

Sound Advice from Teachers to Future and Practicing Teachers

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Abstract The early career teachers in this book give advice to a new wave of hopeful teachers, starting with the need to reflect on what they need to learn and do to give students the best of themselves. This chapter addresses some of the key elements in the narratives, such as teachers' strong investments in their own learning and working within the restrictions of school structures and policies that contrast with teachers' ideas about sound teaching. The teachers speak in plain terms about the steps that are needed for future and early career teachers to grow professionally and enact social equity teaching practices, especially those who teach in historically unjust contexts. Their recommendations fall into four main categories: (1) creating and sustaining relationships, (2) maintaining high expectations, (3) seeing the truths of their contexts, and (4) taking care of oneself.

Keywords Advice · Growth · New teachers · Social equity practices

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1 Introduction

This book has offered the unfiltered perspectives of teachers as they experienced their daunting, frustrating, and rewarding first years teaching in underserved communities. They have not only lifted the academic achievement of historically marginalized communities, but they have worked to overtly challenge classroom and societal inequities that permeate today's public school systems. They have discovered truths about working in underserved districts and worked to practice culturally sustaining pedagogy. And now, as they are no longer novice teachers, they pass the torch to a new wave of hopeful teachers who choose to teach in urban contexts in order to be the change they wish to see.

It is difficult to itemize a list of "best practices" shared by all effective teachers in all contexts. Instead, this chapter presents some best practices of urban teaching that account for and validate the perspectives and experiences of culturally marginalized groups. Although the realities of these teachers' experiences have differed by geographic region, student demographics, pedagogical methods used, amount of administrative support, and levels of instructional independence, they share certain abstract and practical advice for a common purpose: to guide new teachers toward social equity education in historically unjust contexts. They are not intended as a script for good teaching; rather, they are designed to expand pedagogical scholarship to include habits, skills, and mindsets involved in good teaching that are incorrectly assumed to be independent of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic.

2 Reflection

After learning about the dispositions, knowledge, and skills that allowed our five teachers to begin to make a positive difference in their under-resourced classrooms, we now ask you to reflect on what you are currently doing and thinking about to make a difference for your students. What do you think you will need to learn, and do, and know to give your students the best of yourself? We hope these narratives prompted you to think about where you are developmentally and professionally as a teacher for social justice and where you might go. Instead of dispensing advice about how you might acquire the habits of mind and action that align with a social equity orientation, we refer you to the next chapter where teachers speak to you in plain terms about what next steps you can take to grow professionally. In the meantime, we can share a few ideas about getting the support you will need to teach in underserved communities.

You have probably already noticed that the teachers in this book invested heavily in their own learning, primarily through reading the professional literature and seeking the advice of colleagues, mentors and parents. Curiously, professional development sessions were not a primary factor in their learning. This begs questions about the relevance and quality of professional development, and how

teachers might work with teacher mentors and school leaders to direct their own professional learning. Professional development is most relevant when it is based on teachers' particular observations, inquiries, and challenges. Advocate for the types of professional development you need while also understanding that more senior teachers have a lot to teach.

Advocating for one's professional development is one challenge, but what do you do when some of the structures and policies in your school are contradictory to your own philosophy of teaching? This was the case for Megan and Tracie, who, as a result, prepared students for standardized tests using the instructional approaches they believed would work best for their students. When we think about their cases, we are reminded of Cochran-Smith's theory of social justice (2010) in that part of being a teacher for social justice is to acknowledge the tensions and contradictions that emerge from competing ideas about the nature of justice and be able to manage these tensions in imperfect but concrete ways. According to some, standardized testing is supposed to result in greater justice for students. After all, educators can help students only when they know what their needs are, as reflected by these tests. Yet Megan and Tracie tried to work with the standardized testing policies of their schools by using some of their own informed approaches. They were not often recognized for their efforts to provide students with fuller conceptions of literacy than their programs dictated.

The question for you is what to do in situations where there is little to no flexibility to modify instruction in the ways you see fit. Teachers in these situations need to be careful data collectors, analyzers, and theorizers about how their classroom practices are working with particular students, as is consistent with an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). If some students are either being left behind or are disengaged by one-size-fits-all instruction, it is time to gather evidence. It will be useful to gather data on students' levels of engagement, their questions, and their written/oral responses to the assignments, and you will need to do this for at least a few weeks. If you find that students are consistently disengaged, or that instruction is either far below or far above some students' skill levels, it will be apparent that learning is being compromised in your classroom. You will then be able to share this data with teacher colleagues and mentors and invite discussions about what to do. If several teachers in your school make similar discoveries, all of you will be in a better position to advocate for changes in school policies and structures.

3 Teacher to Teacher

The teachers profiled here offer a wide variety of advice: mindsets to adopt, ways to maintain your sanity as a first- or second-year teacher trying to stay afloat, and practical advice for getting through the day-to-day without losing sight of the bigger movement. This advice falls into four main categories, which you will see repeated throughout their excerpts below: (1) creating and sustaining relationships,

(2) maintaining high expectations, (3) seeing the truths—both beautiful and exasperating—of your context, and (4) taking care of yourself. These educators assert the importance of building mutually supportive relationships with administrators, colleagues, families, parents/guardians, and, of course, the students themselves. They understand that teaching the whole child takes a village of workers and that the first step in teaching the whole child is to know the whole child. They understand the importance of keeping the high bar set in its place, even when accomplishing the task seems impossible. They know that social justice teaching cannot last without a clear, honest vision of the challenges and triumphs of their contexts. And they know that, if the best thing for kids is to keep committed teachers in the profession as long as possible, then these committed teachers must find a way to make the work sustainable. In the pages that follow, you will find useful, applicable, and well-intentioned advice that you can mold into your own practice—in short, you will find sound advice.

3.1 Leslie: Build a Strong Knowledge Base

If I could travel back in time and write a letter of advice to myself as a first-year teacher, I would suggest that I (1) be an expert and an authority, (2) know my students as people, (3) cultivate relationships, and (4) take care of myself.

First, be an expert in your content area and strive to become an authority in your classroom. It is important to maintain up-to-date knowledge of pedagogical practices to bolster the literacy skills of your particular body of students. Read Kylene Beers' *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* (2002), Richard T. Vacca and Jo Anne L. Vacca's *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* (10th ed., 2010), Cris Tovani's *I Read It, But I Don't Get It* (2000), Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton's *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language* (2005), Ruth Culham's *Traits of Writing* (2003), and books by Harvey Daniels. Also very helpful are Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis's *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* (2007), David W. Moore et al.'s *Developing Readers and Writers in the Content Areas K-12* (2010), and Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell's texts on leveled and guided reading.

You can become an authority by understanding that kids do not have to like you (there will undoubtedly be some students who won't), but they must respect you. So much of classroom management oftentimes revolves around fear. As Rafe Esquith points out in *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56* (2007), teachers are afraid of not being liked, of looking bad in front of their colleagues, of being disobeyed, and of feeling out of control in front of students. Kids, in turn, are afraid of public humiliation, of getting answers wrong, of appearing stupid, and of facing parental consequences. The way to increase achievement and for everyone to feel more comfortable in the classroom is to replace fear with trust. I believe that the way to build trust is to be fair, transparent,

and genuine. Strive for consistency and enforcement of expectations. Be transparent; kids should know that there are no secrets to doing well in your class. Let them know your job is to give them the skills they need to be successful in college and beyond. You are sympathetic and reasonable; your expectations for behavioral and academic choices are high, yet attainable. Be genuine; kids can “smell” when you don’t mean what you say. Read Doug Lemov’s *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College* (2010). Mean it when you tell them—every single day—that you believe in them. Admit when you don’t know an answer to a question and reveal how you’re going to find it. Model your enthusiasm for learning; they’ll meet your level of excitement.

Second, know your students. You will only be able to teach the whole child—meeting his/her intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs—if you know the child as a person. Take the time to get to know your students in a low-key setting. Hang out with them at recess; sit with them on the subway; volunteer to chaperone field trips. Discover their interests. The idea is to capture some of the experiences of their lives and find ways to weave these into your curriculum. Learn about the challenges, beliefs, values, and responsibilities students may have that affect them in the classroom. But don’t pry. Read Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish’s *How to Talk so Teens will Listen and Listen so Teens will Talk* (2006) and Paul Tough’s *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012). Ascertain which other adults impact the students’ lives: grandparents, neighbors, religious leaders, and soccer coaches. You may need to depend on one another for the support of a child. Remember to bring humility to these conversations; other adults in a child’s life have known the child far longer than you have and will have a ton of insight to offer, if you are willing to listen. “It takes a village.”

Third, cultivate relationships. Via phone, email, and in-person visits, develop relationships with parents and guardians to form a tripod of teamwork among you, them, and the students. Begin with the assumption that all parents/guardians want what is best for their kids, although you may disagree on what that “best” is or the route to achieving it. Call homes with positive messages as often as possible; it makes the families and students feel good, and it makes you feel good, too. Keep in mind that caregivers themselves may have experienced the achievement gap or may not have been schooled in the American education system. As such, they face their own set of challenges in supporting their children: they may not speak English, they may work multiple jobs, they may not be confident in their own academic skills to help with homework, or they may feel marginalized by the school. Approach all encounters with parents with respect.

Take the time to study poverty; you will be far better equipped to speak with parents/guardians and will develop stronger empathy if you learn about the socioeconomic circumstances that impact them. To explore ideas in race and class, read Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (1995) and *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children* (2013), Beverly Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting*

Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations About Race (2003), articles by Sonia Nieto, Michelle Alexander and Cornel West's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012), Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (*Issues of Our Time*) (2011), Alfred Lubrano's *Blue-Collar Roots; White Collar Dreams* (2005), Jonathan Cobb and Richard Sennett's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1993), and Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (1999). To explore the achievement gap specifically, read Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), *The Shame of the Nation* (2005), and *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2007).

Build relationships with school leaders. Make it clear you will work hard and be a team player. Be honest and genuinely optimistic. Assume the best in others and approach all situations from a solutions-oriented attitude. Get to know your colleagues and allow them to get to know you. Develop a close relationship with at least one colleague. Find a mentor if your school doesn't automatically assign one to you. You need someone who can give you constructive feedback, someone to whom you can ask your "stupid questions," and someone who can help you navigate how to obtain resources. Read Patrick's Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (2002) and Jim Collins's *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't* (2001). Carry the culture of respect to all adults who enter your campus, including custodians, secretaries, and visitors. Anyone who puts in an honest day's work deserves respect, and your students will follow your lead.

As should hopefully seem obvious, consuming these resources is not nearly enough to build a strong classroom or establish a career; you must discuss theory with colleagues and try new ideas that are supported by pedagogical literature, but also don't be ashamed to use a practice that has proven effective—there's no need to reinvent the wheel when other teachers have paved the way. Although nothing can replace personal experience in your individual context, a strong knowledge base is a necessary place to start.

Finally, take care of yourself the best you can. Only stress about that which you can control. The achievement gap is connected to other issues like healthcare, law, sanitation, transportation, gang injunctions, drugs, access to weapons, nutrition, psychiatric care, teen pregnancy, and other realities. You can only control what happens in your classroom—maybe your students will create other types of social change. Be flexible. Expect that at least one big change will occur in your school each year. Be protective of your time. Take a day off when you need to. Say no to responsibilities that you cannot commit to doing well. Don't be afraid of constructive conflict. Forgive yourself when you make mistake. Model how to handle imperfection. Read Maia Heyck-Merlin and Norman Atkins's *The Together Teacher: Plan Ahead, Get Organized, and Save Time* (2012). What is best for students is for you to be able to teach for as long as possible. Do what you can to make the job sustainable so that you can do it with all your passion for as long as you can.

3.2 Clare: Let Students Show You What to Teach

First and foremost, take the time to know your kids and learn from them. My students were bursting out of their green polo shirts and khaki pants with culture. I just had to have the willingness to embrace their cultures in my teaching. One change I would make from previous years would be to take steps to make families more accessible. With a language barrier, communication can be even more difficult than usual. But in fostering relationships with parents and guardians, I found so much more success for their children. They shared beautiful stories and welcomed me to hear about the other side of my students' lives. My experiences were humbling and enriched my ability to teach their children. I knew how to build my literacy instruction because of what my students taught me. Their stories intertwined with the ones to which I opened their eyes. I came to realize the importance of listening and not doing so much talking. The classroom has to be about them, down to the picture book you choose before lunch or dismissal. They showed me what to teach. They will show you the way more than any anthology, manual, or textbook ever could.

One of the single most important things you can do for yourself is to find a mentor, even if he/she is not someone assigned to you. I did not have one; I had many, although I sought them out myself. I maintained relationships with different people for different reasons, all of whom helped me survive. It takes a village to raise a child. In school it takes an entire staff to teach a student. Don't be Wonder Woman or Superman, thinking you can do this alone. It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. Don't we encourage our students to ask questions? One behavioral psychologist also told our faculty at one of our meetings to use the phrase Q-TIP, Quit Taking It Personally. Following that faculty meeting, I then had a cohort of faculty who sent envelopes of Q-tips to my classroom as not-so-subtle reminders that I needed to stop acting like such a nut case and calm down. But in more professional terms, you can't take stress home with you, or it will consume you. I am still avidly trying to learn exactly how to do this, but I have begun to come to terms with the fact that I only have control over the school day and what happens during those hours. I have to be okay with that, or I will lose that as well.

Just as you do with yourself as a teacher, and yes, as human being with a life, teaching in the current climate requires that you find a balance. I was fortunate; I had state and diocesan standards to adhere to, but how I taught and met those objectives was of my own accord. My principal emphasized reading and math and approved most avenues to get there. I reveled in my ability to be creative and really teach and reach my students, but I know the reality of the situation can be quite different. Compromise and find your own in-between. Don't lose yourself, and don't lose your job. You are there for your students: you are there to mentor, to guide, and to teach. Infuse yourself in all you bring to the table in your classroom, but pick your battles. If you want to teach, you need a job, and yes, there are teaching opportunities out there where you have the freedom that we grew up with. There are diamonds in the rough, and there are principals that are more than worth

their salt. I had one, plus an amazing assistant principal, plus a one-for-all, all-for-one staff. I was a lucky duck of a first-year teacher, but in many cases, you might have to work to get there. Don't get discouraged; your skills and your students are worth the climb.

But my favorite and the most critical piece of advice is this: don't fear teaching outside of the box. That's where the fun and the magic happen. It can be scary, especially when you look out upon a sea of blank stares or you have to answer questions you don't even know how to answer. You don't always have to have the answer; you just have to be open to the questions. It is good to confront issues in a controlled environment. Doing so makes for constructive conversations and open-minded revelations, even in first grade. And compromises come when you can infuse the skills you need to teach into great literature. Find those books that speak to issues in your classroom while also still remembering the academic needs of your students.

My year in Phoenix changed my life, from my skin's ability to handle heat to the different shape of my heart and soul. My educational philosophy was molded and altered to better fit me as a teacher. Since I fell head over heels into a terrain I had never known, I needed to acclimate quickly to survive. I had taught in Philadelphia, then I had to teach in Phoenix. There was no question: it was my choice and a job that had to be done.

The stories affect me in such immense ways that I cannot revert to the person or teacher I once was. I am fortunate to have acquired educators to guide me along in my teaching-learning journey. First, there was Medea, among other Philadelphia friends, and I now have Malinal, Bernardo, Acilina, Jorge, and on and on and on. It is as if they each hold a space as a tattoo on my teacher heart. Because of them, I teach differently. I approach students knowing that they have a story underneath their adorable exteriors, and I know that it is my job to teach them and maintain high expectations. As gut-wrenching as it is that I cannot change some of their situations, it would be a further detriment to allow these circumstances to dictate my classroom management or discipline. Yes, I invited their stories into my literature block, but I controlled it and ultimately made it a positive experience. As hard as it was to face tearful explanations of misbehavior, I knew the outcome of a functioning student in a classroom environment was of greater importance, and that has to win in both Phoenix and Philadelphia.

I also know not to overlook their stories or brush them off simply because they are not in the curriculum. Your students' lives are the most important teachable moments you will find, and that is something I am willing to fight for. They need to feel valued and to hear someone understand them so that maybe they can better comprehend themselves. I now know I can be that person, advocate, and ally.

Beyond that, I learned a lesson in working with a team of teachers. There will be opposition, even if it is just a personality conflict, which can still surely mess up your day. But one thing I can always rely on is my kids. They are my driving force, so if I am pushing and pulling, yelling and screaming for them, it is worth the uncomfortable aftermath. That always passes with time. Even in literature, conflict

can brew pleasant and worthwhile results, so take it as a learning opportunity. You can never just be a teacher; you have signed up to be a life-long learner as well.

3.3 *Rachael: Study Poverty*

Before you take a job in an underserved community, take the time to study poverty so you have some understanding of your students' home lives. You can study it up close by spending time in these communities. I would also recommend reading books such as *Savage Inequalities* and *Letters to a Young Teacher* by Jonathan Kozol and journal articles such as *The Development of Occupational Aspirations and Expectations among Inner-City Boys* by Thomas D. Cook, Mary B. Church, Subira Ajanaku, William R. Shadish, Jr., Jeong-Ran Kim, and Robert Cohen (1996). Other great articles include *A School that Fosters Resilience in Inner-City Youth* by H. Jerome Freiberg (1993) and *The Cooperative Elementary School: Effects on Students' Achievement, Attitudes, and Social Relations* by Stevens and Slavin (1995).

It is important not to assume that you know why children are acting in certain ways. Instead, ask questions in a respectful way: "Can you tell me about that?" "Why did that happen?" "Is there something going on today?" Your students will have a lot of things going on in their lives that you might not know about or have experience with.

Be sure to educate yourself about the cultural practices of your students. Find out the background of the kids who go to your school, ask questions, and look things up on the Internet. Get to know your families as much as possible. Be friendly, give out your cell phone number, stay late, or come in early to meet family members if that is when they can see you.

A really important thing for me was befriending more experienced teachers. I created an unofficial mentor for myself when I met a master teacher who was now tutoring at Honor. We get along well, and I look to her for advice and information about students, families, and the school itself. Find allies you can talk to and ask questions of. Don't be afraid to ask questions! Even if you are in a great school, you still need some friends you can count on and commiserate with.

Always maintain high expectations for your students. Know that kids in high poverty communities are the same as all other kids; many just face more challenges and obstacles in their daily lives. Show your kids how much you believe in them and that you don't only *think* they can do well, you *expect* no less from them. Your kids will rise to meet or exceed your expectations, and you will be thrilled with what they can do.

Last, have faith in yourself that you can make a difference. You can be the person a student feels safe with. You can be the person who instills confidence in a kid who thinks he will always fail. You can be the person who makes your students want to come to school. You can be the person who shows love to a difficult child. You can be the person who listens to your students. You can be the person who

celebrates a small but hard-fought victory. You can be the person who leads by example. You can be the person who creates a safe environment for kids who are lost and scared. You can be the person your students can count on. You can be the person who changes lives. And you will see it every day. You will see your kids grow and blossom and change in ways you didn't think possible. You will get to know kids and families and get them to trust you. You will watch your students make connections and realize they can do things they didn't think they could do. You will hear your own words repeated back to you and know that what you say to your kids every day is important. You will see that you being you is just what your students need.

3.4 Megan: Build Relationships and Listen

Stay true to yourself and why you decided to work in urban education. With all of the politics involved in education today, it is easy to get sidetracked by mandates and policies that detract from providing the highest possible level of education. Do what you believe is best for your children at all times. If you strongly believe something may take away from the education you desire to give your students, communicate with your administration and work on options for resolving the situation.

Things can get very overwhelming, and it is easy to feel lost in the whirlwind of urban teaching. It is important to take time for yourself. It is kind of like when you're on an airplane and they're going through the safety procedures, and they tell the adults to put their masks on before putting masks on their children. An unhealthy, exhausted, and emotionally drained teacher is not going to perform at his or her peak. Know your limits and when *not* to volunteer for that one extra chess club night if it means you will be able to perform better in the classroom later.

Build relationships with your students and parents. I always immediately call or try to communicate in some way with my children's parents/guardians. Education is teamwork; it truly does take a small village to raise a child. You may not agree with every adult's parenting styles, but you must try your hardest to work as a team for the sake of the child. Find opportunities for adults to volunteer in your classroom, and communicate often with them. Be sure to communicate for positives, not just when their child misbehaves. Take the time to get to know your students. Your children will respect and trust you more when they know you have their best interests at heart. From an academic standpoint, getting to know a child is crucial to providing an excellent education to him or her.

Be proactive. Getting to know your students is the first step in preventing possible disagreements. There is always a reason why a child acts out. For example, this past year, I knew a student who lived with his grandmother who let me know that his father returned from jail. When I spoke with the student the following morning, I asked him how he was feeling, and he told me that he was quite angry. We came up with a plan of squeezing a squishy ball while sitting in the library for

five minutes. Using this simple proactive strategy, I am sure we avoided several severe altercations.

“Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Whether you are religious or not, these are precious words to live by as a teacher, particularly one who works with children in high-poverty areas. You are going to hear about and witness a lot of things that will shake you to your core. You cannot change every detail of your students’ lives, and you cannot change the entire educational system in one day. But letting go of those details you cannot change and focusing in the things that you do have the power to change for the better will make you a better teacher. Focus on you as a teacher, your classroom, and the educational experience you are providing. You should not forget the things you cannot change. Those details are important to consider, but do not bring yourself down trying to change things that are out of your reach. Find the serenity, and gain the wisdom.

3.5 Tracie: Focus on the Entire Child

After finishing my first year of teaching, I reflected on the progress I had made and realized that I had not succeeded in the ways that I thought that I had. After spending four years teaching middle-school-aged children, I have learned that doing so tends to bring out one of two responses in people: either they will cave and give up, or they will find a way to take control of their classrooms and teach. I do not always win, but with every day I stand in front of my students, I start to “win” more.

At the end of my first year, I believed that I had won, but many of my students did not. They walked out of the doors of my classroom without the foundational skills necessary for success in high school. Those are the kids that leave and you know that they still can’t read or write a complete sentence, or even communicate basic thoughts so that their voices can be heard. Carrying that sense of failure or that feeling of having broken the explicit or implicit promises that were made to their families is a heavy load and can change you in ways that can be hard to describe.

That is the difficult reality of teaching I face at the end of each year. Did I walk into my classroom and do everything that I said I was going to do? Did I uphold the explicit and implicit promises I made to my students’ families about what I was going to give them? And finally, did my students walk out better prepared for the next chapter in their school careers and lives than when they entered? These are important questions to ask yourself. While we live in a world that is driven by data, test scores, and meeting the next mandate, being a teacher is more than how many of your students were proficient on the state test or how good their essays were. It is about asking yourself those questions and evaluating how well you served the entire child.

This realization has helped me understand that I had not won the war but perhaps I had started to win some battles for my students. When you work in the

communities that we work in, there are many problems outside the school doors that impact what happens for the sixty or ninety minutes students are in your classroom. To be the most effective teacher in the communities that we work in, you have to become a member of the community that surrounds the school. You need to be vulnerable in front of our parents and their children. Often my parents have had very negative experiences with schools as students and as parents. Schools had become places in which they themselves were left behind. And now their children couldn't read, couldn't do math, and didn't seem to be making any progress towards the goals they had set. I have found that sharing my own story helps parents see me as a partner in the work of educating their children.

When you take the time to learn about your students' cultures and understand what goals their parents have set for their children's futures, you instantly become more capable of helping them achieve those goals. It also shows that you are invested in them as people and increases their trust in your motivations and actions. With the trust of parents, students, staff, and community leaders, you become armed with one of the most powerful weapons a teacher can hold: the power of strong relationships. If you build strong relationships, students will be willing to hear the difficult truths about what they need to do to reach their goals. If you combine those tools with the unrelenting belief that your students can learn, will learn, and will be successful, you have every tool that you need that can't be taught in a classroom. With these beliefs and tools, any time you find yourself in front of my students, in front of your students, in front of our students, you will have a chance to make the difference in that child's life. This is what they deserve.

4 A Final Word

You've already gathered that it takes a lot of knowledge and practice to do what these teachers did in their first few years of teaching. It also takes experience. Most of the teachers had some prior experience in underserved communities either before attending or while attending college. It is important that you get this experience. Recall Clare's experience with Madea. Clare was challenged to win Madea's respect, an experience that was pivotal to her sense of efficacy and her ability to teach in other underserved communities. This experience gave her time to struggle, reflect, and make approximations—experiences that are so necessary to one's growth. Clare found it advantageous to remain in the same school setting over a four-year period, staying long enough to build key relationships with students and their caregivers. There's also something very powerful about taking mission-related trips to underserved communities where you can be immersed in learning about intergenerational poverty and the factors that shape it. Megan, for instance, visited Appalachia and other high poverty communities. These excursions were filled with opportunities for her to get to know community members and reflect on issues of poverty and social inequality. If you currently attend college, seek out these opportunities for yourself.

You've also probably gathered that developing certain dispositions, knowledge, and skills requires not only direct experience in the field but also a heavy commitment to your own learning. Although they did not boast about it, these teachers were intellectually curious and highly accomplished university students. They had established philosophies of teaching and learning that guided their lesson planning and curriculum design. They had developed some notions about classroom management, but most of these teachers found this the most challenging aspect of their jobs. They were continually fine-tuning these strategies within their classrooms. To varying degrees, they had developed some pedagogical strategies for teaching literacy, although they were challenged to address the wide variety of literacy needs that different students presented. The teachers also came to their schools having learned some things about different cultural communities and themselves as people of a particular cultural orientation, but they continued to learn about these things when they began to teach.

If you are majoring in education, it is important that you construct understandings about the big principles that guide teaching and learning, but it is also vital that you acquire strategies for managing a classroom and teaching children with many different social and academic needs. The teachers discussed many types of challenges: an overemphasis on standardized testing, coping with limited resources such as books and other materials, students who read several years below grade expectations, students who are missing from school for long periods of time, and students who are suffering emotionally and socially. It is also important to seek out courses that address these issues and pay special attention to the successful ways teachers have supported students in these settings. It is also important to learn as much as possible about different cultural communities, social inequalities, social equity teaching, culturally sustaining teaching, and critical pedagogy. Last, it is critical that you have opportunities to reflect on and confront your own culturally influenced ways of seeing students and underserved communities. This is vital in order to recognize and nurture students' academic potential.

Getting into the mindset of and consistently striving to make a difference in your students' lives requires tremendous work. The teachers profiled here have provided some advice for getting through those first few tiring years. They have suggested that you develop and nurture relationships, maintain high expectations, see the truths of your context, and take care of yourself. Although forming positive and open relationships with students might be obvious, these teachers have stressed the idea that getting to know your students is not "in addition" to teaching them content. Getting to know your students as people and teaching them academic content are so intricately linked that they cannot be separated. All of these teachers highlighted again and again the importance of understanding and teaching the whole child. Studying poverty, talking to children in low-stakes settings, and truly learning to listen to what children have to say will guide students towards trusting you. If your relationships with students are based on trust, you can teach them to master any content you want.

These teachers underscored the blessings and insight that accompany relationships with parents, guardians, and families. As teachers, we must remember that

children enter our classrooms spontaneously; they come from families that have high hopes for their children's futures. And these families are expecting us to deliver on the promise that accompanies any teacher's job: to love the children until it hurts and give them the academic tools they need to be whatever they want to be when they grow up. Families and teachers want the same thing. Therefore it is important to approach communication through the lens of commonality. You play different roles in the children's lives, but those roles must work in tandem in order for kids to learn.

Some of the teachers also discussed the importance of cultivating relationships by illustrating the benefits of forming positive relationships with colleagues. Colleagues can feel like your saviors: they provide resources, they make you feel better after a tough day, they give you examples to follow, they give you advice on your teaching, they regularly demonstrate best practices, they are your biggest cheerleaders, and they can be close friends. The work of being a social justice teacher is simply too difficult to manage if you feel like an island. In any school where you work, regardless of how you feel about your administration, testing, or curricular freedom, there are other teachers who have walked in your shoes and can show you the path toward excellence. Find those teachers and cling to them with all your might.

Forming and preserving these relationships is a reciprocal process with maintaining high expectations for yourself and for your students. Consistently striving for excellence builds your reputation as someone who works relentlessly to help your students meet their potential. This reputation, in turn, becomes one built on trust, further solidifying your relationships. High expectations communicate your belief in the boundless potential of your students. Students will meet whatever bar you set for them; place the bar in the sky and they'll show you the stars.

Although there is tremendous overlap in the advice these teachers have offered, each context is truly unique. Schools vary dramatically in every facet of education: size, location, demographic, leadership structure, staff culture, curricular independence, student work expectations, etc. What works in one context may not work in another. In selecting your school site, be sure to examine various aspects that will either mesh with or conflict with your values. Once at your school, be honest with yourself about the situation you face. Undoubtedly, there will be facets of the environment that you will question. Understand your realities; work within the ones that align with your values, and use your best judgment in determining how to advocate for a more just way of serving your students.

Although it may seem outside the realm of being an effective teacher, four of the teachers explicitly recommend taking care of yourself. This advice goes beyond the classic mantras of getting enough sleep and eating right. These habits are important for anyone in any profession. Rather, these teachers recognize the unique challenges facing new teachers working in high-poverty schools whose days extend far longer than others may think. These teachers field phone calls from students requesting homework help and parents requesting updates on their children at all hours and on all days of the year. They completely overhaul Wednesday's lessons at 10 p.m. on Tuesday because less than half the students mastered Tuesday's

lesson. They arrive at and leave school in the dark hours of the day. They suffer from laryngitis, are continually dehydrated, often go without lunch, and frequently spend the entire day on their feet. Your students depend on your ability to bring your A-game every single day. Do whatever you can to avoid burnout.

All of this advice notwithstanding, avoid allowing the minutiae of the day-to-day to cloud your vision of making a difference. You have entered this work because you want to make of typical schooling a more just world. Make this advice your own: distinguish which parts apply to the administrative, cultural, and demographic context in which you teach, tweak it to make it subscribe to your personality and style, and think critically about how you can mold it to promote educational equity. The more you think critically about how you can best serve your students, the better you will be able to invite your students to think critically about how they can change the world.

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