This fall marks my 20th year as a classroom teacher. I still remember individual faces and voices of kids. I can recognize the handwriting of others, though I was their teacher in the 1990s. I remember book choices, funny conversations, authentic pieces of writing, and the really difficult interactions that occur when people work together in the intense act of learning and growing. I also look, sadly, at the last 20 years of changes in public education. I can’t help but lament how those changes have devastated the business of teaching and school. At this landmark time in my own career, and in the collective career of teachers, I’d like to take a retrospective look at three things I know for sure about being a teacher.

1. I continually stand on the shoulders of giants.

I will never be done learning how to be a teacher. Every time I go to a National Writing Project meeting, I learn new things that help me teach students to find their voices, even within the (often artificial) writing of school. Those meetings help me reflect on myself as a writer, the process I naturally use to compose, encouraging me to make space for the different composing processes of students. I eagerly await issues of English Journal, Voices from the Middle, and The ALAN Review; skimming first the tables of contents, then going right to articles I immediately need, finally flipping to my favorite columns. I pore through NCTE’s Annual Convention program the way I intensely studied the Sears Christmas catalogue as a kid: marking my first, second, and third choices for each session; flagging particular speakers I can’t miss; and figuring out times to schedule the Exhibitor Hall for a couple passes at free stuff! On a weekly basis, I pull out Kylene Beers’s When Kids Can’t Read or Cris Tovani’s I Read It, but I Don’t Get It to see if I’ve forgotten anything in my reading lessons. Janet Allen’s Words, Words, Words helps me manage incorporating the vocabulary I never seem to have time to teach. And how would I ever know how to teach a grammar lesson if I didn’t have Jeff Anderson or Connie Weaver nearby? In 20 years, our field has learned so much about helping kids become better readers and writers. It’s too much for one teacher to know alone. And so I keep the giants close so that my time with the students is most well spent.

2. I must remember and respect the “teenager-ness” of adolescents.

Last Friday afternoon, I scheduled Independent Reading for 35 minutes and then a 50-minute poetry writing workshop allowing students time to work on a persona poetry project that stemmed from our reading of Out of the Dust, by Karen Hesse. I forgot this class comes to me from a double whammy of lunch and gym, and it was Friday afternoon. Independent Reading? Miserable failure! No one even pretended to read, although they chatted at a quiet, library level. I tensed myself for writing workshop, until I thought, “Ochoa, you fool! These kids are doing what every other kid you ever taught has done! They are being PERFECT teenagers! No one wants to read quietly on Friday after lunch and gym! They need space! They need movement! They need to talk!” I immediately insisted they put everything in their backpacks, told them to stand up. I explained we were having a 1934 “tea party”...
and they needed to meet as many other personas as they could in 15 minutes. They moved, laughed, and played, all in character. When they were done, everyone eagerly sat down and wrote short persona poems for characters they’d met, helping each other build their projects. Sometimes I forget students’ teenage agendas are essential too. I need to be an expert on the books they like to read. I need to insist on and count writing that is important to them, in addition to school writing. And I must remember, Friday afternoon, especially, should be filled with laughter and fun and learning, helping students remember they want to come back on Monday.

3. I need a close-knit community of teacher-friends who help me weather the storms.

I’m certain those in the media cannot begin imagining how intensely the mythological lazy teacher being touted as truth affects my ability to do my job. Last spring, during the height of teacher-bashing that accompanied the union-breaking legislation being introduced around our country, I would listen to Jon Stewart, read the Huffington Post, and laugh and cry. I found myself irritated while grading papers because “no one knew” how much extra time outside of my teaching day responding to student writing requires. I was angry with the students because their completely perfect teenage behavior was getting in the way of the “test prep unit” I was forced to teach. I knew their subsequent test scores would be reported in the newspaper under my name. I came home and raged at my family about my difficult job, and how people just didn’t understand what the life of a teacher was really like.

And then I realized I needed to breathe.

I knew I needed to find a way to weather these very public storms ripping through the landscape of public education. I invited a small group of friends to start a “hunkering down for the storm” book club. Our first choice was Parker Palmer’s The Courage to Teach. Within a few days of reading that book, I was calmer entering my classroom. I could think clearly, which helped me do the same good job I’ve done for 19 years. Our group moved on to William Ayers’s To Teach and, of course, Diane Ravitch’s The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education. We are still reading and talking about titles that boost our morale and underscore what we know about being teachers. Our small community encourages each of us to step into our classrooms every day and just teach.

Although we face difficult times in the field of education, gathering with colleagues and remembering all the work we have done and will continue to do with students helps me to remember why I am excited every fall to return to teaching. As I celebrate the NCTE Centennial, I am grateful for all the professional friends I have made both in person, and through professional reading, and I carry with me the encouragement and inspiration they give me every day in my teaching life.

Works Cited


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