Allies for Education
ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS ACROSS OUR ROLES IN P12 SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES
Volume 1, Issue 2
2018

No More Empty Pails: The Time Is Now for Great Teaching

Brian R. Sevier
Dean of the School of Education
CSU Channel Islands

A few years ago, when my then 5-year-old godson Thomas was about to enter Kindergarten, his mother asked me about the qualities to look for in a school and classroom. "How do you know good teaching is happening…what do you look for?", she wondered. I remembered that conversation as I thought about writing for *Allies for Education.* It really is THE question for anyone interested or invested in education. No doubt, there are countless ways to describe the qualities of good or great teaching. When I am asked this question, I recall a W.B. Yeats quote: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." I love this quote and have used it time and again to describe great teaching and teachers. In one sentence, Yeats captures the teaching I experienced and the classroom that changed my life as a 5th grade student in the Los Angeles Unified School District. My teacher, Mrs. Rhonda Levine, lit an education fire in her students, by seeing (and *not* seeing) us in particular ways, by valuing and using the lives we brought into the classroom, and by allowing us to discover the impact that we could have on our school and community.

Seeing and Not Seeing Students

When I think back on myself and my fellow 5th graders at Camellia Avenue School in North Hollywood, California, I think how easy it might have been to consider us in terms of what we lacked. We were not from what anyone would call "well-off" families; nearly all of us received free or reduced-price lunch at the school cafeteria. We did not come from "educated" households; I knew no one whose parent held a college degree. We were not equally proficient in the English language; many spoke a different primary language at home. If some teachers might have seen deficits, and some surely did, that was not how Mrs. Levine viewed her students. Instead, she saw us, and addressed us every morning, as learners, thinkers, and citizens. Long before today's emphasis on close reading, Mrs. Levine had us examining non-fiction texts specifically related to our young lives, including op-ed pieces and even, once, the transcript of a trial. She pushed us to think about our world, to examine what we read, and to consider what we took for granted as "true," including what we believed about ourselves. Mrs. Levine regularly extolled the virtues of learning as a means to connect with civic life and being in the world. As a first-generation college graduate herself, she insisted that each and every one of us could attend college, if

we chose that path. She spoke to us as no other teacher did, challenging us to make our own futures, just as she had done.

Valuing Student Experience

The educational "fire" that Mrs. Levine ignited, however, was the result of more than how she addressed us or what she had us read; she actually created ways to bring our concerns and lives into the classroom. We regularly began the school week with a "Monday Town Hall" where we would discuss issues relevant to ourselves, the local neighborhood, and national/global communities. The issues might come from newspapers or television. More often than not, however, the topics revolved around things we saw, heard about, or experienced. Mrs. Levine skillfully moderated the town halls, but we chose the topics we deemed important. Through this process, she validated our lived lives and established the classroom as a space connected to those lives. In valuing *our* experiences and concerns, Mrs. Levine prompted us to explore the issues that kept returning to the topic board, a process that took a dramatic turn somewhere in the middle of the fall semester. Until 5th grade, my classmates and I had traversed, and begrudgingly considered "normal," the rutted streets, missing traffic signs, and rain-flooded intersections that made up our daily walking commute to school. All of us had tales, some very dramatic, of near misses with cars and buses, as well as ruined clothes and shoes, that served as testimonies to this lacking and dangerous infrastructure. These stories came so regularly into our town halls that Mrs. Levine eventually found a way to use them in her instructional practice and as a spur toward action.

Encouraging Students to Find Their Voice

Mrs. Levine carefully directed us to move from complaining and toward thinking about how to effect change in our immediate community. In what seemed like a natural shift, one that I now know must have been a huge undertaking in instructional planning, Mrs. Levine (re)oriented the class around a truly interdisciplinary endeavor: helping us determine what we would seek to change and how we would work actively to achieve those changes. And this work would require information and knowledge beyond just our experience *as well as* the development of some very specific skills. For months, we gathered photographic evidence, documented personal accounts of neighborhood hazards, drafted and redrafted petitions, and sought advice from community members about the financial and material realities of the improvements we wanted. We also researched the process for gaining an audience with the Los Angeles City Council and rehearsed public-speaking strategies that would allow us to present our case to the greatest effect. Across these classroom experiences, Mrs. Levine ensured that her students acquired "academic" knowledge (e.g., the civic histories of our state and county) along with computation, writing, and communication skills in the service of working not *like* but *as* engaged citizens.

The Impact

On my office wall is a framed clipping from the Los Angeles Times that documents the day we made our presentation before the City Council. The clipping details the infrastructure issues we sought to correct, the steps we took to rally local/community support, and, amazingly, the $300,000 the City Council voted unanimously to allocate in response. The newspaper provides powerful documentation of citizens (regardless of age or circumstance) making change, but it cannot begin to capture the real change that occurred for Mrs. Levine's students. Years after my experience in that class, I am still in awe of her

teaching. From continued connections with some of my 5th grade peers, I know many of us connect our lives and learning trajectories to this one amazing educator. During my college years and the courses I took in teaching methods, I read countless research articles documenting the effect of teacher expectations on student success and how students perceive themselves as learners. But in Mrs. Levine's classroom I experienced the actual *truth* of that research. I am who I am, in large part, because of her; owing my college degrees, and the PhD after my name, to the sole educational "professional" who saw me as college material.

The Opportunity

Mrs. Levine's classroom was the only one I experienced in my K-12 years that did not treat students as those empty pails waiting to be "filled" with textbook and lecture content. I have spent a lot of time talking with teachers about the "empty-pail" classroom and trying to figure out its prevalence and resilience. In these conversations, many teachers have confided that fear often prevents them from exploring teaching practices that might deviate from "traditional" classroom experiences; fear that stems from insecurity around the (lack of) administrative and community support they would receive for doing so. But it is important to note that teachers do not seek or start out intentionally to recreate the empty pail classroom. In all my years of working with new teachers, nearly every aspiring educator's letter of application cites the desire to create engaging, relevant, and meaningful student-learning experiences as *the* reason to teach. This is why, today, I am more hopeful than ever that the empty pail classroom will become a relic of the past.

Not only are "new" approaches like maker education, design-based learning and concept-based instruction challenging the traditional classroom, but from New York to Colorado to California, new standards for teaching actually describe authentic, culturally-connected, relevant, and rigorous forms of instruction as the *expectation* for all classrooms. These standards and approaches share the belief that all students are capable of learning and that effective teaching uses what students bring to the classroom to deepen awareness of the world and how to participate in it. There is, however, work yet to do. Standards and teaching methods do not teach, they only provide the foundation for creating the classroom experiences *I know* teachers want for their students. To fully and authentically realize the promise of today's standards and instructional practices, teachers need support from us, the community of educational stakeholders. Everyone with a vested interest in great teaching *must* communicate clearly that we *expect* teachers to instruct in ways that see, value, and inspire students.

I do not where Mrs. Levine learned to teach or how she developed her beliefs about education, but I do know she spent just two years in the classroom. Perhaps those fears and insecurities cited by the teachers with whom I have spoken contributed to a decision to leave teaching? I have scoured my memory but cannot recall any celebrations or huzzahs from the Camellia Avenue community, or even my family members, for Mrs. Levine or her teaching. I wonder how many more students' lives she could have changed if the larger community had truly championed her classroom practices? How many like-minded teachers might have sought work in our needy school? In years to come, I hope we will not wonder similarly about current teachers. Every student deserves to experience a classroom, many classrooms, like Mrs. Levine's; that is why I keep the impact of my 5th grade classroom fresh in my mind. Today we have a very real chance, perhaps as never before, to help ensure that outcome.

About the Author

Dr. Brian Sevier is the Dean of the School of Education at California State University at Channel Islands. Across his educational career, Brian has published in numerous journals and texts representative of the curriculum and instruction spectrum. Brian has a strong background in standards, curriculum, instruction, and professional development through his work at the state level, his experience in developing/designing educator preparation programs, and his classroom and district-level experiences.