

Ethnography

The different lives of Teacher Engagement.

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Abstract

This ethnography paper is mainly intended for the Second Language Teaching students, those interested in teacher engagement and in language teaching. In this ethnography, I will briefly focus on the different “lives” of teacher engagement through data collecting, observations and in class theory. My data and samples were once again collected from Jarrett Middle School, as well as articles from the online Kapiolani Community College library, online websites and in class documents. My ethnography will attempt to answer each of the following questions : what is teacher engagement? What are the components of teacher engagement? How are they related? And finally, what type of teacher engagement did I observe while at Jarrett Middle School? I will conclude by sharing my thoughts about teacher engagement, how this experience influenced my position on the topic of engagement, Jarrett Middle School as well as my own philosophy of teaching.

Introduction

It is 10:20 am on a Tuesday morning as I walk into Miss C.’s class. Miss C. is standing in front of her students. There are 10 of them. The bell rings, the students each take their seat, some slower than others, some faster. Once all the students are sitting down, miss C. greets the whole class with a big and loud :”Good morning class!!!” They greet her back, “Good morning Miss C.” It is 10:23 am, with just a few words of respect, the teacher is already engaged in her classroom, and her students are pulled into her orbit. A little later, during an exercise for the whole class, as Miss C. checks each student’s answers individually, she says to one:”I appreciate you rasing your hand”, and to another “I appreciate that you are participating but you were rude.”

Teacher engagement includes many different lives. There are happy lives, respectful ones, sad ones and others who are just between life and death, barely surviving. The many aspects of teacher engagement are linked to various and numerous factors within the classrooms, the school settings, and the education system. Engagement in a classroom is a two way street between the students and the teacher. Teacher engagement within the school settings and education system relies on and is a result of accessible benchmarks , teaching methods, available teaching materials, classroom sizes and environment. This ethnography will introduce some notions, examples and theories of engagement from the teacher's perspective through observations of daily classroom activities and my interviews with a couple of teachers. Teacher engagement is crucial to the well being of a class, a school, a state and finally a country, in any part of the world. It all starts with one engaged teacher willing and eager to teach. But, "Too many professors have lost sight of what it means to be a teacher" (Kennedy,98) However, there are some "effective teachers (who) consciously work to become fully engaged in the learning process and know they can improve their skill as teachers over time."(Kennedy,98) Many factors create confusion over the role and responsibility of the teacher in a classroom. The how, the why, the what to teach all contribute to the crucial feeling of engagement which must be shown by teachers. The whom is another important factor: students with learning disabilities , students part of the gifted and talented program, or English Language Learners students from multiple cultural and socio economic backgrounds, all require different types and levels of engagement. Finally, the economic ingredient plays a major part in getting teachers engaged. The economics such as public school funding to provide better classroom environments and teaching materials is linked to benchmarks. Benchmarks in reading, writing, math or science seem to have become the holy grail of teachers in the United States education system. Nonetheless, those benchmarks directly

influence the teaching methods, and the engagement in teaching them. Each classroom, each teacher, each subject has its own life, its own teaching methods and its own benchmarks. My focus is on ELL teachers. Teacher engagement is a very broad and complex issue. My ethnography just hopes to keep the conversation going, to encourage students to reflect on the issue and parents to keep encouraging teachers to remain engaged. Let's start the conversation.

Background

I completed a total of 90 hours for my service learning in three different locations: on the Kapiolani Community College Campus, at home through online tutoring and once again at Jarrett Middle School. However, the center of my ethnography is once again Jarrett Middle School, which is located in the Palolo Valley between St Louis Heights and Wilhelmina Rise. Jarrett Middle School's homepage site states that "The school serves a community that includes the Kaimuki, Palolo Valley and St. Louis Heights areas. Most of the student population comes from Ali'iolani, Hokulani and Palolo Elementary schools."

This semester, just like the previous one, I spent around 45 hours tutoring ELL students from 6th to 8th grade. I interviewed two teachers: a Language Arts teacher for 6th to 8th grade ELL students, and a part time special education teacher. I attended, observed and participated in Miss C.'s class every Tuesday and Thursday, from 10:20 am to 2:15 pm. My participation ranged from helping students with their homework in English, Math or Science to encouraging them to participate and study for tests. I never actually taught any particular language skills, vocabulary or grammar. Finally, I spent a lot of time just observing the teacher, her teaching methods, the classroom's attitude, and collecting some of her teaching materials.

Before detailing my experiences, my observations, and briefly my research methods, I would like to describe the educational setting of the school. Why? The framework of the school illustrates teacher engagement, its results and obstacles. I believe the socio-economic as well as the cultural background of the students relate to this ethnography. They each represent a component in language teaching and teacher engagement. According to the department of education, Jarrett Middle School had a total of 237 students enrolled for the 2009/2010 school year, 25 fulltime teachers and a ratio of 9.4 students per teacher. Though it is necessary to understand about student/teacher ratio that according to the DoE:

Student/teacher ratio is calculated by dividing the total number of students by the total number of full-time equivalent teachers. Please note that a smaller student/teacher ratio does not necessarily translate to smaller class size. In some instances, schools hire teachers part time, and some teachers are hired for specialized instruction with very small class sizes. These and other factors contribute to the student/teacher ratio.

Based on the "School Status and Improvement Report" as recently as 2007 there were about 280 students enrolled, of which 45 were in Special Education Programs. The ethnicities, according to that same report, for the year 2006/2007 for the different students was composed of Chinese (5.5%), Filipino (5.5%), Part Hawaiian (14.3%), Japanese (15.8%), Samoan (7.4%), Indo Chinese (12.9%), other (30.5%) and White (2.9%). These numbers relate to the composition of the classes I tutored and observed. The classrooms that I participated in had a ratio of 10 students for 1.5 teacher (1 teacher who was part time also helped) in 7th grade for the Language arts, and 4 students in 6th grade Language arts for the same teacher. The teacher/student ratio at Jarrett Middle School has varied over the past 20 years, from 13 down to 9.4 with a peak at 14.6 in 1999 (source National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Dept of Education). It is important

that the classroom and school have an environment conducive to student and teacher engagement. The ratio student/teacher is part of that environment. Jarrett Middle School also proposes an AVID program, taught by 2 teachers. Benchmarks, student/teacher ratios, classroom compositions, school settings and organisation, type of education system, poor socio-economic backgrounds, all encourage or diminish teacher engagement. Finally, the Jarrett Middle School's homepage expresses that: "We ask for your support this school year by keeping track of your child's homework. Students should be using their planner daily. Parents may use the planner to communicate with teachers. Encourage your child to read at least 30 minutes daily." Time to try to analyze how teacher engagement took place this semester in the Language Arts classroom.

Research Method and conceptual framework

My research methods were the following: observations, interviews, collecting material from the teacher, and in class participation. Furthermore, I also acquired some data, and some insights on the issue of engagement from online websites and articles from KCC's online library. I spent around 45 hours on location at Jarrett Middle School in Language Arts classes ranging from 6th grade to 8th grade, conducted several interviews with teachers, and finally reviewed my class notes as well as our handouts. Here are some of the theories where my research guided me. In the beginning of the semester we were asked 2 questions: what is teaching and what is our philosophy of teaching? The answers to both those questions relate to and partly illustrate the issue of teacher engagement. A teacher inspires. A teacher is humble. A teacher creates balance between lecture and self discovery. A teacher will assist students in discovering who they are through showing them respect, accepting and embracing the differences among them. He will also push for, as a student in our class wrote online, "intellectual exchange by giving him/her the opportunity to reflect upon the material." Tankia expressed it best when she wrote

about her philosophy of teaching: he/she must have Ahonui (patience), Malama (Care) and Maliu (Good Judgement). I believe that those are some of the characteristics an engaged teacher must strive to acquire. But is teacher engagement measurable? If so, how? “I suggest the following continuum for measuring teacher engagement: Teacher engagement in the learning process ranges from nil, where the teacher is only interested in disseminating information and assessing student achievement, to infinite, where the teacher functions as a tutor to each student.” (Cathleen A. Kennedy, 1998) Yet, “It’s important to differentiate teacher engagement in the learning process from engagement in the subject matter.” (Cathleen A. Kennedy, 1998) It is often somewhat tricky, delicate and at times misleading to judge teacher engagement. The criterias are legion, and vary from one school, one district, one state or one country to the next. The most common criteria used are the state assessment testing based on different benchmarks in reading, writing, math and science. But according to R. Barker Bausell in the New York Times, “Studies show that over time, test scores do not provide a consistent means of separating good from bad instructors.”(April 30, 2011) In that same article, he perseveres by declaring that [T]est scores are an inadequate proxy for quality because too many factors outside of the teacher’s control can influence student performance from year to year – or even from classroom to classroom during the same year.

One example of a factor influencing student achievement given by Mr Bausell is:

[from] one famous study, by the psychologists Todd Risley and Betty Hart, found that children of professional families had 8 million more words directed at them per year from ages 1 to 3 ½ than children from poorer families. (April 30th, 2011)

Which brings me back to the socio economic background of the families living in Palolo Valley. Those families represent the bases of the student attending Jarrett Middle School.

Are the HSA (Hawaii State Assessment) results truly reflective of the level of engagement shown from the teacher? As I mentioned above, not always. Nevertheless, benchmarks remain the prevailing factor intimately associated with teacher engagement. HSA results from previous years for Jarrett Middle School are available on the following website: <http://www.city-data.com/school/william-p-jarrett-middle-hi.html>. In 2005, Learning Points Associates produced with the department of education a book titled “Using Student Engagement to Improve Adolescent Literacy: Quick Key Action Guide; Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act”. This guide is intended to “ assist educators and administrators in understanding NCLB with a specific focus on the needs of adolescent learners who are building their literacy across content areas.” It is a list of benchmarks to be achieved by students, levels of achievement (Basic, Proficient, and Advanced), and statistics provided by the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). According to this guide, “two factors affect literacy achievement: student skills and student engagement” (Learning Points Associates, 2007, p.5), furthermore, “the two factors are fundamentally linked” (Learning Points Associates, 2007, p. 5). The guide also explains that “ educators who teach reading and writing skills without addressing student engagement are unlikely to yield substantial improvement” (2007, p.6). Wikipedia doesn’t say anything else when it writes that “student engagement requires that teachers actively seek to create the conditions that foster this reaction.” Wikipedia further states that “relationships between students and adults in schools, and among students themselves, are a critical factor of student engagement.” Finally, there are 4 key elements to student engagement according to the “Quick Key Action Guide” : student confidence, relevant and interesting texts, choices of

literacy activities and the most important directly related to my ethnography, teacher involvement.

The definition of teacher engagement is “a teacher that contributes to the student’s self confidence when they care about them as individuals and encourage them to learn”(2007, p. 7), the guide concludes. The student/teacher engagement is a two way street. Benchmarks are just a destination for both of them to reach together. The guide mentioned previously is only one example of a roadmap designed to help understand the instructions of the very law that implemented those benchmarks: the NCLB Act signed into law by president Bush in 2002.

The last points I would like to briefly cover concern purposefulness, learning styles, cultural differences and instructional strategies for students with learning disabilities. Each of them are other ingredients creating and influencing teacher engagement in everyday classrooms throughout the world. In relation to purposefulness, wikipedia informs us that “instructors can enhance student engagement by encouraging students to become more active participants in their education through setting and achieving goals and by providing collaborative opportunities for educational research, planning, teaching, evaluation, and decision-making.” Cathleen A. Kennedy asserts that “[S]tudent engagement refers to students who are on task and intellectually participating in learning activities. This is usually enhanced when students understand why they are taking a specific course and have some context for the learning ”(1998). The why behind the what is crucial to the motivation created in the student by an engaged teacher knowing his subject matter, the reasons for teaching it and communicating those reasons clearly to his classroom. Miss Schussler doesn’t say anything else when she writes that “opportunities for success, flexibility, and respect are generally present when teachers challenge their students at

appropriate levels, provide academic support, use instructional techniques that convey excitement for the content, and make learning relevant ” (2009, p. 114).

“Learning style is the way individuals concentrate on, absorb, and retain new difficult information or skills ” (Read, n.d.) Each student has a different learning style just as each teacher has a different teaching style. This semester, we slightly covered three pedagogies: behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism. We also quickly discussed about the Pedagogic Frameworks for Language Teaching, also known as teaching methods. Both the topics of pedagogies as well as teaching methods helped define teacher engagement. It is the how and style of teaching used by the teacher. It naturally leads to student learning as it must be adjusted to them.

As we learned in class in one of the modules, “each student learns differently, at a different rate, using different learning styles ” (Read, n.d.). Furthermore, “ our learning style, if accommodated, can result in improved attitudes towards learning and an increase in academic achievement ”(Read, n.d.). To accommodate the diverse student’s learning styles is a difficult task. It relies on various elements of levels of engagement such as “ between staff and students (discourse), between staff and subject (enthusiasm), and between staff and the teaching process (professionalism) ” (Bryson, Hand; 2007,p. 360).

Finally, the cultural differences and students with learning disabilities have in common that they both must be carefully taken into consideration and understood by the educator to improve the learning and teaching experience. One of the definitions of culture is that “it refers to the sum total of acquired values, beliefs, customs, and traditions experienced by a group as familiar and normal. It includes language, religion, customs, and a history of the people ” (Read,

n.d.). One statistic provided to us in class expressed that “during the next 20 years the US population will grow by 42 million. It has also been predicted that Hispanics will account for 47% of the growth, Blacks 22 %, Asians 18%, and Whites 13% ” (Read, n.d.). As for the students with learning disabilities, it is vital to understand that a Learning Disability “is a permanent disorder which affects the manner in which individuals with normal or above average intelligence take in, retain and express information ” (Read, n.d.). In addition, “a learning disability is not a disorder that a student grows out of, they are often inconsistent, and they are not the same as mental retardation or emotional disorders ” (Read, n.d.). Learning disabilities include dyslexia (reading and related language-based), dyscalculia (mathematical disability), dysgraphia (writing or fine motor skills deficit), and ADD/ADHD (Attention Deficit Disorder/ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). There are signs and symptoms for each, and instructional strategies to deal with them. Student with learning disabilities present their own challenges as Ruth A.W. Berry details in her article “Teacher talk during Whole-Class lessons: Engagement strategies to support the verbal participation of students with learning disabilities ” (2006). She states that “while inclusion is thought to provide multiple benefits for students with learning disabilities, it also presents instructional challenges for general education teachers ” (2006, p. 211). Additionally, she writes that “for educators that work with students with learning disabilities, the notion of learning rising from participation is challenging, because these students are generally less involved in academic and social exchanges, and participate less in whole group discussion than do their general education counterparts (Alves and Gottlieb, 1986; Buckland & Croll, 1987; McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager, & Lee, 1993) ” (Berry, 2006, p. 212). It is yet another challenge to teacher engagement. But how did all these different factors, different

theories, different situations blend together at Jarrett Middle School? What level of engagement did I observe? How was it clear? And did Miss C. deal with some of those issues?

I will attempt to answer and discuss those questions in the next section through reports of my observations at Jarrett Middle School and my interviews with a couple of teachers.

Issue and discussion

One particular sense of decoration struck me as I returned to Miss C.' classroom this semester : the walls were covered with posters. The posters covered Language Arts terms such as: pre-fix, parts of speech, synonyms, points of view, themes, parts of fiction, etc. Behind and above her were terms of syntaxe with their explanations, and examples. The class was large, and the tables were set in a U shape so that she could see every student clearly. Her desk was located in the front. Finally, on the board behind her were written the different benchmarks of the day for each grade. It would be the what and the why of the lesson. Here are some examples:

6.3.1 What? I can analyze a text to find its theme, I understand symbolism.

Why? This helps me understand the text better.

7.2.4 What? I can summarize a text (fiction).

Why? This helps me to remember and understand things.

8.3.2 What? I can analyze a text to make inferences about history, culture, or gender.

Why? This helps me understand the world around me.

Each of these goals and reasons were read out loud by the entire class at the beginning of the lesson. The element of purpose to keep or get the students engaged was present. The first

number determined the grade, the others related to benchmarks to be reached which are provided by the department of education of Hawaii in the ACCN (Authorized Courses and Code Numbers) catalog.

From week to week, the lessons varied, the mood changed but some things were constant. The composition of the classroom were 4 students in the 6th grade, 10 in the 7th grade. The ethnicities ranged from Filipino to Chinese, from Marshallese to Chuukese, or even from the island of Majuro. And the classes started the same way every time: Miss C. would greet them with a big “Good Morning Class!!!”, to which they would all answer “Good morning Miss C.” Then, the class would start. Miss C. had to deal (and deals) with several of the factors mentioned previously such as learning styles, distinct cultural backgrounds or even HAS testing. I frequently observed her being in “the trenches”, leaving her desk to sit next to or between students, helping them with their task at hand, or walking around checking each student’s answers to the exercises of the day. Comments such as “I know you can do better”, “Good job”, or “I like it when you guys are participating”, or even thanking students by name for taking part in the class discussion or questions, were common. Miss C. has been a teacher for 3 years. When I asked her how she adjusted her teaching methods to her student, she simply answered that, according to her, most of her students were visual. She did use her projector in each lesson, showing them pictures, written examples of language arts exercises such as “constructive responses”, or just to help them visualize the lesson’s topic. I then asked her if she felt it was important to know her students well? Yes. It was important. And she did know them well. She had files on them to track their progress in reading, writing. During our conversations, she went on to explain that she felt it was important to get the parents involved in their children’s education. But following up on that last point, she went to say that culture is important because it

determines their potential level of english when they arrive in Hawaii. How? For example in Micronesia, according to the website of the Republic of Marshall Islands:

[C]ompulsory education remains as age 6 through 14 or completion of eighth grade. A high school entrance examination is administered to all eighth graders to determine the approximately 300 students who will be admitted to the two public high schools each year.

However if they fail, they come to Hawaii where they will be accepted, according to her. The other issue is also, as she went on, that most of her student are “transient”, they go back and forth between here and there, which made it all the more difficult for them to learn, to be engaged and finally to graduate and pass the HSA testing. Which lead me to asking her to share information about the benchmarks she was asked to teach. The answer amounted to one word: Edison!

According to the Edison website,

EdisonLearning works with educators and communities to improve public schools and boost student performance. The expertise and resources we bring to our partners were developed over nearly 20 years of hands-on experience servicing and operating schools in collaboration with districts, boards, and other authorities with whom we partner. EdisonLearning is the only education company that works hand-in-hand with thousands of principals, teachers, students and families every day. We understand what it takes to make a difference for every student because we do it ourselves—from curriculum choices to professional development, staff recruitment to student behavior, community relations to enrollment, compliance to technology— and everything in between.

They had been in charge for Jarrett Middle School for the past 5 years. Through our discussions, my observations of her running around in each class, answering questions while trying to teach to benchmarks, reminded me of how education truly is underappreciated. She concluded by saying that the reasons behind her greeting her class was to create respect, and change the

behavior of her students towards education by teaching them to be more respectful and aware of the classroom rules.

I also spoke with a special education teacher. She had been a SPED teacher for 8 years. She explained to me that the teaching methods were based more on the “strategies of delivery” or more “the how” rather than “the what”. In college she studied the mild/moderate field not the severe, however when I asked which kind of disabilities she had encountered, it ranged from dyslexia and dysgraphia to deaf, students in wheelchairs, to even the autistic spectrum. The skills to teach students with disabilities amounted to being patient, having people skills and having knowledge of the disability. Knowledge of the disability came during IEP meetings, also known as Individualized Education Program, or roadmap of each student. Other skills included behavioral, social, organisational and positive reinforcement skills. Another interesting fact concerned benchmarks. They could be the same as the other “regular” students but the instructional delivery, assessment and methodology were different. However, according to the “Case guidelines for using benchmarks in the IEP process”, “in special education, either benchmarks or short term objectives may now be used to measure a student’s progress toward achieving IEP annual goals”, furthermore those “ benchmarks are generally more specific than those used in general education.” The annual goals are set by a team composed of teachers, parents and school principal, based on the students needs. The special education classrooms are smaller with only 8-10 SPED students at the most. But the rules as to the size are complex as I discovered while reading “Guidance on Special Education Class Size for 2009/2010 and beyond” dated May 1st 2009.

Classroom environment, teaching methods, students with learning disabilities, purposefulness, without forgetting benchmarks dictated and regulated by an outside company, were elements that I discovered during my service learning. Each of them linked to teacher engagement. Before moving on to my conclusion, here is one last interesting point that was shared with me by the special education teacher: the teacher turnover was high. I admit I was not surprised.

Conclusion

According to Cathleen A. Kennedy, “good teachers have the following characteristics and beliefs: (...) passion for helping students, are driven by passion for becoming a good teacher, and believe teaching is hard but important, and are willing to invest large amounts of time in improving their competence” (1998). I mentioned that we were asked two questions in the beginning of the semester: what is teaching for us ? and what is our philosophy of teaching? In order to truly answer those questions, I believe we must first reflect on and determine our “own personal meaning and purpose of education” (Yero, 2002). The why behind the what. For me, teaching is about sharing knowledge with respect. It is about never undermining the students, trying to encourage them to learn more while being firm, honest and organized. Beyond anything else, teaching must become a vocation not “just another job”. The Jarrett Middle School adventure confirmed my why behind my what. I believe that education is a right, not a privilege. Each child deserves to go to school, deserves a great teacher, someone who cares, someone who is passionate, someone who will go the extra mile to share knowledge. The road isn't easy. The road isn't fair. The road isn't always clear. But it must be undertaken.

Many other factors participate in the definition of teacher engagement. But it is crucial to focus on the ones that matter: passion, patience and understanding. Two final quotes to illustrate my thoughts on the subject:

The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think – rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men. (Bill Beattie)

The one real object of education is to leave a man in the condition of continually asking questions. (Bishop Creighton)

I am still asking myself those first 2 questions. Jarrett Middle School has started giving me some answers, but my road ahead is still long.

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