

Reflections of a Good, but Aspiring to be Great Teacher

Richard Feistman, MA
University of Missouri

ABSTRACT. This reflection focuses on the career path and teaching philosophy of a family educator in the middle of his career. Varied experiences within schools and universities in multiple countries produced a teaching philosophy that revolves around the perspectives and needs of the student. The author finds that an educator can better manage the fluidity that makes families unique by fostering a safe and open learning environment, working through power hierarchies, and appreciating student context.

“Everyone sucks their first year of teaching; it takes 5 years to become good, 10 years to become great, and 20 to become a Master.” – My first teaching mentor

While time alone does not make a good teacher, I feel the heart of what my mentor expressed was that experience matters. According to the quote above I have the potential to be a great teacher (I am in my 10th professional year of teaching) and am still a while away from reaching the ranks of master. There is a reason someone survives for decades in a high turnover field such as education. Over time, experience builds a teaching philosophy. While building my philosophy I have found the experiences of the families I interact with to be more important than my own experiences as a family educator. Putting the experiences of the family above my own has helped me to negotiate the fluidity and variety that makes each family unique.

Working as an educator in contexts ranging from the middle schools of New York, the universities of Cambodia and China, and the communities of the American Midwest has taught me that an educator benefits from incorporating the background of the target audience as well as respecting the audience themselves. This is accomplished by fostering a safe and open learning environment while also transcending the power hierarchies between teacher and student. While a teacher cannot eliminate all the power hierarchies in the environment they work in, they can at least negotiate those hierarchies for the betterment of their students. Female and other marginalized perspectives are particularly important to acknowledge because of their history of being ignored and oppressed by the dominant power structures that influence education (e.g., politics, government). My future career will be centered on integrating the domains of education and research; however, for the purposes of this reflection, I look back on my limited, but colorful career as an educator who works with and teaches about families.

Fostering a Safe and Open Learning Environment

Creating an environment that is conducive for learning is a skill that took some time for me to develop. My first major step in the development of my educational philosophy came in the middle school classrooms of Washington Heights in northern Manhattan. When I entered the New York public schools, I was idealistic and wide-eyed in my search to help children. I joined a program called the Columbia Urban Educators (CUE). This program, similar to the model of Teach for America and the Peace Corps, took undergraduates with freshly printed bachelors' degrees and placed them in the most underserved, hard to staff classrooms in the United States.

Direct correspondence to Richard Feistman at richardfeistman@mail.missouri.edu.

CUE specifically took undergrads from Columbia University, promised them a master's degree from Teachers College, and more importantly, gave them the opportunity to serve those who were in need. For a new, young teacher it was the perfect opportunity.

My experiences during those five years as a middle school teacher were varied and intense. The school building was four stories tall and took up nearly a city block, not counting the annex across the street. Nearly every student in the school qualified for free lunches. Over 90% of the student body spoke English as a second language (most of which had cultural roots in the Dominican Republic), and 30% of the student body spoke little or no English. The school was fraught with problems such as high teacher turnover; multiple positions were vacant and the school was desperate for teachers to accept leadership roles. This gave me ample opportunities to try on different roles and responsibilities within the school. Officially, I taught social studies, but unofficially I taught nearly every subject while 'covering' other classrooms. Covering was a term used when a teacher would teach classes that were missing teachers due to teacher illness or when no actual teacher was in place for that position; this was relatively common because of high teacher turnover. I worked on the school leadership councils, learning how the district level edicts were enforced and how schools created their plans for curricula, known as the comprehensive education plan. I helped to develop a track team, a sports league, and a student government, none of which existed when I arrived at the school. A hefty amount of my disposable income went into buying supplies for these endeavors that the school would support, but could not fund. I even became what the school termed a Team Advocate after my 2nd year of teaching, which meant I was a teacher who also lead an academy of other teachers and students and supported the assistant principal in supervision duties. This is where I learned how to simultaneously move, feed, organize, and discipline 1000 students ranging in age from 10-17 in a 45 minute lunch period, a fire drill, or an assembly.

I was the overambitious, workaholic that teacher recruitment programs love. The first two years of my teaching career involved watching my peers quit in rapid succession. By my 4th year, only 1 of the other 13 new teachers that started the program with me remained. My first years of teaching were a trial by fire that involved making a mistake and then correcting that mistake. With the help of a support network of other teachers, I was able to learn from those rookie mistakes and maintain enough sanity to stay in the profession.

Over my time as an educator I have found that before I can figure out what I learned from an experience, it is essential for me to identify where I failed. One of the reasons I consider myself a quality educator is that I have made so many mistakes. Things that I tried, but found not to work in fostering an open environment include:

- Poor organization – Once I started writing my lessons the summer before the semester began I was able to focus on classroom environment and individual student needs at night instead of scrambling to figure out what I was doing with the content.
- Inflexibility - Those lesson plans are important, but in real life situations students' emotional states, classroom retention of material, and school time constraints are what truly determine the length of a project.
- Misplaced expectations - A wise, older teacher once saw me in the hall calling the assistant principal's office looking for help with a student; she smiled and calmly said 'They ain't coming honey,' and kept walking.
- A lack of follow through – I once told students they will sit there until they finish their assignment and when the bell rang in 5 minutes, I looked pretty stupid as they all left the classroom to go to their next class.

Educators have a short period of time to establish themselves as someone worthy of attention; and organization, flexibility, realistic expectations, and follow-through are what establish that attention. This is something I have found to transcend age, race, and class; students might be sitting there and even enjoy you as a person, but that does not mean they are paying attention. Unfortunately, I have found that some educators take this need to control a classroom too far and this results in an abuse of their power as educators. Educators must be very careful about how they manage the power relationships between themselves and their students or they could potentially be repeating some of the power abuses that are so pervasive outside the classroom (e.g., presenting one perspective as the only ‘true’ perspective).

Working Through Power Hierarchies

As my teaching philosophy has developed, I have become more concerned about the interactions within families and the power relations between family professionals and the families they serve. The first time I was responsible for the actions of others was as a teenaged athletic team captain or Boy Scout leader in Los Angeles. This was a time before I had concerns about power relationships and student development. In fact, at that time all I really wanted was for the person I was talking with to do what I was telling them. In retrospect this was not the best way to pass knowledge; however, it is a form of education I still notice when I observe other educators. I believe the view of students as empty vessels that need to be filled is a naïve, but powerful perspective that presents itself in many of the troubles faced by educators. While my philosophy on education was not built much in these early experiences, I discovered an essential trait about myself that many educators probably share - I enjoy being the one who gives directions and I like being looked to for the answers. It took me a little longer before I learned how to help people answer questions for themselves. Having answers is one source of a teacher’s power. It is an important aspect of being a teacher, but it can also lead to the mistaken assumption that the teacher should be the only one with the power in the student-teacher relationship.

Over time I found that methods that introduce student input into the classroom help to work around rigid teacher-student power dynamics. An educator wishing to empower students, in my opinion, needs to prioritize the perspectives of others. Teaching in difficult but rewarding environments taught me humility; a trait that served me particularly well when I later entered a field with greater focus on family education. My perspective that others know more about themselves than I do helps me to see the skills and background of others as an advantage rather than a limitation.

In addition to learning to appreciate others, working with multiple second language learners taught me how important language development is to overall accomplishment and power relationships. I once worked with a girl who was brilliant at mathematics, possibly better than many of the teachers, yet would routinely fail the state mathematics tests because she was taking them in English rather than Spanish. The student and her parents were terrified that if they took the exams offered in Spanish that it would ‘mean less.’ The problem is twofold, the student should be getting more focused English instructions and her first language should be valued. When I am patiently working with a student with language difficulties, I am giving them access to becoming independent and empowered individuals. While the majority of education is about learning tools to navigate the world, language development is the exception where the absence of basic knowledge will limit a student for the rest of their lives.

In a classroom, a teacher must balance establishing authority (i.e., creating order in the classroom) while valuing and respecting student needs. A refrain I heard from exhausted teachers in various countries was that students have no appreciation or respect for education. I would argue that a student shows respect and appreciation for education solely by entering the classroom. Once students enter the classroom it becomes my responsibility to engage them. I worry about non-engaged students because they are the ones who become apathetic, end up leaving the school, and eventually try to survive in society with a limited amount of skills. In New York, those kids become drug dealers, in Asia the men became laborers and the women prostitutes. Oftentimes I can imagine the mid-twenties version of those apathetic students wishing they could do it again. I have seen students get pushed into apathy by well-intentioned teachers attempting to maintain authority. I believe it is part of my job to keep the students I am working with from crossing the line into apathy.

Appreciating Context

Educators work exceptionally hard, but hard work is not always enough to help a student succeed. In fact, one of the surprising realizations I had as a public school teacher is that the ideal way to help a student is to appreciate the family context the student comes from. I have heard teachers complain about students' families as limitations, but this is too shortsighted; my cardinal sin of teaching is blaming students (or their families) for their lack of success. Rather, awareness of family context enables me to discover what students already understand and use that knowledge to help them understand other things. As an educator, I strive to understand the family and environmental influences on the student, find missing connections that are limiting the student's success, and then identify a way to use the family context in order to build those missing connections. To do this, it is essential that my goals as a teacher are specific, appropriate, and realistic. My time with thousands of students taught me that it is much more difficult to help them if I do not understand them.

While working as a public school teacher and after finishing my master's degree, I enrolled in additional graduate coursework that focused on developing teaching skills in other educators. This path led me to a teacher training academy in Cambodia and a foreign language institute in Northern China. In China, I also worked as a written and spoken English language instructor for undergraduates who were working on bachelor's degrees in English translation. This switch over to working with adults strengthened my resolve that context (i.e., the various interactions a student has with the world), specifically family context (i.e., the interaction within the family), is an important aspect of effectively educating a student. While I did not have to worry about fights and aggression in classrooms with adults, I had to worry even more about problems such as disinterest and confusion.

Once again, the best way I found to prevent these pitfalls was quality instruction based on the experience of the participant. A Cambodian teacher does not want to hear about smartboards when they do not have access to electricity in their classroom. A Chinese teacher does not want to hear about curriculum development when their curriculum is mandated by the State. Rather, both teachers are interested in the ways that they can reach students within the restrictions of their work environment. The teachers I trained shared the perspective of many of my former students. Teachers I talked to mainly were concerned about how to grow with the present structure within which they worked. These teachers were similar to my previous students in wishing to gather and develop skills that make sense to them and apply to their goals. As an

educator it is my responsibility to respect my student's priorities whether they are an adult or a child.

Whether domestic or abroad, I have learned over time that students learn best when I individualize instruction. In New York I needed to design instruction based on the language needs of my students. In Cambodia I needed to individualize instruction based on the resources at the teacher's disposal. When I had classrooms with 40 or more students ranging in age and ability, I liked to give multifaceted group work. This allowed me to assign higher critical thinking tasks to advanced students and simpler tasks to trailing students. Meeting my students at their skill level in this way gave everyone the ability to be successful, even though it meant not everyone had the exact same work. Once again, I feel it is the educator's job to help the student learn rather than blaming the student for being 'too behind' or 'too ahead' for the class. Once I accepted that all students will be slightly different based on their context it became much easier to conceptualize how to organize a class that met the various needs of the students.

Working with Families

One of the common refrains from my students and colleagues overseas was that they wanted to come to the United States. When I mentioned my time living in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, students in my class were unimpressed. 'No,' they would say, 'I want to go to the real America, not places that are full of other people.' Many of my students felt that small town America was where the 'real' Americans were. I had mainly flown over the center of the United States, rarely visiting it. I felt my next step in my teaching career should fill in this unexpected gap in my experience. Thus, when I decided to enroll in a Human Development and Family Studies graduate program to advance my career interests in the family, I started looking in the Midwest.

While I enjoyed working with teachers and undergraduates overseas, I still found the same limitations in my classrooms; specifically, I did not have enough time to work with students on personal development. What I found was that for me to have the impact that I desired, I needed to work not only with teachers or children, but with families as well. I wanted to immerse myself even more into the context of the student. I came to the conclusion that I either needed to help make social structures that influence education more family friendly, or work with the families on how to negotiate intimidating social structures such as government agencies and educational systems. I chose to work with families.

Working in the Midwest gave me an opportunity to change my focus from basic instruction to family education. I now work specifically with divorcing parents in a court mandated class about conflict resolution and post-divorce parenting. I also work as a facilitator and evaluator of a relationship education program. This program is voluntary and caters to unmarried parents living in poverty. These simultaneous teaching experiences have reinforced and introduced many new concepts into my teaching philosophy.

Primarily, I have found while working with families that, while an empirical base is essential for the curriculum, one-dimensional opinions about what makes a good family is not a good thing. Rigid definitions of family alienate students and obscure the positive aspects of family diversity. This is especially true in the form of mandated programming such as the divorce education program. These participants love and care for their children and while they legally have to attend the session, courts cannot legislate content retention. Telling a parent they are a bad parent is the best way for an educator to make themselves a target of cynicism and

apathy from the student so when I teach these sessions I work hard to earn and keep their attention by drawing them back again and again to how my message might help their children.

The relationship program I teach incentivizes couples to participate; however, participants who felt disrespected or talked down to were the first to leave and not come back. Even hundreds of dollars in gift cards offered to someone in poverty could not convince them to sit through a lecture with a message which made them feel put down or disrespected. People crave and demand a level of respect. While I have always felt that respecting prior knowledge was an essential element in teaching, working with families in the Midwest has affirmed my sense that respecting the family is essential before attempting to help or work with the family. Maintaining this respect reintroduces my philosophical cornerstones of being well prepared and humble when working with anyone. Methods for showing this respect towards families include giving options, providing resources, and letting people have the choice in what to take or do. This respects the agency of the participant by allowing them the power to make changes based on what they feel is right for their families.

Prioritizing Marginalized Perspectives

One of the interesting things about coming to the Midwest is that I learned the label for an educator that is concerned about respecting their students' prior knowledge and culture; it is called being a Feminist. While the word *feminism* has been taken to mean many things in popular culture, those that write on feminist theory refer to the recognition of power relations and the desire to change power imbalances as central themes of feminism (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). While I had come to these conclusions on my own terms during my teaching career, it was pleasant to find a theory that supported my work and experience.

Years of coursework and professional work has influenced my view of education as a civil right, particularly in the case of women. Whether in the inner city of New York, the rural lands of Cambodia, or urban sprawl of developing China, young girls have much more to lose when education is denied them. I have seen teachers in tears about the decision to hold a young girl back a grade. These teachers were fully aware of how that young girl's likelihood of becoming pregnant and leaving school skyrockets when they are held behind. I have talked to young women overseas who are terrified about getting low exam scores for fear their father will remove them from school. Family patriarchs who control the resources of the household are wary of spending limited resources on educating the young women of the family. Education grants societal access to the marginalized. Allowing marginalized populations into schools is an important start, but my experience tells me that these groups will do even better when the curriculum is designed around their specific needs and family contexts.

Empowering the Classroom

Despite my limitations, something I consider a strength of my teaching philosophy is a concern over power relationships. A teacher needs to be able to control the room and provide an environment where all can learn. To do so, the power hierarchies between teacher and student need to be leveled. In my classroom I want to achieve two main goals: avoiding force and improving retention. I avoid forcing one perspective by presenting empirically backed data to those I work with and then collaboratively coming to an agreement on how those findings might apply to them. I have seen force accomplish things like attendance, but not retention. I improve retention by leveling power hierarchies. This helps me improve the chances that a student will retain what we talked about and possibly enjoy the experience of working on complicated topics

such as parenting and relationships. The method I use to avoid abusing my power as a teacher is making the impetus for change on me and not the student. Even when students are required to be in a room, they are not required to pay attention; this is why I feel my job as an educator is to do everything I can to *earn* a student's respect before student apathy sets in. A title gets me to the front of the room, but does not guarantee student attention. I have worked in classrooms with mandated and non-mandated attendance; it is always a little harder to get those in the mandated classrooms to participate. The best way I have found to get them to participate is by leveling the power in the classroom and giving them a voice in the discussion.

A family educator needs to be flexible and adapt to the situation. Whether the limitations are a lack of resources, a lack of student interest, or low programming recruitment, it becomes the job of the teacher to make it work. I think this was one of the main points my mentor was getting at with her advice at the start of this reflection. Younger educators go out into the world trying to promote change through spreading knowledge; the experienced educator, however, tries to find ways to adjust their own style in order to help the world change itself with a power that the world already possesses. It is the difference between dictating and collaborating. I look forward to this collaboration, and hope that one day I might master it.

References

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Richard Feistman Bio

Richard is originally from Los Angeles, California. In 2002 he earned a Bachelors of Arts with a major in Psychology and a minor in Economics from Columbia University. In 2004 he earned a Master of Arts degree with a major in the Teaching of Social Studies from Teacher College, Columbia University. Richard has worked in the New York public school system, the Cambodian teacher education system, and a private Foreign Language institute in northern China. He currently works and studies in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri where he is currently pursuing a PhD in Family Studies. In his current position, Richard works as a facilitator in family education programs including a mandated co-parenting course for recently divorced individuals and a voluntary relationship education program for impoverished, unmarried new parents.