

EMPOWERING CARE'S EFFECTIVENESS FROM HIGH SCHOOL MATH TO COLLEGE ENGLISH: FROM STANDARDIZED TESTS TO STUDENT VOICES

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***In this paper, Sunnyside High School, Inland Empire University (IEU) and Desert Valley, California will serve as pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of the high school, university, district and city. Ms. Jasmine Espinoza and Dr. J. D. Hyde will represent the pseudonyms for the teacher-participants who taught the classes examined in this follow-up study.

Abstract

Building upon the prior success of a rookie high school math teacher, a veteran English professor also successfully implemented empowering care at a private university in that same urban setting in Southern California. The aforementioned empowering care that contributed to better student learning as measured by district wide tests at the high school level now demonstrated pedagogical success as assessed by student evaluations in the university setting. The purpose of this paper, chronicled from a practitioner's point of view, examines how teacher beliefs that "all students are capable of learning," operationalized concretely in terms of empowering care, enabled students to achieve impressive academic performances on the aforementioned measures in their respective settings over two consecutive school years (D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019).

Keywords: empowering care, English education, enabling care, student evaluations

Introduction

When researchers originally decided to undertake some naturalistic research based on a rookie math teacher's, (Ms. Jasmine Espinoza), classroom experiences at Sunnyside High School, in Desert Valley, California, no one realized just how applicable what this math teacher was doing in terms of empowering care would be to college level teaching in English education. At that time, the original study focused on researching the challenges of preparing teachers to meet the rather stringent expectations of state-level test-based accountability initiated in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019). Wills and Sandholtz (2009) have aptly defined the basic tension that California public school teachers often face in the era of test-based accountability that may have a

constraining impact upon their classrooms: namely, the tension between teacher professionalism and centralized standardization of curriculum and instruction. According to Wills and Sandholtz (2009), teachers face the delicate challenge of negotiating this tension between professionalism and standardization as school administrations increasingly believe that “uniformity [of goals, curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment] offers the most straightforward way of providing equality of educational opportunity” (p. 1069). As opposed to systems that offer greater teacher autonomy to make decisions at the classroom level, a standardized approach seeks to centralize curriculum and instruction with pacing guides and collaborations at departmental meetings to unify content. The overall goal would be to ensure as much as possible that practically all course content matches the substance of state and local tests and remains uniform between all schools in the system.

Meanwhile, teachers often try to employ an individualized pedagogical approach based on professionalism emphasizing their own expertise and judgment to make autonomous decisions at the classroom level, reflecting their own diverse and unique classroom environments. Wills and Sandholtz (2009) reported that this professionalism has defining characteristics “based on theory, mastery of knowledge base through extended specialized training, a high degree of autonomy in performing tasks, and a code of ethics that guides behavior” (p. 1067). It is important for teachers to be allowed to apply their own theoretical knowledge in classroom practice autonomously because of the rich diversity in their classrooms and uniqueness of each classroom environment that “preclude[s] formulaic solutions” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS], 1996; D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Essentially, teachers must be permitted to draw upon their own specialized knowledge and professional judgment to determine how to meet the rich diversity of their students’ needs concerning what and how to teach because research has identified teacher expertise as the most important factor in determining student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; NCTAF, 1996; D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Teachers impact student performance more powerfully than program variables (Hawley & Rosenholtz, 1985; D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).

To be sure, an overly centralized or standardized approach tends to “emphasize transmission of information,” where “knowledge is considered to be a fixed body of information that is transferred from teacher or text to the student” (Good & Brophy, 1994). The teacher, in turn, becomes more manager than facilitator while classroom instruction grows more teacher-centered rather than student-centered and increasingly didactic rather than interactive. Thus, Wills and Sandholtz (2009) recommended a new type of professionalism which they called “constrained professionalism” that attempts to balance the needs of implementing a standards-based curriculum without reducing teacher effectiveness as teachers may be demoralized by encroachments upon their autonomy that seem to undermine their professionalism with an overly hierarchical and centralized standardization (one-size-fits-all approach) to curriculum and instruction.

While it may not be as strong in American universities as it is in the secondary education system, nevertheless, the tension between teacher professionalism and standardization of instruction represents an issue for

university professors as well. For professors, undergoing rigorous assessment and satisfying university accreditation bodies, such as the one representing the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), have become increasingly important at the tertiary level in American higher education. Internationally, teachers and professors could also feel constrained in the way they deliver content and ultimately relate to students depending on the amount and type of centralized standardization pressures that they may face from national Ministries of Education and other relevant stakeholders. It was a tension Jazmine Espinoza would be confronted with in a very personal way in that initial study at Sunnyside High School in math education.

Even so, while pressures toward standardization were present, Ms. Espinoza enjoyed a reasonable amount of opportunity to cultivate her professionalism and exercise a sound degree of autonomy in her classroom. This room that her principal graciously provided her rookie teacher to operate within the curriculum, proved extremely helpful in exercising autonomy within constrained professionalism. Ms. Espinoza applied the standards while receiving collaborative departmental support but also, more importantly, the freedom to alter materials and methods to make them her own, which allowed her remarkable success in implementing empowering care with her students. While professors also feel this institutional press at the university level, they typically maintain even greater academic freedom that can permit them to be nurturing and compassionate educators focused on teaching and ministering to students (a mission of many private universities) through the implementation of empowering care. Incorporating empowering care into a personalized English writing instruction may enable professors to more effectively facilitate the growth of college level writers during those formative freshman semesters of writing instruction.

Enabling care has been defined as the ideals associated with a “communitarian moral order” (Hemmings, 2006, p. 139) that fosters a sense of community and individual character that encourages school actors to ‘respect one another, treat each other as equals, but never stray too far from the idea that they are first and foremost a class, a community of learning” (Rosario, 2000, p 30). Hemmings (2006) contrasted the concepts of “enabling” and “disenabling care” at the urban Central High School whose students were 81% Black with most living in poverty (p. 139). Some acts of enabling care included a “huge dose of TLC” --- tender loving care ---- implemented with such acts as calling parents, tracking down absent students, counseling troubled kids, and even providing clothes, transportation and other physical needs as well. As one staffer told the author, “We hug ‘em, not slug ‘em” (p. 141). As 40 year career-education Rita Pierson (2013) indicated in her recent *TED Talk*, “Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like.” Positive relationships are a key ingredient in effective teacher-student collaboration.

Ironically, the same school staff that provided positive, enabling care also inadvertently provided disabling care by watering-down classroom standards for achievement and proper behavior that made many students think that the school “did not care about the students as capable learners” (Hemmings, 2006, p. 141). Many teachers at the high school greatly reduced the sources of knowledge for students, taught primarily or exclusively from the textbook, eliminating

massive portions of course content, and resorted to mundane methods such as fill-in-the-blanks worksheets, rote memorization and answering questions from the end of the chapter. Such teachers frequently held students to minimal standards and allowed them to socialize, laugh out loud or put their heads down during class time. One teacher explained that “loose standards” were needed to make the classroom “as pleasant as possible,” so students would not drop out of school. In her own words,

I used to feel guilty about the loose standards but then I came to the realization that these kids, you know, the kids in the neighborhood won't come unless you make things as pleasant as possible. Parents don't push them so if kids come it's because they want to (p. 142).

Undoubtedly, this faculty member meant well in her effort to keep the students happy and in school given the high dropout among minorities, especially when they feel discriminated against ----- as many of these students clearly did. Nevertheless, loosening standards was not an appropriate approach to say the least. Even students themselves complained about it. As student advocate Amber explained,

They try to be cool with the kids so that classes are comfortable. They get buddy, buddy and lower the standards so that classes are a joke. Even advanced placement classes are a joke. They have pretty much written kids off even though they'll tell you they haven't. Kids know what is going on and it really bothers them. They don't like being treated like that. (p. 142)

Amber even tried to petition the school to insist that lax teachers do a more professional job. Clearly, the students themselves wanted a high degree of professionalism from teachers, student-centered instruction and a rigorous curriculum that would make them proud.

A long line of educational research, in fact, has delineated how structural forces, school-level practices and students' responses to the aforementioned have all contributed to systematic passdown of privilege to white and wealthy children and disadvantage to impoverished children, especially those of color (Bordieu and Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; MacLeod, 1995; Oakes, 1985; Ogbu, 1978; Rist, 1970; Roscigno, 1998; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968; Solomon, 1992; Willis, 1977). Many of these institutionalized patterns of perpetuating disadvantage for minorities and poor students have centered on lower teacher expectations that have contributed to a tragic “self-fulfilling prophecy” where student self-esteem and self-efficacy have been damaged, contributing to reduced motivation. In response, teachers have often given less challenging school work (Farkas, 1996; Farkas et al, 1990) as was true at Central High in Hemmings' study (2006). Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane (2004) reported that this leveling of school-based expectations for certain minority or low income students is rooted in institutional hierarchy and can become “embedded” in schools. These authors also argued that these low expectations could be mediated if school leaders engaged in practices designed to

increase student responsibility for student learning. Properly implemented enabling care should not involve watering down standards, but should focus on delivering a student-centered approach toward meeting students where they are on a personal level and lifting them up toward reaching the standard.

Recent research in teacher care has focused primarily on the effort to respond to students with “culturally relevant critical teacher care” (Roberts, 2010). Bondy and Hambacher (2016) explained this phenomenon as “caring for students is a moral imperative, a way to take steps toward justice for historically underserved children” (p. 50). These historically underserved children would include African-American, Hispanic, impoverished or urban youth, most notably (Acosta, 2013; Bondy & Hambacher, 2016; Cooper & Minness, 2014; Roberts, 2010). As Bondy and Hambacher (2016) elaborated,

Such caring is ‘culturally relevant’ because teachers learn about and respond to the values, knowledge and histories of their students; it’s critical because it shows insight into the sociopolitical realities of students’ lives, particularly a history of injustice that shapes their educational experience and opportunities (p. 50).

The recent push for critical care for social justice and more enhanced teacher care for all students is not merely based on ideology either. It is also founded on pedagogical practicality. Acosta (2013) argued that the most effective teachers of African-American youth were “both aware of the enduring marginalization of African American people and committed to preparing black students to preparing black students for opportunities that their ancestors were unable to experience” (Bondy & Hambacher, 2016, p. 50-51). Roberts (2010) reported that teacher care could empower students to experience positive school outcomes such as improved attendance, attitude, self-esteem, effort and identification with school, if they believe their teachers care for them and their well-being.

Interestingly, the teacher care issue has not only been more closely examined in terms of traditionally marginalized communities as classified by race, high poverty, etc. but has been more recently viewed as an adolescent developmental issue as well (Bondy & Hambacher, 2016; Cooper & Minness, 2014; Gasser et al, 2018). It is especially noteworthy that Gasser et al. (2018) reaffirmed the findings of Cooper & Minness (2014) that indicated a greater need for more student connection and personalization at the high school level as demands increased and secondary level classrooms often become less personalized. Another marginalized community may then be the adolescent low achiever. Nurmi and Kiuru (2015) suggested that “evocative effects” could explain how student academic achievement and engagement or lack thereof, might impact student-teacher relationships. As Gasser and colleagues (2018) elaborated, student low academic achievement and disengagement might produce differential treatment from the teacher. Students on the receiving end of what they perceive to be more negative treatment (e.g. more criticism, less support, and lower expectations) may perceive teachers as less caring and just than their high achieving peers do. Thus, in limited studies, there does appear to be a bidirectional relationship between student-teacher relationships and academic achievement and engagement. (Kosir & Tement, 2014; Quin, 2017). All of these studies, both old and new, clearly

point to the need to emphasize teacher care in the classroom both in the interest of upgrading academic and also of promoting social justice (D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019).

Method

For the purposes of this paper, the author decided to employ a qualitative case-study approach, utilizing the same method of narrative inquiry, used to analyze the success of the high school math teacher (D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019) with the university English professor in the present study. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) described the use of narrative inquiry succinctly:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experiences in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and they interpret their past in terms of their stories. Story, in the current idiom is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adapt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 47)

Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 4) stated further: "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience." Through the bi-directional transaction of learning from each other, researchers and participants can begin to understand specific experiences within the context of stories told and retold in community. New understandings about the content and context of a situation ideally open up possible new imaginings for future stories to be lived.

High school math teacher Ms. Espinoza (D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019) in the previous study and college writing professor Dr. Hyde in the present one engaged in almost daily discussions on professionalism in education with their respective authors about empowering classroom instruction. In combination with narrative inquiry and systematic conversational analysis regarding the teaching situation, the researchers measured success ultimately by using Desert Valley Unified School District's first and second semester Benchmark Assessments for Algebra I for two consecutive school years to measure Ms. Espinoza's classroom success in the prior study.

As for Dr. Hyde at Inland Empire University, success would be measured differently, as the American university system does not engage in systematic standardized testing as in K-12 education. As many recent sources have confirmed, university student evaluations of their professor's teaching are very commonly relied upon as an integral and sometimes the sole measure of teaching effectiveness at the tertiary level (Boswell, 2016; Chitre & Srinivasan, 2018; Gross et al., 2015; Serin, 2019). As Gross and her colleagues asserted (2015),

“Nearly all colleges and universities in the United States use students’ evaluations of teaching as part of the tenure and promotion decisions” (p. 19). They further elaborated that “many measures of students’ evaluations have impressive validity” and that “professors’ scores on students’ evaluations correlate substantially with students’ learning,” and also that “there is reasonable agreement among current students, faculty, administrators, and alumni about which professor are most effective” (Gross et al, 2015, p. 19).

Serin (2019) contended that “student feedback played an increasingly important role in the delivery of high quality teaching” (p.168). Serin (2019) further found that “Although the use of student evaluations has been criticized, it remains the main tool in measuring teaching competence of instructors in higher education....[evaluations] are useful to increase teaching quality and can lead to better student achievement” (p. 172). Specifically, students benefitting academically from teachers they rate highly may be interpreted through the lens of relational regulation theory where “some professors are unusually effective in regulating some students’ positive affect and memory and are rewarded with high teaching evaluations...[which can be important] as positive affect includes attentiveness and interest” (Gross et al., 2015, p. 29).

Thus, faculty teaching evaluations have been clearly established as the university-level “gold standard,” often the sole criteria of teaching effectiveness. In the tenure and promotion formula at Inland Empire University, teaching equals 60% of the official formula, measured almost exclusively by university-administered professor-course evaluations, as stated in the faculty handbook. This reliance on teaching evaluations has appeared to be a reliable measure on teaching effectiveness judging from the rapid growth in student population from 3,000 students in 2005 to 11,000 students in 2019 and a remarkable retention rate of over 70% at Inland Empire University during that time. Thus, the author decided to rely on student voices as expressed in the professor evaluations to judge the effectiveness of teaching with empowering care in this qualitative study.

Building upon prior research on teacher expectations and enabling (empowering) care and the evidence collected here, it will be argued that just as Ms. Espinoza’s (enabling) empowering care made a critical contribution toward raising her students’ test scores to a surprisingly significant degree, among the leading scores in the district in Algebra I, that a similar empowering care-oriented pedagogy proved equally successful in Dr. Hyde’s freshman English composition classes, as ascertained from course evaluations. The term *empowering care* will be used in place of *enabling care* because the term *enabling care* can be too easily confused with the type of loose standard care provided in Hemmings’ (2006) discussion of *disenabling care*.

In the following sections of the paper, the empowering care implemented by Dr. Hyde and the results of two years of university course evaluations will be presented and analyzed. The narrative inquiry and conversations between the classroom teacher and author revealed that both instructors were using empowering care as a key focus in their classrooms. Since Inland Empire University uses student evaluations as the key measure of teaching effectiveness, two years of teaching evaluations were collected from 156 subjects in 10 different freshman writing classes to be analyzed to determine the effectiveness of empowering care in Dr. Hyde’s IEU freshman English writing classes. In terms

of assessing Dr. Hyde's teaching effectiveness, student evaluations are the primary and almost exclusively the sole indicator of teaching excellence used at Inland Empire University though colleague observations, materials created, colleague evaluations, and other measures may be considered as well, albeit to a much less degree and extent. Every semester, students fill out a fourteen question survey about their course instructors ranging from whether or not course objectives were clearly stated (Q#1) to how helpful a professor is outside of class (Q#9) and on feedback (Q #10), to how students rate the overall course instruction (Q#14). Students rate their professors on these 14 questions using a 5 point scale where "5" = Excellent; "4" = Good; "3" = Adequate; "2" = Needs improvement; "1" = Very poor. The results of Dr. Hyde's course evaluations in all freshman writing courses he taught for both academic school years are presented as follows in Table 1.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 Dr. Hyde's IEU Course Evaluations for Freshman Writing

Rating	SP 1 113D	SP 1 113F	SU 1 113 AE	FA 1 103H	FA 1 113E	FA 1 113R	SP 2 113A	SP2 113D	SP2 113G	SP 2 113H
"5"	56.3%	76.8%	65.8%	71.3%	73.7%	68.1%	57.1%	61.9%	67.3%	65.8%
"4"	32.4%	21.4%	29.7%	24.6%	21.8%	29.0%	32.8%	35.3%	26.3%	28.9%
"3"	8.6%	1.8%	4.5%	3.6%	4.1%	2.5%	9.2%	2.4%	4.8%	4.9%
"2"	2.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.4%	0.4%	0.8%	0.4%	1.6%	0.4%
"1"	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Tot. 4/5s	88.7%	98.2%	95.5%	95.9%	95.5%	97.1%	89.9%	97.2%	93.6%	94.7%
Students	16	12	8	12	19	17	17	18	18	19

In Table 1, the data clearly demonstrates that the student evaluations of Dr. Hyde's teaching ranked consistently high. The total number of 4s and 5s, the most important indicator of teaching effectiveness from the IEU administration point of view, never fell below 88.7% ("good") and only twice scored less than 90% (excellent) of 10 sample classes. In fact, for 7 of the 10 sample classes, the approval rating ranked at or over 95% ("superior"). The number of "5" excellent scores ranged from a low of 56.3% to a high of 76.8%, between one-half and three-fourths of the students surveyed. On the other end of the spectrum, the number of "1" responses ("very poor") was zero out of 156 students sampled on 14 questions, a total of 2184 total survey responses. Rarely were "poor" ratings invoked, most usually fewer than 1% and never more than 3%. Overall, the mean score was 94.6% 4s and 5s while the median was 95.5%. Both numbers hovered around the "superior" standard according to the faculty handbook.

In Table 2, some of the most common individual comments were recorded. Comments were enumerated by what students specifically said in their comments as follows:

Table 2 Most Frequent Student Comments on Dr. Hyde's Teaching Evaluations
Freshman Writing

Comment	Frequency
Learned a lot / skills improved	13
Enjoyed class / fun / engaging	13
Professor helpful	13

Professor motivating / encouraging	7
“Growth provoking”	6
Professor provides constructive criticism/ feedback	5
Professor heart / love / grace	5
Professor knowledgeable / wise	4
Critical thinking promoted	3
Bad time management	3

The most frequently specifically reported spontaneous comment from the 43 students who made explicit comments was offered 13 times. Students indicated that they “learned a lot” or “improved their (writing) skills” a total of 13 times. The same number of students also indicated that the professor was “helpful” and that class was “enjoyable,” “fun” or “engaging.” These categories were reported on nearly twice as much as any other. The next most frequent comments were that the professor was “motivating” or “encouraging” (7), the class or professor helped students with their “growth” (6) and that the professor provided constructive criticism or effective feedback (5). Other comments were about personal attributes of the professor such as his “heart,” love (for class / students), and “grace” (4) and wisdom / knowledge (4). Finally three students remarked the class provided good critical thinking / reflection opportunity. The only repeated negative response involved the professor not being good at time management (3).

Discussion

Going back to the previous math study, the DVUSD standardized test data clearly demonstrated that Ms. Espinoza by all standardized test measures had a very successful first year experience of teaching math at Sunnyside High School in Desert Valley, California. Succinctly stated, Ms. Espinoza’s students, on the average, scored significantly higher than the school or district average. In addition, she had significantly more students classified as either *Advanced* or especially *Proficient* than most other teachers in her district, many with far more experience than her in teaching math in California. Equally impressive, Ms. Espinoza had significantly fewer students fall into the lower categories of performance known as *Below Basic* and *Far Below Basic*.

In the present follow-up study on English composition classes, Dr. Hyde’s instruction was rated very well by students as the instruction in most of the classes he taught in the past two years was rated “excellent” (> 90% 4s & 5s) or even “superior” (>95% 4s & 5s), rarely as merely “good” (between 85 – 89% 4s & 5s), and never “unacceptable (<85% 4s & 5s). Typically, about 2/3 of student responses were “5” “excellent.” Even though the results were very good, this rating system is actually somewhat misleading as the IEU administration does not consider the “3” response to be “adequate” at all but views it as a substandard rating. Furthermore, on these course evaluations, only 4s and 5s are considered “good” and “excellent” ratings, respectively, from the university administration’s point of view. These course evaluations are taken very seriously by the university administration as the leading and nearly sole indicator of teaching success in the classroom, strongly influencing both retention and promotion. In the stated tenure formula for instance, the administration rates “teaching” as 60% of the stated formula while 20% is devoted to “research” and 20% to “service.” In actuality,

most professors feel like teaching is really significantly more than 60% of the university administration's emphasis.

While it may be somewhat controversial to place such a strong emphasis on the student evaluations of teaching as the primary means of teaching effectiveness, it may be equally argued that this emphasis is not entirely misplaced. A substantial body of research exists suggesting that developing mutual rapport and liking both students and student writing (Corbett, 1991; Elbow, 2000; Murray, 2004) strongly correlate with teacher effectiveness in English writing classes. Also, as previously stated, recent research on teaching evaluations has strongly supported their use at the tertiary level, even suggesting that they often do correlate with student learning and academic achievement (Boswell, 2016; Chitre & Srinivasan, 2018; Gross et al., 2015; Serin, 2019).

Moreover, the specific student comments that were spontaneously offered on the evaluation appear to support the idea that the numerical ratings on the evaluations more accurately represent the positive outcomes of empowering care rather than simply students rewarding an "easy teacher." At the top of the list was the comment "learned a lot" or "skills improved," which appeared as much as any other (13). Some even commented that the class challenged them. Moreover, the tendency for students to praise the instructor for being "helpful" (13) and "encouraging" (7) might also suggest that the freshman writing course was not too easy for them. While many noted it was easier than other classes, often more than half of students reported needing to work "more extensively" on this class than other courses. Other comments praising "constructive criticism and feedback" (5), "professor knowledge" (4) and "critical thinking skills" (3) as important also suggest that rigorous writing instruction was taking place. Both practitioners, Ms. Espinoza at the high school level and Dr. J. D. Hyde at the university, expressed a firm belief that the standardized tests for secondary math students and the teaching evaluations for college freshman writing classes suggested that the empowering care they were employing in their classes was indeed helping students to improve their skills in these respective subjects and grow as students. In the next section, the main elements of empowering care in the classroom pedagogy employed by these practitioners will be outlined in Table 3:

Table 3. Keys to Empowering Care in English Writing

Personalized Instruction	e.g. Learning and using student names early & showing interest in their personal lives & families, journaling, workshops, small groups
Practical Purpose	e.g. Connecting academic success to personal goals & providing clear goals, purpose and topic choices
Positive Feedback	e.g. Using peer reviews, writing conferences, rubrics and balancing criticism with praise in college level writing

Personalized Instruction

In English writing, Dr. Hyde would emphasize getting to know students by name right away. On the first day of class, Dr. Hyde would take time to use an ice breaker activity "Getting to Know You" to begin to establish a "Christian-academic-discourse community" and help lay the groundwork for future teacher conferencing and peer review activities that would increasingly personalize the

writing instruction, help students to internalize writing conventions and aid them to develop a greater sense of audience than they would get by simply turning in their essays to their teachers. Another way that Dr. Hyde would personalize writing instruction would be to take different steps to ensure the writing process was individualized for each writer. This included allowing a maximum amount of flexibility into writing prompts and providing generous amounts of feedback to students not only on formal essays but also on journal assignments in the prewriting stages of a unit. Later, during the revision stages, instruction would become highly personalized with peer review activities with each essay and teacher conferences at least twice per semester, once early on to get to know them and another time later on to assist them with their hardest assignment. Often, more conferencing would be encouraged for struggling writers.

Naturally, teacher conferences, peer response activities and feedback on papers allow teachers to give very good feedback to students and enlarge their sense of audience. However, these are also venues where teachers can reduce student anxiety, encourage them to improve, provide them extra help, and just really get to know them not only for their writing but as people as well. Dr. Hyde always keeps a full candy dish ready for teacher conferences and office hours, which helps reduce the tensions of teacher as “judge.” Dr. Hyde also finds it helpful to connect with students about sports or what is happening around campus or in student lives before or even after conferencing with students about their work. Language learning is very personal, and writing is quite difficult for most freshman students. Students need to feel accepted and supported to fully relax their anxieties and inhibitions so they can take the necessary risks in their work to grow more as writers. Dr. Hyde uses a portfolio system that helps with the aforementioned efforts by delaying grading and reducing those anxieties. Portfolios are also helpful in terms of providing student-writers an opportunity to be more reflective about their work and more sophisticated in marketing it. After all, writers must then decide what papers to include and how to present them as the best choices to represent their work.

Practical Purpose

Succinctly stated, students no longer do their homework or write essays because the teacher told them to do so. In order to properly motivate students in English Composition, Dr. Hyde finds it necessary to tell his students exactly why the assignments are given and how they can help the students as developing writers. For Dr. Hyde this starts with the relating the course syllabus objectives to each writing assignment given. As Dr. Hyde often tells the freshman English teaching adjunct instructors he mentors, “Teaching freshman writing is as much about teaching life as it is teaching English.” Many do not even know why the two freshman courses are required. Dr. Hyde often asks them and makes sure they understand how these courses build communication skills necessary for practically all professional jobs (even nursing and engineering) and for college success as most college classes are based on reading and responding in writing to what one reads. Another truth Dr. Hyde relates to writing students, “There is no busy work in ENG 113.” Dr. Hyde finds it important to relate to students how journal writing can help build fluency, provide notes for tomorrow’s class discussion and allow a student to generate information for their next formal paper.

Today's students have ridiculously busy schedules. They want an education but hate busy work. Many are first generation college students and need explicit instruction as to how the curriculum is put together: e.g. how writing skills from one unit and genre of writing can help build into the next, even in next term's writing class.

Even in terms of class activities, students often find it helpful to know why they are doing group work, peer collaboration, peer review, teacher conferencing, etc. They need to know how each activity helps them to develop as a writer and a person. They need their roles in group work or peer review clearly articulated to them or else these activities will fall flat due to confusion or lack of motivation from a sense of purposelessness. It takes a classroom instructor who has established a rapport and a connection with students to assist them in understanding how writing process works from prewriting to revision and how they can build their own personal writing process by selecting a set of tools presented that match their own intelligences, skills, preferences, etc.. Thus, students need to see how all the writing classes connect in a curriculum with practical purpose from freshman writing through senior project and how units within classes and activities connect. It increases student motivation as they trust that the teacher is on their side and trying to empower them to become the best students and writers possible.

Positive Feedback

Providing positive feedback is so important but often underappreciated among writing instructors. Well-meaning teachers, often with the best of intentions, trying sincerely to help students "fix" their papers, often fall into the trap of developing a "deficit-orientation" toward student writing. Students can be frequently overwhelmed with red ink and over-correction. Sometimes they are left hurt and confused, wondering, "Did he like anything about my paper?" This is an easy trap for someone to fall into after reviewing 100 essays or seeing that run-on for the "umpteenth" time! Nevertheless, many professional writers and writing teachers (Corbett, 1991; Elbow, 2000; Murray, 2004) will attest that students need to like themselves and their writing to truly produce their best work. Many times students procrastinate not out of laziness but out of anxiety and negative feelings about writing. Staying positive about student writing must be cultivated by writing instructors from the beginning of the course through the end.

For Dr. Hyde this starts on day one as many freshman students have negative prior experiences with writing to overcome. They often introduce themselves by apologizing in advance for their poor writing or sheepishly admitting they "hate writing." Dr. Hyde typically responds by saying "You probably write better than you think" even before he ever sees a piece of their writing. How can he do that? How can he not do that? Many freshman writers have not seen that many other freshman essays, so they are usually too hard on themselves. Moreover, if the writer does not believe s/he can write well then where do we go from there? Student belief that they only produce "bad writing" will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Freewriting and journal writing can help as students may be liberated to freely write and become more fluent by having fun and writing with reckless abandon about anything they desire. Thus, they are improving by practicing freely without the anxiety of being judged in what Elbow called "the teacherless

classroom” with their “message in a bottle.” The delayed grading of portfolio writing also helps to allow students the space to grow without constantly worrying about a grade. Thanks to the formulation of a writing pedagogy based on empowering care and supported with practical techniques, Dr. Hyde’s goal of day one often becomes realized when students either leave class “enjoying writing or hating it less.”

Teachers such as Ms. Espinoza in the prior math study and English professor Dr. Hyde in the current study realize that teaching is above all things relational and contextual in nature. Secondary math success with empowering care was measured via standardized tests in math achievement while with English at the university level it was determined by student voices as expressed in standardized professor / course evaluations. Recent research has suggested that the quality of emotional support to teachers in the classroom by any means such as responding to relational warmth or responsiveness to student needs may actually protect students from developing negative relational outcomes (Gasser et al., 2018; O’Connor 2010). The findings here are similar to prior recent research indicating that teacher care can be used effectively to empower marginalized students to overcome racial barriers or high poverty and for teachers to overcome their own deficit orientations toward students; uphold high expectations while providing support; expand the meaning of achievement (e.g. including cultivating student social and communication skills); and teach with a sense of urgency that inspires students (Acosta, 2013; Bondy & Hambacher, 2016; Cooper and Miness, 2014; Gasser et al., 2018; Roberts, 2010; D. Walker & S. Walker, 2019).

Thus, while teaching standards-based curriculum is important, it is of even greater importance to connect with students through the demonstration of empowering care towards them. Good teachers are often able to provide such empowering care to students because they draw upon past teaching experiences and pedagogical research. Institutional support can be important if not vital for teachers in their efforts to provide their students with empowering care.

According to Wills and Sandholtz (2009), state-level test-based accountability can negatively impact classrooms and degrade teacher professionalism when the positive effort to teach a standards-based curriculum increasingly becomes confused with a misguided effort to implement an overly simplistic “one-size-fits-all” standardization of centralized curriculum. Classrooms can be negatively impacted and teacher professionalism degraded because teachers may not be allowed to make their own decisions concerning curriculum, teaching methods, and authentic assessments—including portfolios. The resulting highly rigid instructional approaches can limit students’ participation in their learning process, which also inhibits the quality of a student’s educational experience (Katz, 1999; McNeil, 1981). For instance, McNeil (1981) argued that the high school juniors in her article were not promoted to cultivate high level thinking in history classes: “the students sat in classes passively, very rarely voicing an opinion or asking a question, no research required” (p. 318). She further pointed out that “all information in the course was reduced to lists of facts, brief descriptions, chronologies of presidents, laws and court decisions” (p. 317). When centralized curriculum becomes required, class lectures tend to be tightly controlled by not encouraging students in “questioning their institutions” (p.317). Often, the

teachers' primary concern may deviate toward covering the materials without students' interruption.

While one might argue that centralized curriculum and uniformity of instructional strategies help provide equal learning opportunities for students, scholars have found that teachers need to differentiate classroom teaching to support all students' best learning (Katz, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1997). Although teachers want to engage in more "student-centered instruction" (Cuban, 1993, p. 6) in their daily classroom teaching, rigid standardization of curriculum and instruction often drives teachers to mainly focus on student test performance. Teachers working within such a professionally confined and rigid system may over-emphasize practicing test-taking strategies, including "how to properly bubble in test answers, or how to eliminate wrong answers" (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009, p. 1078).

As strong focus on accountability through high-stakes testing often creates teaching dilemmas through over-centralized emphasis on standardization of curriculum, teachers often become too limited in exercising academic freedom, an important part of the teaching profession. Primarily due to the obligation of following the centralized curriculum, teachers can lose the autonomy necessary for creating instructional strategies to meet different students' educational needs. It is vital for teachers to value all different students' educational needs and provide for them accordingly. Showing respect for the various cultures in class is a sign of teachers' care, recognizing all students "as worthwhile individuals" (Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, 1992, p. 698).

Conclusion

In a more nurturing classroom environment, where empowering care is provided, students tend to engage more in class discussions and finish their class work more consistently because they feel that their teachers care about them. However, overly-standardized test-driven instructional approaches often prohibit the opportunity for teachers to adequately consider diverse students' educational needs simply because they feel obligated to use the canned-materials from the departments following the pacing guides. According to Phelan et al (1992), students want to be acknowledged as valuable individuals by their teachers. Students want their teachers "to recognize who they are, to listen to what they have to say, and to respect their efforts" (p. 696). One student quoted in Phelan et. al. (1992) elaborated,

The class I'm getting an F in, he seems like he doesn't really actually pay attention to anybody in particular in class, it's just a whole class, and this is math.....So I don't know what he really actually means. He doesn't look at me...(p. 696)

Thus, it is easy to see how perceived teacher indifference to individual student needs can result in disconnected relationships between students and teachers, which may be harmful to individual students. In teacher-centered classrooms where teachers are pressured to get results on standardized tests, such disconnected relationships can easily form. When educators feel constrained and find difficulty being creative with their teaching practices because of the pressure

to immediately raise test scores, students may be treated more like numbers than properly valued individual learners.

While understanding that state-level testing may be an important part of the assessment process, over-emphasis on centralization of a standardized curriculum for uniformity in test preparation in schools can create a negative impact on teacher practice and student learning. Consequently, students may be drilled to perform well on their standardized testing. Without recognizing an individual's special circumstances such as lack of English proficiency and disciplinary behaviors, a hostile classroom atmosphere may be created between teachers and students. The underlying tension between teachers' agendas and students' needs often may inhibit teacher efforts to cultivate the kind of healthy relationships with students that can come from application of empowering care. As administrators and policy makers try to reform schools by ensuring that standards are met, providing centralized curricula to promote students' immediate learning outcomes with accountability in the form standardized tests represents an overreaction to problems in education. In short, this type of 'test-driven' classroom instruction often does not serve the best interests of all students' learning needs (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Rather, a system that encourages teacher professionalism and enables teachers to employ empowering care with their students does (Walker & Walker, 2019).

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