Mercer University, Macon, USA
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I had just graduated from college with a teaching degree and a state certification. I was an idealist. I was a “world-changer.” I was unaware of what I did not know. It was my very first day in my new classroom. I had spent a large amount of time during the summer months preparing the place where learning would transform young high school minds.

The first day arrived, and my first period class sat and listened carefully to my words. I was prepared. I had spent the entire semester prior in an eleventh grade English classroom where the cooperating teacher allowed me to teach the entire semester. She wanted to prepare me for the real world of teaching. I left my student teaching experience with a notebook full of ideas and letters of recommendations discussing what an amazing teacher I was. I had also been accepted into a graduate teaching program. I was ready.

I walked around the room discussing the information on the board. I was informally assessing the students’ ability to comprehend the topic. After asking if there were any questions, I walked to the dry erase board and began removing all of the information. I was triumphant in my first lesson of my first full-time teaching job. Then, I heard these words: “Wow, he has a nice ass.” I froze. I heard giggles and other noises that affirmed my belief that others had heard this student’s words. I had to make an on-the-spot decision that would impact my classroom management for the rest of the academic year and possibly my career at the school.

As I reflect on this story and my years of teaching (both at the collegiate and secondary levels), I wonder what more I should be adding to my curriculum. In the chaos of my reflections, I realized that there were so many things that my own teacher preparation program did not teach me. It is important to note that I believe that my undergraduate and graduate programs were AMAZING, but there are still things that I was not prepared for in my schooling. I was not prepared for the “nice ass” comment, nor was I prepared for the irate parent who entered my classroom uninvited and interrupted my discussion of Camelot.

There were several other moments throughout my career as a novice teacher that still haunt my mind. For example, a few weeks after the “Wow, he has a nice ass” comment, my class was engaged in a cooperative learning assignment, and the door
flew open. Within seconds, two large teenage boys were engaged in a fist fight and “rolled” into my room. There was blood, spit, and lots of screams from my students. I am not a hyperbolist. I will admit that it was a frightening moment for me and my students.

One final personal moment occurred in the teachers’ lounge. During lunch, I walked into the lounge to grab a soda. One of the assistant principals was degrading a student with a group of teachers by discussing the student’s perceived sexual orientation. Before I could leave, I heard the question, “Joseph, he is in your class. What do you think?” The conversation had nothing to do with his academics. I quickly responded, “Talk to you guys later, I have a meeting. Sorry.” I was abrupt and ran out as quickly as possible, but what does one do in such a position? In my true avoidance nature, I did not return to the teachers’ lounge for the rest of the year.

In reflecting, I wonder why I was not more prepared to address some of the challenges that I faced as a new teacher. I recognize that, as members of teacher preparation programs, we cannot address all of the challenges that our students will face, but I feel as though something more needs to be done. In other professions, students receive a great deal more “real life preparation” for their jobs. Medical doctors engage in residencies that can be quite time consuming. In order to be a licensed therapist, most states require a two-year (or longer) “apprenticeship.” Nursing programs require a mass of “clinicals.”

In my undergraduate program, I was required to observe a classroom for a few hours each semester (only the upper level education courses). In most cases, the “real teacher” did not want me involved; thus, I sat in the back of the room, taking a few notes on what I saw. With that being said, my student teaching experience was dynamic only because I was there for the entire semester. I started on the first day of the semester and, by week three, I was teaching all of the courses. My cooperative teacher was absolutely wonderful. I was immersed in the lives of those students and the teaching profession, yet I believe that not all student teaching experiences are equal. Some of my former students (at previous institutions) complained about not being allowed to “take over the classes.” Their cooperating teachers wanted to remain in control of the class, and student teachers were only “required to fully teach the courses for two consecutive weeks.”

Thus, as I reflect, I believe that one of the reasons for which I continued in the profession is because I was a “little better prepared” for the reality of teaching, yet so many new teachers are not. They enter into classrooms and become overwhelmed with the chaos that teaching presents. They spend more time meandering the political establishments than is necessary. They spend more time with classroom management than with actual instruction. They are inundated with unnecessary battles.

Thus, I wonder what I should add to my curriculum. What “realities” can I add that will help this next group of young minds pass the “five year marker?” I believe that we as faculty members in teacher preparation programs should all be asking the same questions. I have always postulated that theory is important and that theoretical camps guide one’s teaching practices. Every teacher must know about Dewey,
Vygotsky, and other educational philosophers. But what more? What more can I do in my classroom to help teachers survive and love teaching? What more can I do to help prepare them to address the “Wow, he has a nice ass” moments?

In compiling the chapters in this book, I hope to provide practicing teachers and pre-service teachers with another tool to help engender a successful teaching career. I hope to provide information to help teachers address the “I didn’t learn that in college” moments. In doing so, the chapters are written by teachers who have a different backgrounds, different educational levels, and different disciplines. Nevertheless, they were all teachers who encountered some “interesting” moments in their teaching career and wished that they had received that “special knowledge” to help them deal with those moments.
WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID

With the assistance of persons immersed within the field of Education, Dr. Joseph Jones has created an insightful read. Those interested in pursuing a career in the field of education as well as those already deep within the trenches will not want to put this book down until the last pages are read, phrases are highlighted, or post it notes are in place. The reader will experience enlightenment due to the heartfelt and powerful stories held inside this book. This is a teaching tool.

—Sherry Blanco
Veteran High School Teacher
Art, New York State

Jones presents in this significant compilation a wide array of circumstances that new teachers found themselves confronting, as each author details his or her unexpected classroom experiences. From stories of handling inappropriate language choices to tales of battling uncompromising administrations, Under the Bleachers excellently depicts authentic, common happenings that pre-service educators may need to prepare to confront in their own future classrooms. Each author’s unique voice aptly chronicles the terms of these difficult situations, composing an informative, cerebral collection vital to those planning to start their careers in education.

—Taelor Jackson Rye
First Year High School Teacher
English, Georgia

The field of education can be a rewarding but ever challenging career. This book is an essential read for new teachers and veteran teachers alike. The insightful stories that Dr. Joseph Jones has masterfully chosen as part of the book will inspire a new sense of resolve and hope for those who are feeling the weight of seemingly impossible demands placed on teachers. These compelling excerpts will assist the reader through the maze of uncertainty that many new teachers face.

—Wendi West
Veteran Teacher
Elementary, Virginia

Dr. Jones has presented this text in a manner that is insightful to all educators, veterans and novices. After being in the field professionally for four years, I was enlightened to see that many had the same opinions, struggles, and
experiences as I have had. Prior to reading the text, I experienced many times where I felt alone in a situation that was out of my own hands, but as I read the stories offered through these educators, I realized that many of us often deal with similar situations. This text is a must read for individuals with an interest in the teaching field as well as those who are currently teaching.

—Evan Moss
New Teacher
Elementary, Virginia
1. BECOMING A GOOD TEACHER – WHO CARES?

There is in the act of preparing, the moment you start caring.
—Winston Churchill

Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For, indeed, that’s all who ever have.
—Margaret Mead

Because the soul has such deep roots in personal and social life and its values run so contrary to modern concerns, caring for the soul may well turn out to be a radical act, a challenge to accepted norms.
—Sir Thomas More

I was naïve to think that teaching was predominately an academic affair. I became a teacher because I loved school: intellectually, socially, athletically, and completely. I felt confident that, because I had been a good at school in those capacities and because I was a smart person, I would naturally be a good teacher. I operated under the false assumption that, since I was good at learning and knowing things, the final step of transmitting the knowledge to students would be a given. I incorrectly thought that the core challenge of teaching was the learning and knowing of things (content knowledge, instructional strategies, protocol and procedures and best practices) when, in fact, this is the easiest and least important part. Teaching is an often gritty and intimate human endeavor. Foremost, it is about building positive relationships with students and, through those relationships, working to help students grow into their best selves.

Fortunately, despite these misconceptions, my first year student-teaching went well. I seemed to have avoided some of the horror scenarios that members of my cohort shared during our graduate classes, and I counted myself “lucky” to have had good students. As the years passed, my “luck” continued, and even when I had students whose notorious reputations preceded them, they didn’t present the dispositions I had been warned about. I also realized along the way that, although I had been attracted to the classroom because I enjoyed learning and the academic content, I remained because I loved the students.

After five years in a secondary classroom, I had the opportunity to return to the university to study and work in the College of Education. While supervising teacher-students, I found myself immersed in the process of teacher education and having to evaluate my experiences through a new lens. Listening to observations of my undergraduates from their visits to classrooms around the county, I was forced to consider many questions: What really matters in education? What do beginning
teachers need to know? What makes a good teacher? What challenges do beginning teachers face? Suddenly, I was tasked with finding ways to help other teachers enjoy the same kind of “luck” that I had experienced.

It was through this reflection that I was able to identify that building positive relationships with students had been at the heart of what made teaching such wonderful experience for me. Not only had it contributed to my personal fulfillment and the richness of the profession, but it also helped me with differentiating instruction and managing the classroom and was at the heart of everything I did as a teacher. Beyond that, it was something that had gone virtually unaddressed in any of my formal teacher preparation. So to any teacher, particularly beginning teachers, I would say this: prioritize building relationships with your students. Because both students and teachers are wonderfully diverse, the process by which relationships in the classroom are developed should be specific to the teacher and to each student. However, I hope to discuss my approach in general terms in hopes that the discussion might bear fruit for others. At minimum, an awareness of the importance of devoting time to relationships and a desire to do so is a crucial first step.

Caring

If you don’t care about students, you’ve chosen the wrong profession. This might sound obvious or harsh, but one needn’t search very hard to find teachers in classrooms across the nation who demonstrate dispositions toward their students that range from toleration to loathing, and those classrooms are rarely pleasant for the students or the teacher. However, I think that, if polled, most teachers would answer in the affirmative with regards to caring for their students. Most teachers enter the profession with a desire to be a positive force in the lives of young people. Caring is the necessary condition that underlies the entire process of relationship building and maintenance.

Nel Noddings, in her book The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternate Approach to Education, makes an important distinction between individuals who care and those who are able to creating caring relations. It is not enough for a teacher to care generally about young people or the future of the nation; teachers must care specifically for individual students in a manner such that the student being cared for is aware of and benefits from that care. We should care for students not only because establishing caring relationships assists in achieving the other goals of education but also because we want students to be carers themselves, so we should seek to model an ethic of caring (Noddings, 2005).

Knowing

Once you’ve committed to prioritizing relationships in your classroom, you have to take steps to build those relationships and to get to know your students. This is a two-way street, and it also involves letting your students know you. Demonstration
of your humanity, fallibility, and personality is important. For me, this process starts as soon as the students arrive in the classroom on the first day. I typically have the students create and decorate nametags and ask them to put an adjective that describes them on the placard. The first time I call roll, we have an exchange where they tell me those words along with giving me their preferred name and allowing me to make sure that I am pronouncing the name correctly. The learning and proper pronunciation and future use of student names is an important part relationship construction. I will often ask students to elaborate on why they picked certain adjectives. For example, if a student picks *athletic*, I will follow up by asking about which sports she participates in, which teams she follows, etc., or if the student selects *artistic*, I might follow up asking about which mediums he prefers to work in and later follow up by asking him to share some work. I think that this initial exchange and friendly banter as well as allowing students their moment in the sun helps open the door.

After the initial roll, I inform the students that we will absolutely not do anything academic on the first day. I will not hand out a syllabus; I will not discuss rules; I explicitly state that I want to spend the first day getting to know one another because that is most important to me. I also take the opportunity to share that I love teaching and working with students and that I am excited about the year. In teaching, I don’t know that it’s necessary to explain every decision to the class, but I prefer to do so when able. I think that giving the students a window into my rationale in this instance lets them understand how I operate, and demonstrating that I am a thoughtful, rational individual who is interested in them will be important in future exchanges with the students. Students, just like adults, appreciate knowing “why” more often than not. In this instance, they are also relieved to know that no “work” will occur that day.

After taking roll, I introduce myself – I have a silly PowerPoint with pictures of places I have lived and gone to school and of myself as a younger person with dated haircuts and outfits. The presentation has slides for favorite foods and sports teams and movies, and though it might be a bit self-indulgent, I try to keep it short. The students respond favorably and have a laugh at my expense, and humor helps students relax and feel more comfortable sharing about themselves later. Though it should be your mission to come to know your students, they also have a genuine curiosity about you, and giving them a glimpse of your humanity and letting them come to know you as an individual are important parts of relationship construction.

While I show the PowerPoint, I have the students complete a general questionnaire on which I ask things like:

- On a scale of 1–10, how much do you enjoy school?
- What are you most looking forward to this year?
- What sort of extracurricular activities do you participate in? How many hours a week do you spend in these activities? (sports, fine arts, job, religious organization, etc.)
- On a scale of 1–10, how much do you already know about (insert course subject)?
• What type of classroom activities do you prefer: group work, projects, independent work, etc.?
• Do you have Internet access at home?
• On a scale of 1–10, if I were to assign a project that required obtaining materials from a store (ex. poster board), how difficult would this be to accomplish?
• Is there anything that I should know about you as a student to help you be more successful?
• (I also ask for parent/guardian contact information on this handout.)

These questions are to give me some small insight into variables which might impact the “student” part of the human beings in my room, but this exchange and, consequently, the information provided are the least-emphasized portion of the first class period.

Beyond this, I typically use a people bingo game wherein students have to seek initials from other students on different squares of their bingo boards. The squares feature characteristics such as “someone who has seen the Pacific Ocean” or “someone who likes horror movies,” and the students move around the room and interact with one another to fill their boards. I usually have a candy reward for the first couple of students who finish and then go over each square and ask the class to raise their hand if they could have signed off on that particular square. I usually follow up with questions to squares such as “this person was born in another state” or “this person plays an instrument” and allow for general conversation in which the students seem inclined to discuss. Again, all of this is just to give little insights into the students in my room and a chance for students to share and become more comfortable with one another. I also use an icebreaker, which is essentially a candy giveaway where each type of candy corresponds with a different question: “if you could have any superpower, what would it be?” or “if you could have any food delivered for lunch today, what would it be?” The students answer questions based on the candy that they’ve selected. All of this is to help create a dialogue, a positive first impression, and to help students feel comfortable with me and with one another and in the classroom, generally.

Altogether, the first day for me is about setting a tone. I’ve often heard beginning teachers advised to “start off strict” or “don’t smile until Christmas,” but I think that this drill sergeant/authoritarian recommendation is a cop-out from having to do the more complicated work of earning respect and building trust. I want my first day to be about making students feel welcome in my class and optimistic about me and the year. The first day is an important start to the process of getting to know one another. Between the questionnaire and the adjectives and the bingo, I have a baseline of information on which I can start to develop an understanding of each student. Furthermore, glimpses of their personalities can be seen through the different activities.
Students arrive in your classroom with a range of predispositions about school and teachers and perhaps even about you once you’ve had a cycle of students and begin to have a reputation in the building. Some students may have a negative opinion of school or negative history of interaction with adults or authority figures or men or women or whatever may be the case. For me, the first few days are an opportunity to disarm those students and to give them reasons for being “open” to me and my classroom.

It’s not uncommon for a teacher’s course introduction or displayed rules to include something about mutual respect. I’ve even heard a teacher say, “You must respect me,” and I cringed. For me, on the second day of class, as we address some very general classroom guidelines, I tell my students that I believe that respect should be earned and that I hope that they will give me an opportunity to earn their respect. I also explain to them how I intend to do so. I inform them that my plan is to first show them respect, to work hard and be friendly and fair, to try to make class enjoyable, and to do anything that I can to help them get to wherever they want to go in life (we also do a goal-setting activity on the second day). In the meantime, I ask that they will give time to prove myself. Beyond that, I tell students that, while I intend to earn respect as an individual, there are some things that they should respect about the position, that any teacher is responsible for grading and discipline. We also discuss that they should, by default, respect each other and any stranger they cross paths with. Last, we address having respect for our collective mission in school.

There is a line between fear and respect, and while a using a fear of consequence or conflict might keep most students in line, it is a method that some students will readily oppose, and even those students who are pacified in a fearful classroom climate are not likely to be developing positive feelings about themselves, the subject, school in general, or learning a model for developing healthy relationships. For that reason, I do not often employ methods of management built around using fear of outcomes or conflict.

It is not enough to have a person-oriented first day and to assume that the necessary knowledge of the students has been obtained. In the past, I’ve also used four-colored personality surveys, a Harry Potter house sorting quiz, and a Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence survey as a way to continue to learn about my students. If the level of the students is appropriate, discussing Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) is a good way to acknowledge that many students will have strengths not necessarily reflected in the traditional classroom and to segue into a discussion about individualized goals for the term. As the year continues, creating opportunities to continue to learn about students can occur in the form of casual conversations, class discussions, providing students the opportunities to write or journal, observations of behavior and conversations with parents, counselors or other teachers of the student. The “picture” of each student is being ever-clarified and can also change dramatically as the student grows and evolves.
All relationships are a work in progress. They require continued effort and ongoing dialogue and opportunities for genuine interaction. There are a number of ways to create these opportunities throughout the school year, and the essential point is that you, as the teacher, make the effort to create or to recognize and capitalize on these opportunities.

No offense to Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series, but I would never have read her series, were I not a high school teacher. The same could be said about a number of young adult cultural phenomena that I have participated in or familiarized myself with simply because they were relevant to so many of my students, and they provided me with social capital that helps with building and maintaining relationships. Take the time to be aware of what is culturally relevant to your students; the time invested in doing so will pay dividends!

When possible, you should meet students where their interests lie. For instance, if a student comes into the classroom wearing a shirt of a favorite band or a jersey from a favorite sports team, take the time to ask about the band if it is one you are unfamiliar with, and get a song recommendation and have a listen, or – even if the jersey is a sport in which you have no interest – take the time to check out a score or follow up with that student to ask how the team performing. It is certainly easier to build relationships in the event of an overlapping of interests, but if you desire to build relationships with all students, then you’ll need to take the extra step. Students will also respond to your interests if they are aware of them. In my classroom, I have posters of movies, comic heroes, sports figures and a number of things that typically generate student comments and conversations.

Beyond identifying student interests, supporting healthy student pursuits contributes to the students’ perception that you care. Attending an art show, a band or chorus concert, a play, or a sporting event not only demonstrates that you are a part of the school community but also provides an opportunity to see the students “in their element” and to connect with students regarding an activity or environment with which they have a positive association. Sponsoring clubs or coaching is a good way to demonstrate a greater investment in the school and students’ interests. Students know that you are not required to do these things and are generally appreciative of your extra effort. As a basketball and soccer coach, I was able to build positive relationships with students in those environments, which then translated to the classroom when my athletes or their peers would appear on my class rosters.

Regarding classroom instruction, I prefer cooperative learning activities because the students typically enjoy the chance to mix class work and still be able to interact with their peers. By not doing whole class instruction, I am also able to move about the room and have more personalized interactions with my students. This instructional style supports my relational objectives.

Additionally, small things such as standing in the hallway, acknowledging passersby, finding reasons to occasionally visit the cafeteria during lunch time, and
informally chatting with students outside of the classroom itself are chances to be visible and friendly and to create opportunities for quality exchanges with students in a setting where you are not directly responsible for them and have no behavioral or academic agenda coloring the exchange. From experience, I find that these exchanges will even result in students who are not in your class viewing you in a positive light as they observe your friendly interactions with their peers.

**Relationship Challenges**

Were our only job to be familiar with and friendly toward students, the task would be simplified somewhat, though still not an easy one. Yet, we also have to help students make progress toward academic objectives, which they may not always be interested in, and to assist in the development of social behaviors that will allow them to be successful in other contexts. For the student who has been less successful in a traditional class setting or who has received less instruction about socially appropriate behaviors, the road is challenging, and tensions can arise from the trying circumstances that occur. However, these moments can also be opportunities to build and reinforce the relationship.

When dealing with off-task behavior, productivity issues or socially inappropriate behaviors, one must remember that, just as these students are attempting to learn academic content, they are also learning how to be successful human beings. It is a process, and you as the teacher have the capacity (and, I would argue, the responsibility) to help facilitate this process. Whether you agree with this sentiment or would rather narrowly confine your responsibilities to influencing academic variables, the fact is that these are growing and developing persons. Even as a high school teacher, I find myself often training individuals how to be students. It seems unrealistic to expect students to learn content and be successful in the classroom when they have never really learned how to do these things. In these instances, my general classroom goals of being present and prepared, taking the task seriously, working hard, and having a good attitude need to be communicated and positively reinforced often. Some of the young people in your classroom, regardless of age, may first need to be taught, or reminded, how to be students.

A student who is conditioned to exhibit unproductive habits or rude behaviors has the capacity to change, but such change will not happen immediately. Like losing weight or stopping smoking, the process of major change for conditioned negative behaviors is complicated and wrought with obstacles and setbacks. Students need consistent positive support when attempting to adjust deeply ingrained behaviors, and the process is more likely to be successful if the student is a willing participant and sees the need for an adjustment. For an example in how difficult such change can be, I encourage you to change the log-in code for your smart phone or your PIN for an ATM/debit card and to take note of how many failed attempts you accrue as you try to defeat your conditioning and change.
In addition to being patient with students, corrections from the teacher need to be made with care. There are very few instances in which a teacher behind a lectern chastising a student by name across the room at full volume is the best manner to address an undesirable behavior. Embarrassing students runs contrary to the message of care and damages the relationship that you are trying to build. Furthermore, you put the student in a position wherein they may feel forced to respond in a contrary manner to “save face” in the eyes of their peers.

As a general guide, corrections should always come from a caring place. If a class is working on an assignment and you notice an off-task student, I would recommend moving over to the student and asking questions such as “How’s it going?” or “Need any help with anything?” – questions that are non-accusatory and delivered as a genuine status inquiry. Anytime you can use humor to soften an exchange or positively acknowledge students to encourage certain behaviors, you should! You can also provide a rationale for why the student should adjust his or her behavior: “I’m afraid you guys won’t finish and this will become homework.” So much of this seems unnecessary to say, but I believe that one of the reasons that so many teachers struggle with classroom management is because they fail to take into account things such as tone, body language and positioning, and specific phrasing, so situations often devolve into places they need never have gone. Certainly as a teacher, you must “pick your battles” but, when possible, avoid “battling” the students! Ideally, you construct a scenario where you are on the students’ side battling against whatever other obstacles to success might exist. Perhaps the one exception to this is when a student becomes his own obstacle. Just remember, as a relational teacher, these interactions are to encourage progress, not to establish control.

Sometimes these encounters escalate because teachers are humans, too, and subject to the emotional moment. It’s important to try to model appropriate behavior and caring, especially in trying moments. Often, I think that teachers become offended or upset because a student’s negative behavior may seem targeted toward the teacher. Generally, a student doesn’t wake up with the intention to ruin a certain teacher’s day, and a classroom episode is normally a culmination of other factors. As a teacher – especially if you are caring and supportive and work to help and not to embarrass a student – the negative behavior is probably not inspired by, nor directed toward, you. Remembering this and understanding that it’s probably not personal should help you get to a place where you can diagnose what the real issue is. If, in fact, a happy student comes to your room and begins to exhibit negative behavior and it is targeted, then you’re doing something wrong.

I’ve mentioned that I like to rationalize decisions to students when I am able, and I often allow students to choose their own groups or their own seats. I do this because initially assigning seats is arbitrary and because you’re not guaranteed to avoid volatile combinations by doing so. It also helps students have a positive first perception of your class on that first day. I truly want students to enjoy my classroom socially, and I want to help them find a balance between their academic
responsibilities and other distractions. I explain the freedom of choice being given, acknowledging the importance and the fun of the social aspects of high school while giving the warning that, if they are not able to find a productive balance, I now know their preferred seating, so any seating that I may of necessity have to assign will be very different. Letting students choose seats also gives a negotiating tool in the event of future off-task behavior. The ability to say, “I don’t think this arrangement is working out for us, we aren’t really accomplishing what we need to,” has proven to be an effective carrot at times. Furthermore, if the day comes when you must assign seats, you have a rationale as to why they are needed and history of evidence to support the decision.

Similarly, I have a relaxed policy on food and drink at the beginning of the year. As a graduate student myself, I can sympathize with the need for caffeine or hydration or the inability to focus on anything else besides being hungry for my next meal. Providing freedom here is also an opportunity to talk about being responsible, picking up after oneself, and trying to promote those responsible behaviors. In a recent article, Chhuon and Wallace (2012) describe a category of teacher behaviors as exhibiting a “benefit of the doubt” mentality. In their study, students identified a range of teacher behaviors that increased their sense of belonging in the school. This mentality is a combination of patience and optimism that students can meet (with support) high expectations and undergo real change. With classroom policy and in potential negative exchanges, I try to maintain a “benefit of the doubt” mentality.

What about Academics?

As a beginning teacher, I think that you need to be able to answer some underlying philosophical questions regarding teaching in general: What is my purpose as an educator/why did I become a teacher? How can I best help these students be ready for future endeavors? What essential knowledge should I prioritize for transmission to my students? What is the best possible outcome for each student? For me, the goal that I articulate to my high school students is that I want to help them develop into happy and productive people and that, at the end of the term, I am less interested in whether or not they remember how many Supreme Court justices there are but am more concerned with whether or not they demonstrate the qualities that allow for people to be successful and happy in life beyond my classroom. These include being present, being prepared, having a positive attitude, being kind, self-advocating, working hard, making good decisions, and generally being invested in their own future.

In this age of accountability, we are often caught up on the tested minutiae of our content areas. Despite my being a secondary social studies teacher, my answers to those philosophical questions have very little overlap with the national/state/district-proscribed learning objectives such as “analyze political rivalries as underlying causes for war.” I admit to my students early on that I love learning and love the
content but that I’m a realist about the universal utility of certain knowledge. So, while conceding that all knowledge is valuable and that passing my specific course and graduating from high school are important objectives that will keep doors open for students as they move forward, the course content is but a tiny part of the big picture, one objective of the mission.

The point here is this: don’t sacrifice the students for the content or think that the most valuable thing that you can teach a student is a series of factoids or that the greatest service you can do for your students is to prepare them for a test. I’ve been fortunate to teach Advanced Placement students and to have rewarding academic experiences, exploring topics in depth and celebrating students’ success on the exam, but this did not happen outside of my relational philosophy of teaching.

There is ample research demonstrating a positive correlation between teacher-student relationships and student perceptions of school, student performance, classroom behavior, attendance, student perceptions of themselves, and student connectedness to the school environment, so the pursuit of relational objectives is not at the expense of academic objectives. The existence of positive relationships enhances the ability to pursue academic goals.

**Final Thoughts**

Relationships matter. Because they matter, teachers and schools should create opportunities and enact strategies to consciously foster the development of positive teacher-student relationships. Relationships matter not only because of the potential impact on student academic achievement but also because they are the medium through which the hidden curriculum – i.e. the human development and character education – is best conveyed. In this age of accountability and numbers, we’ve lost sight of some of this. Building relationships with students of such tremendous personal diversity across age, gender, ethnic and cultural boundaries is the central challenge for a teacher.

One cause for optimism is that we can greatly increase in our capacity as relationship-builders. First, being aware of the importance and prioritizing relationships are a tremendous step in the right direction. Over time and with practice, you will get better at reading students and designing classroom instruction that allows for you to see and celebrate their personalities. With effort, we can become better communicators and manage our half of these relationships better. Caring for students and being empathetic help provide more patience for process of change and the different speeds at which students grow. Even if your school does not specifically emphasize relationship construction, it is a classroom level variable almost exclusively influenced by you, the teacher. If your teacher education training underemphasized this aspect of teaching, there is a wealth of literature about relationships available, but ultimately the methods and manner should be specific to you, and it is more about a personal philosophy and process than a set of theories or strategies to be implemented.
A second reason to be hopeful about succeeding in the task of building relationships is that students, for the most part, are desirous of or at least open to the idea. I recently gave an attitudinal survey regarding teacher-student relationships to students in both advanced and standard classes of ninth graders. One of the measures asked, “How important is a positive teacher-student relationship to your performance in a given class?” My assumption was that students in the standard class would rate the relationship with the teacher much higher and that the students in the advanced class would be conditioned to perform and be successful even in the absence of a great relationship with the teacher. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very important,” the students from the standard sections rated the importance at a 7.9 while the students in the advanced class rated it as a 7.7. I was surprised to see such high ratings in general and also surprised that the advanced sections valued the relationship nearly to the degree that the standard sections did. Other items on the survey were illuminating, however, as the students in different sections seemed to value different teacher behaviors in those relationships.

Beyond the survey results, many students demonstrate behaviors that indicate their desire to know and be known by their teachers. At my school, we have an open campus during lunch, and students can eat where they choose. Students regularly choose to take lunch in their teachers’ classrooms. Any teacher can relate to the students who come to visit for no particular reason other than that they enjoy the company or the conversation. I myself recently returned to the classroom of my favorite teacher, 11 years removed. I reflect almost daily to my own experiences as a student, and I was fortunate to have a number of good teachers with well-organized classes who challenged me academically, but the one whom I think about most often and who made the most difference in my life was the one who I knew cared about me.

As teachers, a great knowledge and love of our academic content will certainly assist in achieving some of our classroom objectives. However, after teaching a certain unit for the third or 30th time, the material may not remain as interesting as it once was. Even for a lifelong learner and an evolving teacher and even in this age of ever-changing curriculum standards, the academic content is not the dynamic variable in our classrooms. The students are. The opportunity to get to meet, learn and know new students each year is what makes that first day of each term so exciting.

This relational approach and interest in the overall development of the student allows for a broader definition of success. To know that, regardless of test results, you’ve made school a more welcoming and enjoyable place, that you’ve been a positive influence or helped a student through a complicated time, that you’ve helped students come to know and appreciate themselves beyond their capacity to be successful on traditional academic measures – all of these are victories. Reflecting on the rewarding moments of my teaching career so far, sometimes I feel like the best thing that I’ve done was to be kind to a kid when he or she really needed it or to sit and listen as students relate their interests or anxieties or to be a regular source of
humor or positivity in the lives of students. So whether you are a pre-service teacher or a seasoned veteran, I would hope that you don’t lose sight of the fact that, despite the conversations about scores and strategies, it really is the people at the core of this rich and rewarding profession who matter most.
2. WHAT THEY DID NOT TEACH ME IN SCHOOL

That Kindness Is the Most Important Thing in the World

Three things in human life are important: the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind.

—Henry James

After teaching secondary school for over 20 years and college for 15 years, I have come to the conclusion that schools of education should require that teachers pass a course on kindness before they can enter the classroom to teach—yes, good “ole-fashioned” kindness. Psychotherapist Robert Furey writes that for one “to be acquainted with kindness, one must be prepared to learn new things and feel new feelings. Kindness is more than a philosophy of the mind. It is a philosophy of the spirit.” Thus, both the learner’s (and the teacher’s) mind and spirit are touched by the smallest kindnesses in life, especially in the classroom.

I have always considered myself to be a kind person, but in retrospect, I know that I have not always been a “kind” teacher. In my first years of teaching, I was a focused teacher, a pragmatist but also a positivist who saw life as right and wrong with little room for gray. Either my students performed in language “skill and drill,” or they did not; either they understood grammar and absorbed “Standard Written English,” or they did not; either they turned in each assignments, or they did not. I did not give them much room for error or for effort. I did give them what I was trained to give them: pedagogy that would produce little consumers who wrote like I did, spoke like I did, and thought like I did. I did not allow for any room for excuses for not turning in homework, not passing tests, and not participating. I had come out of a life of poverty and was the first in my immediate family to go to college. I was the proverbial second child who often outdoes the first child academically. If I could make it and be a good student, my students could, too.

That kind of thinking lasted about a year although some old patterns die slowly. Furey’s epithet proved true for me as the instructor—I had to be prepared to learn new things and to feel new feelings. Therefore, years passed as quickly as the names on the principal’s office door, and with the passing of those years, I did begin to learn new things—such as the importance of beginning each new year (especially with middle schoolers) with a fun ice-breaker in which I allowed my new students to see my humanity. Before asking each student to show us something (that they could do in front of their grandmothers), I would show them my unique ability—I could
literally touch my nose with my tongue. (One of my grandchildren has inherited this ability!)

By participating in this childish venture, I was allowing my students to relax and to see me as a human being. The strange thing is that I began to see them more as human beings, too. They were no longer the vessels in which I had to pour knowledge; they now became the boy who could roll his eyelids back, the girl who could fold her ears back, and the shy person who could whistle so loudly that the principal would come running. I began to learn from them as much or more than they learned from me, and before I knew it, I was having more fun teaching. I also found myself becoming kinder to my students if I sensed that there really was something wrong at home that was keeping that student from studying or working. That understanding usually translated into the student eventually performing better, even if it took the student another form of assignment to make up the grade.

Furey also writes that, the more acquainted I am with kindness, the more I must be prepared to feel new feelings. Some of those new feelings involved respecting what my students had to say, even if what they had to discuss was not in the syllabus or lesson plan for that day, and acknowledging that they could work just as well in groups as they could alone and that Dewey was right about so many ideas about education. I even got to the point that I could give a “group test” and everyone would get the same grade, but everyone had to participate authentically. Another method that I used was to give each student an oral spelling test sitting right beside me and away from other students to supplement the poor scores that he or she had already earned. Later, I would find out about different learning styles and that many of my smartest students had dyslexia or other blocks to reading and needed the accommodation of reading a test question to them.

As I implemented these methods and changed my feelings about impromptu discussions, group work, oral testing, and many other adaptations in pedagogy, I began to be less rigid in my worldview. I also began to be more comfortable in the classroom and with students from different cultures. I began to be a “kinder” teacher. I began to see that they were becoming kinder to each other and respecting each other’s space, history, and behaviors, too. One of the ways that students became kinder was in listening to the writings of other students. I began to incorporate short personal writings in the classroom with more success than the longer essays, which were still required.

As students shared their personal thoughts, I believe that those words of common experiences allowed people to see the same human trials that they had experienced in life. I even began to write some from my own experiences and to share these writings with my students. To put it in a nutshell—I became more “real” as a teacher and kinder as a person with them. I had stopped using what Paulo Freire calls the “banking model” and begun to build a personal pedagogy based on kindness and consideration for each person. Did all students like these changes? No, some
complained and wanted to change classes. Did I like these changes? Yes, I did because I had found what Rousseau says is greater than other forms of wisdom: “What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?”