Learning to Keep My Heart Open

Marika Paez
Teachers College, Columbia University

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MARIKA PAEZ started her teaching career six years ago through Teach for America. After working in various schools in the South Bronx and Harlem, in New York City, this year she became a staff developer for the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University.

I tend to look back on my first year of teaching with a mixture of horror, disbelief, and awe. I started teaching through Teach for America, an organization that recruits recent college graduates without education degrees to work for two years in under-resourced school districts all around the country. My inspiration for moving across the country to teach in the South Bronx came, in part, from having had opportunities in college to work side-by-side with teachers in inner-city schools who were brilliantly and passionately able to work with groups of young people to not only teach them subject matter, but also to weave them into a caring community of people who supported and sustained one another. I suppose I began to imagine that my future classroom could be like one in a made-for-TV movie, in which I would be able to inspire and motivate a group of young people not only to achieve incredible academic feats, but also to have ultimate personal fulfillment.

Then, after a six-week summer training session given by Teach for America, I arrived at my second-grade classroom at PS 162 in the South Bronx. My students were needy, demanding…some of them hostile. My made-for-TV movie vision of teaching flew right out the window as I struggled daily to get twenty-eight wiggling bodies to do anything all together, at the same time—line up, get out math books, drink water. I saw many teachers around me who got “control” of their students by using threats, intimidation, and the occasional reward of a sticker or two. I must admit that, seeing this as a model, and feeling desperate to gain some semblance of management in my classroom, I tried these methods as well. I cried almost every day in frustration over my ineffectiveness. I was overwhelmed and discouraged. I wonder now, after six years of experience teaching in the public schools and having obtained my master’s degree, how I ever survived that first year, much less agreed to do it all over again the following year.

Though my memories of those first two years of teaching second grade in a South Bronx elementary school are mostly a blur, there is one incident that stands out for me—the day my class, and one student, in particular, helped me begin to discover what it truly means to be a teacher. Malik and his classmates helped me learn that the job of a teacher requires much more than to be an organized dispenser of curriculum or
an efficient manager of individuals. Rather, it requires being a person who can stay in
the moment, listen carefully, respond authentically, and thoughtfully guide students
closer to becoming their own best selves.

Malik had a shy smile and a perpetually averted gaze. He was the kind of kid
that a teacher would work hard to “bring out of his shell.” I would tell jokes and watch
to see if he laughed. I would tease him playfully, trying to get him to smile. Looking
back, I think I sensed that Malik wasn’t quite comfortable in the classroom and I so
wanted to put him at ease. I picture him now as he was at the beginning of the year,
shifting often in his seat, slow and reluctant to start his work, not confident about
reading or writing, easily embarrassed in front of other children.

Starting around January, Malik began to have angry and violent outbursts, mostly
directed at other children. I changed his seat to a table with the most docile children
in the class, but he continued to act out, often unprovoked—kicking children, pushing
them, grabbing their notebooks off of their desks while they wrote. Gradually, these
outbursts became more frequent and prolonged.

I wasn’t sure what to do. I tried everything I could think of at the time. I tried
punishing him for his disruptive and hurtful behavior. I tried to persuade him to behave
by using rewards—stickers or special treats. I tried speaking with his mom. But it event-
ually became clear that these rages were uncontrollable for him. I was frustrated and
scared. I wanted all of my students to feel safe in my classroom, yet I was unable to
control or even predict Malik’s behavior, so how could I keep my students safe?

One day during math, Malik had a particularly intense fight with another stu-
dent, jumping on a boy and pummeling him with his fists. I called another teacher for
help in removing Malik from the classroom. As I held his arms to lead him out of the
room, he fought and struggled against me, screaming, “Get off me! Get off me!” When
I finally returned to the classroom, I was exhausted and on the verge of tears. I took one
look at my students—staring at me wide-eyed, some scared, some in shock, math books
still open—and I thought, “We can’t go on like this.” I knew that we couldn’t go on as a
class continuing to ignore Malik and his behavior. It had become too big. I didn’t know
how to approach it or how to deal with it, but I knew that I couldn’t go on with “busi-
ness as usual.” We needed to talk about what was happening with Malik. So, I called
my first class meeting.

As we gathered on the rug, I worried about how it might go. I was scared that
I didn’t know the “right” way to go about conducting the meeting. Should Malik be
present or not? If we talked about him behind his back, would the discussion negatively
affect how we all saw Malik? I wanted desperately to hear what the children were
thinking, how they felt about the situation, and what they thought should be done.
Once we assembled on the rug, I explained briefly that I wanted to talk about what just happened and about how the children were feeling. I asked if anyone wanted to start. A few hands were raised and then a few more, as students started to share how they felt when Malik hit them or teased them. Some of them expressed confusion about why Malik was acting this way. Some expressed concern for me, saying that he shouldn’t treat me that way. When the children were done, I added that I, too, felt very sad about Malik’s behavior, because I cared about him and I knew he was having a hard time controlling his anger. I also said that I was concerned because I wanted every child in my class to feel safe and I knew it was hard to feel safe when Malik acted this way.

Then I asked the children if they had any ideas about what we could do. Some students suggested various punishments Malik should get for acting up. Most students seemed at a loss. Then one student, Natalie, spoke up, “Maybe if we tell Malik how we feel, he will know that it hurts us when he acts this way. Then he won’t do it anymore.” A couple of students nodded. I asked the class if they would be willing to talk to Malik to help him understand how they felt. They agreed that this was a good idea, and I went to get Malik. I was worried. Would it seem to Malik like we were “ganging up” on him? How was he going to react to what kids said? Would the children say things that were appropriate and thoughtful? How was I going to bring closure to the meeting?

Malik entered the room with his head hanging low, and his arms crossed over his chest. He sat down in the circle with us, and I invited some students to share what they had said before, about their feelings about Malik’s actions. The students were amazingly gentle and mature as they told Malik how they felt. They seemed to realize as much as I did how fragile Malik was. After several students had shared, I asked Malik if he had anything he wanted to say.

We waited for what seemed to be an eternity while Malik sat in silence, his head hanging down, eyes piercing the floor. Finally, he stood up. He walked over to the boy he had pummeled earlier in the day and reached down to shake his hand, mumbling, “I’m sorry.” As he gripped the boy’s hand, he bent down even lower and embraced him with his other arm, patting the boy on the back. Malik then went to each student who had shared what they felt and did the same, shaking their hands and giving them each a hug. The room erupted into spontaneous applause, as all the students jumped up to hug Malik, and each other. It was an moment that I will never forget.

When I reflect on this experience now, I realize that this was a significant moment in my teaching. On this day, perhaps for the first time in my short teaching career, I was able to turn off all the “teacher” voices in my head. I had been able to stop thinking and planning how I was going to teach this or that lesson or “use” this or that moment, and, instead, to be emotionally authentic, to truly listen, and to put my full trust in my students.
On the day of that class meeting, I could not possibly have planned for what was in store. An important lesson I learned that day was the value of uncertainty, of “not knowing.” As a teacher, and especially as a new teacher, it’s easy to feel pressured to “know” how to handle every situation that comes up, from minor first aid to major tragedy. But this is impossible; uncertainty is a part of almost every teaching and learning interaction. And it is this uncertainty, this “not knowing,” that forced me to be open and present in that moment, to see my students without preconceived notions, to consider roles for us other than “all-knowing teacher” and “know-nothing student.” On that day, not knowing what to do opened me up to consider my students as individuals and as people, and to respond with them to the situation at hand.

Up until this moment, I had been trying to handle Malik’s behavior on my own. I was trying hard to be the teacher who “had everything under control.” I had not considered having a class meeting to discuss with my students what was going on with Malik, and I certainly didn’t know when the time came, what they would say, how Malik would react, or if this spontaneous decision was appropriate for the situation. Because of my own inexperience with what to do in such an intense situation, I was forced to trust the children and to rely on them as partners in trying to figure out how to resolve the situation. Whether out of desperation, instinct, or a combination of the two, I felt compelled to trust them, that they would be fair in their judgments of Malik, that they would be emotionally open with each other and with me, and that they would show Malik both compassion and honesty.

Although I was unconscious of it at the time, one of the reasons I was so deeply unhappy as a teacher in those first years is because I was failing to live up to my vision of what teaching and learning could and should be. My “voice” as a teacher was essentially one of control through manipulation—a system of punishments and rewards that didn’t reflect the kind of emotionally honest community I longed to build. This experience with Malik and his classmates opened a door for me and provided a new model of managing and resolving classroom issues. Although some students had responded to the punishment and reward system I had initially set up, I began to see even more students responding to class meetings and community problem-solving. I began to see how my “voice” as a teacher could develop into one that more closely matched my “voice” as a person. By becoming more emotionally authentic with my students, I became a teacher who was able to manage her class by building community and trust among students. I became a teacher who told her students how she honestly felt about things and encouraged them to do the same.

While I do think that it’s important for me to model emotional authenticity, I don’t think it’s enough; if children are to be able to successfully negotiate conflicts inde-
pendently, they need to be explicitly taught some ways to express their feelings and given multiple opportunities to practice. In my classroom, I begin by giving them language they can use when someone hurts them, such as making “I-statements.” We also learn and practice conflict-resolution protocol—naming the hurtful action, how it makes you feel, and what needs to happen next. Children begin to take on the language independently, saying things like, “When you hit me, I feel mad. I need you to use your words to tell me something.” We practice active listening during every part of the school day, so that students gradually become aware of the importance of body language and thoughtful response in good communication. For example, during discussions of a read-aloud book, students are explicitly taught to ask questions to clarify confusion, and to disagree with another’s point of view respectfully.

Honoring emotions also plays a part in the more “academic” parts of the classroom curriculum. Our daily writing workshop has become a place for students to bring both the big and small moments of their lives and share them with each other and with me. One child wrote a beautiful story that shared her feelings about living with a chronically ill mother. Another child was able to use poetry to examine the conflicting feelings he had about his parents’ divorce. When I conduct my one-on-one writing conferences, I focus on responding first to the writer and the importance of the story he or she is telling, and then on the writing. I push myself to remember that sitting before me is a person, and it is my responsibility as a teacher to help children develop as a person and not just as a “student” or a “writer.” I cherish and prioritize writing workshop because it provides daily opportunities for my students to be vulnerable and to be known by others. It provides all of us an opportunity to be pulled more closely together into a community in which we love and support one another.

Becoming attuned to twenty-two or more sets of emotional needs is difficult, and I certainly can’t say that I’ve successfully mastered it. I am not always as emotionally transparent as I could be, and I don’t always listen to students as carefully as I should. I am still not always sure of the best ways to value children’s emotions in the classroom, or how often it’s important to stop and process what’s happened. But I do know that when I am blind to children’s emotions in the classroom because I am trying to rush on to the activity at hand, I miss valuable teachable moments.

In the end, I didn’t have ultimate control over what happened to Malik. After one of his numerous suspensions for fighting at lunchtime, he didn’t return to my class. He went, instead, to a special education class in another part of the school as a “trial.” The trial extended the entire year. His going was silent, but his absence was palpable. We occasionally still saw him around school, and he would smile shyly and duck his head when I asked how he was doing. Sometimes I saw him running in the hallways with a couple of other boys, or heard him screaming upstairs.
At the end of the year, I encouraged my students to think about what we had done that year, to reminisce about good times. Several students brought up Malik, and Natalie remembered back to the class meeting we had “when Malik said he was sorry and we all hugged.”

Although I will never know the impact, if any, I had on Malik, I will never forget the impact he and his classmates had on me. The fantasy world I still had of teaching and learning was eradicated and I was forced to confront the messy, sometimes ugly, sometimes wonderful reality of children as emotional beings. In one of my favorite passages about teaching, Parker Palmer (1998) writes, “The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require.” (p. 11) Approaching teaching in this way is not easy; it’s a courageous act, requiring one to be open and authentic with students. However, it is in the moments when I open myself up, trust and truly listen to my students, that I discover we can all rise beautifully to the occasion.

References