“Knowledge, Passion, and Compassion”: Urban Middle School English Language Arts Teachers—What’s Your Story?

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Teaching is a very noble profession that shapes the character, caliber, and future of an individual,” explained Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, eleventh president of India, in a 2013 interview for Teacher’s Day, a national holiday in India (Kumar). Each of us can remember a special teacher who made all the difference in our lives, and so with the help of some very special people here in the southwestern United States, 30 highly regarded urban middle school ELA teachers were identified and then solicited to fill out a survey entitled “What’s Your Story,” encouraging them to use a narrative approach as much as possible for each item, so that we might understand more about this “noble profession.” Creation of the survey items was informed by research findings from a broad range of sources. The answers were not only moving but also highly instructional for those of us who prepare or hire ELA teachers for middle schools in the urban core. The most important themes running through all the stories, backed up by research, include membership in the community, love and advocacy for students, meeting the needs of students as individuals, respecting students’ home culture in curriculum design and delivery of instruction, and passion for the job. The teachers’ own words are used as often as possible.

Effective urban middle school teachers often come from the same or similar neighborhoods and have backgrounds similar to their students, which gives them not only tremendous insight but also devotion and no small amount of authority (“street cred”). The students know who their teachers are, understand where they come from, and sense their advocacy. As one teacher remembered from her own middle school days:

As a child of color, growing up in poverty, middle school was very trying for me. I struggled at home for my mother’s attention because she was a single mother working three jobs at a time. I craved the attention from an adult but found it difficult to relate to my teachers. . . . I never felt like even if I told them my struggle that they would understand. It was in this moment that I chose to be a teacher. I did not choose to be a teacher to change the world. I chose to be a teacher to change one child’s world. To be the adult that they could relate to. With the children that we serve, I share the same struggle that many of them are facing now.

All participants acknowledged the power of homegrown teachers, teachers whom the students knew as relatives, friends, or neighbors, but some teachers also described how they had adopted and been adopted into the local community, communities they have come to love, communities that love them back:

[Our part of town] is a cultural explosion with refugees from Africa, predominately Somalia and Kenya, as well as immigrants from Latin America. My wife’s family lives in the area and we live very close. A weekend trip to Walmart or a trip out for pizza can usually involve a student sighting. Being a part of the community should be a requirement for teachers, it’s great when students can see us as people too. I have been to several

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extended family and friend parties and crossed paths with students and their families. My current school has several teachers who are former students, and it’s great motivation for our kids.

This personal connection to students and their community is consistent with research on English language arts teachers in the urban core. As Freeman (2011) found in her research on effective language arts instruction in urban schools:

A strong connection with students, along with building significant relationships with them was recognized as an essential factor and a common thread that contributed to their success (Comer, 1999). Research indicates that culturally relevant teachers see their students’ cultures and lifestyles as assets (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Participants described interacting with students and addressing the needs of student’s a key element for teacher success. (Freeman, p. 109)

What does that look like on the ground when “teachers see their students’ culture and lifestyles as assets”? One study participant explains:

Students succeed when they are proud of their knowledge and have a way to share it. One year two boys, considered trouble makers, . . . [were provided] an alternative curriculum [that] involved reading an article about Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre’s album The Chronic and it’s timing and relevance to the LA Rodney King Riots. The two boys wrote to the National Public Radio editor who published the article, and they got a response! It was such a big deal for them to reach out into the world and get a response regarding hip hop, something they had genuine interest in.

Snoop Dogg? Dr. Dre? National Public Radio? Really? Centering curriculum on popular culture and students’ personal thoughts and feelings seems contradictory to the “Six Instructional Shifs” evangelized through David Coleman during the push to a national common core standards system. This push recommended reading the Western Canon and adhering to a strict set of writing templates. Most veteran educators, however, know the age-old maxim that “nothing succeeds like success,” and as Warren (2015) explains in “Incorporating Pop Culture in the English/ Language Arts Urban Classroom”:

Our students’ love for pop culture is a critical peek into what we can do to further engage our students in the content—especially in many of our urban schools where students are acutely disconnected to the content. Many of my students would rather skip school then learn about some old guy (their words, not mine) that’s nothing like them. (p. 1)

“Acutely disconnected” is not a phrase commonly found in outcomes or objectives in any curriculum guide or lesson plan and is obviously something all teachers are working overtime to prevent. Working with students’ local culture has been a proven winner for our effective urban teachers in the Southwest.

Even these highly regarded teachers experience some degree of frustration, but it is never with the kids; usually the frustration is with the system and, perhaps, their teacher preparation programs. They called out for more concrete instructional approaches and less theory, for more input into curriculum design through student individualization, time for teacher team sessions, and more respect for their voices as professionals:

My university teaching education program did not prepare me at all for what I would experience as a teacher. Teacher preparation was more focused on theory rather than practice.

I wish that my voice and my judgment was valued more. Too many decisions are made for us rather than as a part of a community or a team in order to bring change for our school and our kids.

Team time with my colleagues for developing our program is priceless.

These observations are not only right on target, they are also backed up by research. Barela and McCurdy (2013) looked at commonalities among urban middle schools that had successfully “turned around” unsuccessful educational programs. They concluded that winning middle schools increased transparency, communication, ownership, and ultimately a positive adult culture.

. . . change[d] to a mindset about supporting each and every student, as opposed to considering all students as one monolithic group.

[allowed] teachers ownership over structures and systems.
[fostered] strong relationships between teachers—camaraderie, not competition . . .

[nurtured] strong relationships between teachers and students that support high expectations.

“Great teachers emanate out of knowledge, passion, and compassion,” according to Dr. Kalam (Kumar, 2013). Each set of survey stories absolutely burned with passion for young people and teaching. When asked what they wanted the world to know about their students, two of our teachers responded as follows:

My students are not adults-in-training. They are not receptacles of knowledge there to simply dump facts into. They are not preparing for the day when they will begin their lives. Their lives have already begun. My students are whole and, yet, still on their journey to wholeness. They are unique. They are complex. They care. And they are the reason (not standards or test scores) that I get up every morning and head down to the school.

I want people to know that my kids are some of the most special, beautiful, hopeful human beings that you will ever meet. In their short lives, they have experienced great hardship and trauma, but, in spite of that, they give no excuses and are determined to succeed. They are determined to fulfill their dreams and make a difference in our world. My kids definitely give me hope, peace, and confidence knowing that our future is in their hands.

References


