

Reflecting on the Past

“Miss, your class is the best because you are always kind, and we know you actually like us,” one of my sixth grade students once told me. Her evaluation left me feeling both incredibly touched and simultaneously crushed. On the one hand, this was the kind of compliment a teacher treasures from their students; a genuine outpouring of appreciation and affection. On the other hand, the idea that my students felt as if many of their teachers didn’t even like them left me disheartened, to say the least.

Too often I have heard colleagues in the staff room complaining about *this student* or *that one class*, and while I begrudge no one a venting session, there is a point where I begin to wonder when people lose the joy that comes with getting to know their students and acting as their support system. I believe that it is there - in the relationships we build with students - where teachers truly make a difference. After completing my Master of Arts in Education at [Michigan State University](#), I fully understand that the content I teach should not be my primary focus in the classroom. Creating a safe, nurturing environment in which my students can learn to understand the world around them, through both new ideas and personal strengths, is my true aim.

Simply Seeing our Students

One of the courses in my program that helped change the way I think about my responsibilities was Classroom and Behavior Management in the Inclusive Classroom (CEP 841). Upon enrolling for this course, I assumed that I would be hearing about practical use-it-tomorrow classroom management strategies - some tricks of the trade. The first day of the course, however, the professor clearly told us that this is not at all what we would be learning. Admittedly, I was a bit floored. What was the point in signing up for a classroom management course if we weren’t going to get the tools to keep in our teacher belts? The real point of the course was to discover that ‘10 easy tricks’ or ‘3 ways to control a room’ were not the ideal way to view student behavior. Ultimately, behavior was another facet of what we should be teaching. This philosophy spoke to me, especially as someone who has taught middle school grades nearly every year of their career. Again, my mind circles back to the staff room complaints. “Why can’t these 6th graders bring their books to class?” or “How do students not know to pack their bags so they don’t have to visit their locker six times per day?” The easy answer is: because we need to teach students how to do these things. We, as teachers, must understand that so many behaviors we associate with common sense are, in fact, not common

sense at all. These are self-management strategies we have learned over the years, and to simply expect our students to learn them through osmosis is unfair and will only result in our own frustration.

Aside from the understanding that students must be taught the kind of behaviors we want to see in them, CEP 841 also encouraged me to see my students as whole individuals. It is simple for us to view students as just who they are when they enter our rooms; however, there is an entire world for them going on outside of our class. It's like when my students see me at the grocery store, and they're completely flabbergasted that I could exist outside of Room 206. Because students do not exist in a bubble, teachers must be understanding of the challenges students face, especially in how those challenges can affect student behavior. As we discussed in the course, each behavior has a function; there is a *reason* that the student in the back is falling asleep; there is a *reason* that the girl by the window is daydreaming; and there is a *reason* that one student never wants to write. Our job is not to 'fix' a student's behavior, but to understand what the function of the behavior is in order to best support the child in our care. Considering this idea taught me to be a more compassionate and sensitive educator. It also further cemented in my mind the idea that part of my responsibility is to make sure, at least for the one hour per day I see them, that my students can feel welcomed and understood in my class.

Continuously Presenting the World

As a secondary English teacher, I have taken numerous literature courses throughout my own schooling. Postcolonial literature, Shakespearean tragedies, the works of Richard Wright - I have a wide range of texts in my wheelhouse. However, it wasn't until I took my Adolescent Literature course (TE 849) last fall that I comprehended the weight of responsibility put upon me as a literature teacher. While I do believe it is the job of every educator to expose students to new ideologies and ways of thinking, I also think that this task sits especially heavily on those in my subject area. Books are windows into worlds we may not otherwise see, and they are also a clear way of letting students know whose voices are valued and whose are not. Each week of my literature course was focused on a different topic. One week, the novels might center around [a protagonist who was part of the LGBTQ+ community](#), the next it could be a story focused on [someone dealing with mental health struggles](#).

While I have always been conscientious of the texts I choose for my classes, I realized I had been neglecting several underrepresented voices. But this course didn't just point out a

hole in my curriculum; it also showed me how my own value system for texts could easily be conveyed and interpreted by my students. The texts that we choose and the stories that we highlight send a message to adolescents about the kinds of people society values. By omitting novels focused on the aforementioned groups (and so many more!), I was silently showing my students that these voices were not as valid as others. Since taking this course, I have taken the job of selecting literature even more seriously, considering a text's diversity beyond just who the protagonist may be. I have attempted to find works whose authors and messages are different from those my students have been exposed to before. Part of my responsibility as an English teacher is to present my students with a more complex, and therefore more complete, view of the world, and it is a responsibility I have begun to hold in higher esteem.

Progressing on Their Own

While this program has helped me reach new understandings about my responsibilities to my students, and the actions I should take to make them a reality, it has also helped me see that some of my responsibility is to trust my students' capabilities in their own right. My course titled Secondary Reading Instruction and Assessment (TE 843) demonstrated to me all of the new directions in which reading and literacy learning could venture. Throughout the course, we learned about the real world contexts of reading, especially how students were using their reading and literacy skills to impact their own local communities. This was a vastly different interpretation of 'reading' than I had experienced in my past studies, but it made sense, especially in today's society. Activists, especially young people, are using reading skills to help create social change. We specifically examined how the ways in which academics typically approach reading could be limiting for students in these circumstances. Ultimately, part of teachers' responsibility is to allow for student voice and to nurture the strengths they already possess.

The philosophy behind giving students this kind of freedom resonated with me largely because I have spent most of my career so far working with English Language Learners (ELLs). In so many school communities, the label of ELL carries with it a certain deficient connotation. Oftentimes, ELL students will be described by what they *cannot* do. This mindset always caused some confusion for me; how could someone who is studying all day in what may be their second or even third language be deficient? Of course, in reality, this way of thinking is completely nonsensical as ELL students can do anything that their first-language counterparts can do, they simply need certain supports and accommodations. In TE 843, we focused heavily

on using students' strengths in our classrooms; this philosophy inspired me to reflect on my teaching methods with my ELL students. How was I utilizing their very specific skill set? Was I giving them enough chances to grow in the ways they felt confident? Since this course, I have made a concentrated effort to give my students more choice in their assessments and content, allowing for them to demonstrate their learning through the pathways in which they already excel.

In a Perfect Future...

It would be simple to discuss my time in this program solely in the past tense. To reflect fondly on the courses I've taken, the new resources I've created, or the texts I've read and think "*Job well done.*" However, one major way this program has influenced me is that I do not want to consider my learning in the past tense. In order to be the best teacher I can be, my reflection and my learning must be ongoing. The reevaluation of my responsibilities as a teacher that I discussed above cannot fade into background; they should be a central part of my teaching philosophy going forward.

While each of my courses throughout this program will affect how I implement my curriculum and the way I teach it, the most important facet of my growth is in how I view my students. In order for students to even begin to grasp content, a relationship must exist between them and their teacher. This should be a relationship of understanding, support and care. While it may sound obvious, this sentiment can get lost in our busy school days, or when our patience is running thin. My experience and my learning have shown me that our students need us for so much more than content. For some, we are their rocks, their cheerleaders, and their understanding ear. It is a role I value and honor, and a philosophy I will carry with me through the rest of my career.