

Supporting Teachers to Enrich the Lives of Children

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In my workshops for educators I describe strategies for nurturing self-discipline, self-dignity, learning, motivation, and resilience in students. At the beginning of these workshops I emphasize a point that may seem obvious but deserves highlighting, namely, that the daily words and actions of teachers can have a lifelong impact on students. Educators may not even be aware of the depth of this impact unless they reflect upon their own experiences as students and the memories they still carry of their teachers years later.

In the late 1980s, while gathering material for my book *The Self-Esteem Teacher*, I requested that participants in many of my seminars complete an anonymous questionnaire. The first question asked responders to describe one of the best moments they ever had in school as students, a moment that involved something a teacher said or did that boosted their self-esteem and motivation. The second question asked them to recall one of their worst experiences with a teacher that lessened their sense of self-worth. In reviewing approximately 1,500 completed questionnaires I was impressed by the high number of memories, both positive and negative, that involved only a few seconds of a teacher's time. These responses prompted me to write about "the importance of the seemingly small gestures."

In addition to administering the questionnaire, I encouraged audience members to share these memories during the workshop. Many were very willing to do so. The range and intensity of feelings triggered by these memories were evident immediately, both in the person recounting the story and in those listening. Laughter, groans, tears, sighs of disbelief, and applause spontaneously filled the room. These memories evoked strong emotions even if they represented an incident from 50 years ago. Their staying power was noteworthy.

Some participants told me that they were surprised by their strong reaction to school memories from the distant past. One woman displayed tears and anger as she recalled a teacher humiliating her 40 years earlier when she was only six years old; in contrast, tears of joy dotted a man's face as he recounted a particularly poignant story of a teacher who demonstrated great compassion 45 years earlier when the man's mother was dying of cancer. It was little wonder that in *The Self-Esteem Teacher* I labeled these experiences as "indelible memories of school."

While we might not reflect on our school memories with any regularity, they continue to influence our current feelings and thoughts. I have heard accounts from adults who shudder

when faced with doing a simple math problem or having to write a report, still haunted by demeaning comments made by a teacher about their learning skills. I have also witnessed the delight of people as they attribute their optimism and perseverance to encouragement they received years earlier from a teacher.

When I ask educators to consider their most positive and negative interactions with their teachers I do so not simply as an academic experience. I believe that teachers, parents, and other caregivers should view their childhood memories as valuable resources when they engage children. It is for this reason that I pose the following questions for teachers:

“Do you use your own indelible school memories to guide what you do with your students?”

“Do you inject into your classroom practices those experiences you had with a teacher that enhanced your self-esteem and motivation as a student?”

“Are you careful not to say or do things even unintentionally with your students that were hurtful to you when you were a student?”

Many educators have reported that considering these questions has helped them to be more effective teachers. School administrators have informed me that they have introduced these questions at staff meetings so that their entire faculty might examine their teaching practices in order to create positive school memories for their students.

Given my longstanding interest in education, learning, school climate, and school memories, I was drawn to the cover story that appeared in the February 25, 2008 issue of *Time* titled “How to Make Great Teachers” by Claudia Wallis. I was immediately captured by Wallis’ opening statement, “We never forget our best teachers—those who imbued us with a deeper understanding or an enduring passion, the ones we come back to visit after graduating, the educators who opened doors and altered the course of our lives.”

Wallis continues with a description of two such teachers in her life whose teaching style and passion for their work touched her deeply. She notes, “Looking back, I’d have to credit this inspirational pair for carving the path that led me to a career writing about science.”

I would add to Wallis’ observation, “We never forget our best teachers” with my belief, supported by the feedback I have received from many educators, that we never forget our worst

teachers either. Interestingly and sadly, many educators in my workshops report that they have less difficulty recalling negative memories of school than positive ones.

After describing two of her inspirational teachers, Wallis raises several thought-provoking questions. “It would be wonderful if we knew more about teachers such as these and how to multiply their number. How do they come by their craft? What qualities and capacities do they possess? Can these abilities be measured? Can they be taught? Perhaps above all: How should excellent teaching be rewarded so that the best teachers—the most competent, caring, and compelling—remain in a profession known for low pay, low status and soul-crushing bureaucracy?” Wallis says that answers to these questions are urgent, especially with the United States having to recruit an additional 2.8 million teachers over the next eight years as baby boomers retire, a situation occurring while student enrollment increases and staff turnover, especially among new teachers, continues to persist.

Wallis’ article reviews several key issues confronting teachers, one of the thorniest of which is merit pay. What data should enter the formula to assess “merit”? How does one determine in an equitable fashion the effectiveness of teachers working in a school with many seemingly at-risk students compared with those in a school in which there are a limited number of such students? Obviously, the playing field is not equal in different schools and communities, placing some teachers at a distinct disadvantage when measuring student progress.

Wallis reports encouraging developments to level the field. For example, William Sanders, a statistician, has devised a technique using student test data to calculate an individual teacher’s impact or “value added” to a student’s progress. As Wallis describes, “He takes three or more years of student test results, projects a trajectory for each student based on past performance and then looks at whether, at the end of the year, the students in a given teacher’s class tended to stay on course, soar above expectations or fall short. Sanders uses statistical methods to adjust for flaws and gaps in the data.” Sanders contends, “Under the best circumstances we can reliably identify the top 10% to 30% of teachers.”

Wallis cites the success of merit pay programs that actively incorporate teacher input and consider more than one measure of success. One such program is Denver’s Professional Compensation or ProComp, which was borne out of a seven-year collaboration among the teachers’ union, the school district, and city hall. The program includes nine ways for teachers to

increase their earnings. New teachers are automatically placed in the ProComp system, while it is voluntary for teachers already working in the district. However, within one year, half of Denver's veteran 4,555 teachers elected to join. The system includes several noteworthy components of an incentive system such as: "a careful effort to earn teacher buy-in to the plan, clarity about how it works, multiple ways of measuring merit, rewards for teamwork and school-wide success, and reliable funding."

While it is still too early to measure the success of ProComp, the results of a pilot study indicated that students whose teachers enrolled on a trial basis achieved higher scores on standardized tests than other students. Also, there has been an increase in the number of teachers applying to work in Denver's more troubled schools.

Wallis identifies several characteristics of effective teachers. At the top of the list is "an unshakable belief in children's capacity to learn." I was delighted to see this attribute afforded such prominence. In my workshops I emphasize that if we are to reach and teach students we must be guided by the belief that from birth all children want to be successful and that all children are motivated to learn. I believe that when we describe students as "unmotivated" or "lazy" what we really mean is that these students are not doing what we would like them to do. Instead they are engaged in what has been called "avoidance motivation." Students will resort to avoidance motivation for a variety of reasons, including their perception that the learning task is beyond their abilities and/or their teachers do not care or have faith in them. Teachers who earn the confidence of such students subscribe to the belief that if students are not learning, it is the teacher's responsibility to ask, "What is it that I can do differently to help this student to learn and succeed?" These teachers recognize that to repeatedly use strategies that are not working is a prescription for failure.

Another feature of effective educators "is a deep knowledge of one's subject." Statistician Sanders found "the higher the grade, the more closely student achievement correlates to a teacher's expertise in her field. However, nearly 30% middle- and high-school classes in math, English, science and social studies are taught by teachers who didn't major in a subject closely related to one they are teaching."

Wallis writes that certain essential skills require on-the-job experience. She contends, "It takes at least two years to master the basics of classroom management and six to seven years to

become a fully proficient teacher.” While some may have different estimates, studies indicate that a large percentage of public school teachers resign well before these years of experience are reached. “Between a quarter and a third of new teachers quit within their first three years on the job and as many as 50% leave poor, urban schools within five years.” A major reason for many young teachers leaving the field of education is the relatively low salary, but many depart because they feel they receive little, if any, support and mentoring, especially as they deal with challenging situations in the classroom. I am dismayed by reports I hear from educators of the lack of time set aside for mentoring or the limited opportunity for collaboration. It is regrettable that as teachers feel the increased pressure to prepare students for high-stakes tests, there appears to be less time for staff development.

In the same *Time* issue as Wallis’ article, Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun professor of Education at Stanford University, reports numerous countries, including Finland, Sweden, Ireland, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, that have devoted significant resources for teacher training and support. “These countries routinely prepare their teachers more extensively, pay them well in relation to competing occupations, and give them lots of time for professional learning.”

Darling-Hammond writes that in Singapore, for example, “Expert teachers are given time to serve as mentors to help beginners learn their craft. The government pays for 100 hours of professional development each year for all teachers. In addition, they have 20 hours a week to work with other teachers and visit one another’s classrooms. . . . Most U.S. teachers, on the other hand, have no time to work with colleagues during the school day. They plan by themselves. . . with little opportunity to share knowledge or improve their practice.”

I appreciate that there are school districts in the United States that have made an effort to build in meaningful mentoring and professional development for their teachers, but sparse resources have kept many others from doing so. Yet, I believe that an effective mentoring system coupled with ongoing professional development will lessen the number of young, talented teachers who leave education.

I continue to be impressed by the many teachers I have met who work under the most difficult situations. On a daily basis they touch the hearts and minds of their students, receiving limited support, often battling feelings of discouragement and burnout. The “No Child Left

Behind” legislation rings hollow if as a society we do not provide the necessary resources to enable those entrusted with meeting the goals of this legislation to do so effectively. I recognize that providing these resources is a daunting challenge, but consider the consequences of not doing so. Failure to provide for high quality education for all of our children will result in the loss of countless promising lives; the ongoing emotional and financial drain on society will be significant.