

Voice from the Field

When a Teacher Switches Schools

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The bell rings and students flood the hallway. High-fives, handshakes, and hugs continue as staff members nudge a wave of students onto their first class. I watch as students scream and sprint toward their favorite teachers. This year was different. This year the students were not visiting me.

With the continuation of Philadelphia's school budget crisis, I feared my third year of pay freezes and only a promise that employment contracts would be available by the last day of school. Student loans, the unstable future of Pennsylvania's teacher pension system, and the history of Philadelphia teacher layoffs: as a novice teacher, like many before me, I felt forced to accept a teaching position elsewhere. From a somber first day to the unfolding of the first few weeks of school, my new school setting would offer an interesting change of perspective.

Within the first three weeks, I felt my world had been turned upside down. My new students enjoyed laughing at and ignoring, as one student so sincerely put it, "the new guy." My old students reached out in text, email, and Facebook asking me to return to their school and be their teacher again. I was an amalgam of disappointment and regret, frustration and nostalgia. But, perhaps most of all, I felt bewildered and a bit fascinated as I saw the systems, norms, and lessons that had worked so well at my past school blow up in my face. How could the instructional strategies that had worked so well at my previous school (also a neighborhood turn-around charter) prove so fruitless here? The same students I struggled to motivate seemed to flourish with their literature and math teachers, both of whom shared my years of teaching experience, but had spent all of them at this school. The science teacher, also new to this school but not new to teaching, shared the same intriguing, humbling, and vexing experiences as me. I began to wonder if the struggles of my predicament were not all that uncommon.

As someone who spent the past three years reflecting, grading, and spending so many hours tweaking classroom systems and policies to get students invested, I kept asking myself, "Why do I feel like I'm drowning?" I felt like an artist layering brushes with paint only to find my canvas still blank at the end of my stroke. How could I have walked into my first week of school with lessons planned, expectations clear, and engaging resources made, only to find my classroom resembling the chaos and indifference of my first year? I initially felt hesitant and embarrassed to describe my struggles to my new colleagues. I felt insane, almost as if I were trying to convince them of a strange conspiracy. My directions seemed clear, my intentions genuine, and my presence strong, yet no honeymoon period existed. My colleagues just smiled and said, "It was just like that for me too."

What initially seemed like an episode of the Twilight Zone came to reflect a common plight. The most effective teachers at my school were ones who had been there the longest, even with the same years of teaching experience as the others.

What does this say about teaching? As a Teach for America alumnus, I naively thought, until I stepped into the classroom, that pedagogical skill could be acquired within a five-week summer school training period. As an emerging educator in the data-driven results-oriented educational culture, I believed that curricular knowledge, high expectations, culturally relevant pedagogy, and other learnable skills produced a quality teacher. Could the rapport, trust, and safety of a classroom not only be the result of quality instructional practices, but the localized knowledge of knowing the school culture? Could there be something to the relationship building, trust, and magic in the classroom that comes from being a trusted and returning teacher to the school?

While my struggles seemed so surprising to me then, I now wonder if it would be more surprising if my students began the year trusting me. How often have students spent a class more focused on socializing than academics only to find their teacher not return the next day? How often do Philadelphia students sit in assemblies to hear a list of clubs and upcoming fieldtrips only to see very few of them come to fruition? How often do teachers successfully convince their students that the strictness and structure of a classroom is a sign of caring not megalomania?

As I saw students run to former teachers on the first day of school, I now realize what teachers were saying back. Their smiles said, “Despite what you’ve been told about this school, I clearly believe in it and that’s why I’m still here.” Their hugs and laughter said, “Despite our frustrations last year, our successes make this job worth it.” Their presence in the hallway said, “I choose to be at this school.” As I stood alone in a sea of students that first day, why wouldn’t a student think, “Is this one going to stay? Is this one going to give me a reason to care about being here?” In a city that makes more promises about education than it keeps, why would a student trust me rather than test me in the first month of school?

As the autumn months passed and the school year wrapped up for winter break, my ability to engage, motivate, and push students improved with each day. The transition and struggle of leaving my past students and adjusting to a new school continues to challenge my understanding of what makes a quality teacher. Perhaps there is more to quality teaching than content-knowledge, pedagogy, or even experience—there is something highly contextual to effective teaching that comes from being in the same building among past students. Perhaps it is reputation. Perhaps it is the knowledge of when bells ring, when the copy room line is the shortest, or which emails you can ignore. But maybe it’s even more complex and subtle than that. Maybe it’s the implicit message to students that the teacher who returns each year is a teacher worth just a little bit of trust to give their lessons, activities, and personality a shot.

If there is a kernel of truth to this experience, I certainly have not read about it. The highly contextualized knowledge of how to navigate, and be accepted in, a school culture is not something I have read in any of Diane Ravitch’s books nor the journal articles from my graduate classes. I have not found it in *The Teacher Wars* (2014) or *Building a Better Teacher* (2014), two recent books on education featured in the *New York Times Book Review*. Although arguably off the nation’s radar, I hope it makes it onto Philadelphia’s. While teachers leave the profession

and extracurriculars get cut due to the budget crisis, students suffer. They also suffer when trusted and favorite teachers leave their school for better job security elsewhere, and they begin a new school year even more hesitant to trust the unfamiliar face in front of them.

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