Why Teaching Is Not an Exact Science

By Lynne Anderson-Loy

In 2002, the principal who offered me my first teaching position told me she did so because I was "older." I took that as a compliment. I was proud that she recognized my ability to juggle single parenthood, a full-time job, and college. What I didn't know then was that, for her, "older" meant having the wisdom to manage a classroom of 28 fourth-graders in a high-poverty school where I was the only white person in my classroom.

I had just graduated from Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, after a 30-year career as a certified dental assistant. I remember that when I thanked one of my undergraduate professors for his unwavering guidance, he gave me the following advice: "Remember, teaching is not an exact science."

As a science education major, the phrase struck me as odd. "Wait," I thought, after I left his office, "all my science classes have focused on the importance of examining evidence and being precise. Have I really been sent off to teach in a profession where I must accept unresolved outcomes?" I just wanted to teach students about the world around them in a fun and meaningful way. How hard could that be?

Over the next 13 years, at four different schools, I would learn that teaching is so much more challenging and rewarding than I had ever expected.

After my first year, I was still far from wise, and I felt the full significance of my professor's words. It quickly became apparent during that year that I was well prepared to organize a classroom, maintain a schedule, write and deliver lessons, and meet deadlines set by my administrators. But the life experiences that come with being "older," and that my principal was counting on, did not prepare me to manage student behavior. I struggled to keep my students—with all their various personalities—on a common path of learning, while teaching them to be respectful to me and others. I realized I needed help.

Like many new teachers, I asked my colleagues what they did. Not surprisingly, the number of practices to motivate and discipline students corresponded to the number of teachers; everyone did something different.

Searching for Support

Many approaches, such as sending students out of class, having them stand in a corner of the room, sending them to another teacher, or giving them candy when they did the right thing, seemed ineffective and born out of frustration. Taken together, they simply reflected a lack of support and training around discipline. Moreover, my university teacher preparation program, like many other such programs, did not prepare me to address the social and emotional needs of students, the very needs that fuel so many behavioral problems.

I grew increasingly frustrated that I was not supported enough professionally to be able to support my students and began to look for another teaching position.

Fortunately, at my next school I had a much better experience. Sometime during my first week, I realized that student discipline here was less of an issue. During one lesson, when I turned my back to my class of 24 first-graders so I could write on the board, the room fell silent. I kept writing and wondered, "Are they still in the room? Did they leave?" At this point in my career, I had never experienced turning my back to write on the board without needing to refocus the class. I finished writing and slowly turned around. Everyone was looking at me attentively, waiting. For a minute, I stood there dumbfounded.

Like my former school, this one was also in the inner city, but the students came from a mix of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.* We had parents who were young professionals and parents who lived in poverty. During my seven years there, I received the support I needed to improve my instruction and handle behavior problems when they did occur. My colleagues and I had a say in professional development, and we also received significant help from Bradley University's education students, who tutored our students. Conveniently, the university was right next door to our school.

All those supports proved crucial to the success of our students. One of my years there, the school was awarded National Blue Ribbon status from the U.S. Department of Education, and it consistently received recognition from the state for high achievement. Our principal continuously helped us reflect on and improve our instruction and understand data and the importance of building relationships. Discipline policies and practices that had been in place before I arrived emphasized ensuring an even and nurturing playing field. Parental involvement was also high.

But the main difference between my first-year teaching experience and my time at this school was the philosophy of the principal. She treated her teachers as professionals and made sure that we knew our opinions mattered. Were there students

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*For more on the importance of school integration by socioeconomic status, see "From All Walks of Life" in the Winter 2012–2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2012-2013/kahlenberg.

who misbehaved? Of course, but teachers knew that the goal was to do their best to keep students in the classroom. De-escalating conflicts, redirecting students, and creating engaging lessons were all emphasized. For example, when students interrupted the lesson, I would direct them to a table in the back of the room and have them work on a different assignment. I made sure no student had idle time. A few minutes later, when the rest of the class was engaged in an assignment at their own desks, I would quietly talk to the student at the back of the room to find out what exactly was going on. My goal was always to build relationships with students and redirect them when necessary.

But if poor behavior significantly interrupted teaching and learning, there was support from the office. If necessary, the principal would remove the student from the classroom and contact the parent immediately. Rarely was the student sent home. Most often, after a brief time out of class, the student returned. Parents also knew that when the school called about a discipline issue, it needed to be handled at home as well.

I am painting a pretty perfect picture here, but no school is without challenges. Even at this school, teachers and administrators struggled with overly punitive consequences for behavior. For instance, when students made fun of others, left their seats during instruction, spoke disrespectfully to teachers, or stole items from their classmates, teachers sometimes unnecessarily raised their voices at students, assigned them to detention during lunch, or made them write sentences in their notebook promising not to engage in a particular behavior again—practices that were hardly ever effective.

But I was pleased that at least my colleagues and I were asking ourselves tough questions: "Is what the student did a big enough classroom distraction to acknowledge the behavior and stop teaching? Can I handle it myself? Do I need to call the parents? Do I need to send this student to the office?"

Discipline Based on a Desire to Understand

While it is frustrating to contain the energy of nearly 30 elementary school children in a single classroom, punitive approaches do not foster calm.

Some of my students had experienced violence, and I was starting to realize that their lack of self-control resulted from overwhelming frustration. With each passing year, my philosophy regarding classroom management, student discipline, and motivation became clearer to me. But my biggest personal growth in these areas occurred because I began teaching middle school.

I followed my elementary school's supportive principal to a school that the state deemed "failing" and that needed to be restructured, meaning all school personnel had to be interviewed and rehired by a completely new administration.

This school included grades 7 through 12, and my assignment was teaching science to seventh- and eighth-graders, which was quite an eye opener. Several students were already masters at disrupting the classroom. The middle school years can be hard for both students and teachers. I had never in my life witnessed a physical fight until I taught middle school.

My new school was in the heart of Peoria's South Side, known for its poverty and crime. Obtaining an education did not always top the students' lists of priorities; making it through the week safely and with enough food in their stomachs did.

It often seemed that many of my students did not focus enough on learning when they came to school. Instead, they seemed to concentrate more on socializing with friends, having some laughs, and seeing who could most disrupt class. Even with professional development focused on writing engaging lessons, collaboration with fellow teachers, peer mentoring, and the support of administrators, often the only recourse to disruptive behavior in the classroom was office referrals. These were written mostly for disrespect, foul language, class disruptions, and fighting. I could have written several referrals each class period if I had the time. Moving through my lessons was difficult, and I tried each day to hold my students' attention in new ways.

After two years, I transferred to another school to join a colleague who was moving from the classroom to administration. As colleagues, we were like-minded. A simple practice of hers helped me understand a way to reach students who disrupted class and also encourage them to respect themselves and others. My colleague would schedule a 15-minute conference after school with any student who disrupted the class and stopped teaching and learning. During this conference, she calmly reminded the student of his or her actions and asked what he or she needed to be more successful in the classroom. To me, the most important aspect of this interaction was that it gave the student an opportunity to be heard. Has this strategy been used in classrooms before? Yes, but it was a lost art that needed to return.

My new school was located in a building (the Woodruff Career and Technical Center) that housed three schools on one high school campus: a career and technical school, an Alternative School, and a Regional Safe School for expelled students.

The Alternative School provides smaller class sizes for students who have had attendance problems, have been retained and are now much older than their classmates, have children of their own, have had some behavior problems, or just do not fit in at their home school. The Safe School is for expelled students to keep up their studies during their expulsion. The Alternative School and the Safe School share staff, and I would be teaching science in both—to the most challenging students in the district.

Students in the Alternative School often have found their previous education boring and far from useful and, as a result, have a history of acting out in class. They are the students about whom some teachers in the past might have said, "If only he weren't here, my class would be great."

Many of these students know the system of school referrals and suspensions very well. They are familiar with the legal system, as some have been in juvenile detention. They have friends and family members who are, or have been, incarcerated. They have lost loved ones to violent deaths. And to avoid doing a task they don't understand for fear of looking stupid in front of their peers, they know how to push teachers' buttons to get sent out of class.

Meanwhile, students in the Safe School have been expelled for a designated time depending on their past misconduct in school. These students are generally academically high-performing. Their day is structured, and they are monitored at all times. Pressure from law enforcement and the district's rising school suspension rate precipitated both schools to open quickly in 2010 but without much direction.

Some staff members still believe only punitive measures work. But students are more likely to flourish if we handle discipline in constructive ways.

An Opportunity to Improve

In the spring of 2013, the AFT's national office contacted my local union about a grant focused on tackling discipline issues. The funder, The Atlantic Philanthropies, was examining the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies, and was looking for four schools throughout the nation to support innovative efforts around student behavior. (To read more about The Atlantic Philanthropies' work, see the article on page 34.) I could not believe it; this was the exact opportunity I was looking for.

A few weeks after submitting an application, our school won the grant. The AFT let us know that professional development ideas would come directly from teachers. Educators found it refreshing to have a say since professional development is usually designed from the top down.

Our administrators came on board immediately. Teachers in our building already had a memorandum of understanding with the school district's board of education that stipulates 30 hours of additional professional development with pay and a yearly stipend to attract well-qualified teachers given the challenges of teaching Alternative and Safe School students. But beyond that, no funds covered training educators to work with students suffering from poverty, trauma, and low motivation, even though the "regular" discipline system had not worked for these students and was, indeed, the very reason they were here now.

The principal of our building at the time had a counseling background. During his tenure, he emphasized the importance of building relationships with students and also reminded us teachers to take care of ourselves and acknowledge that we work in an atmosphere of secondhand trauma. His perspective shaped our first grant proposals, which sought professional development on effective classroom management and positive behavior programs, as well as programs that would help us understand the trauma our students were experiencing.

That spring, administrators and teachers attended a conference in Washington, D.C., organized by the Advancement Project, a national civil rights organization. There we heard for the first time about the "school-to-prison pipeline" and many educators' unintentional contribution to it. I realized that our district had such a pipeline and that we needed to start doing something about it.

A couple months later, when our principal became the superintendent of another school district, we were fortunate that his replacement was another well-respected principal in our district who continued the enthusiastic collaboration between teachers and administrators. He immediately saw the need to create a specific mission for the Alternative School, one that stated the importance of social supports, intentional instruction, and a healthy rapport between teachers and students. This new mission ultimately prompted us to rename it the Contemporary School. That small adjustment reflected the changed attitudes of many staff and students alike. Often when students go to an "alternative school," they feel discarded by their "home" school. The new name was our way to make them feel special and foster pride in the school.

Throughout the first year of the three-year grant, we had a chance to more clearly understand our students' lives. We had professional development on secondhand trauma, and we also had a yearlong consultant who visited classrooms and suggested lessons that helped students see how education was relevant to improving their lives. In addition, we began a tradition of attending the community's annual Martin Luther King Jr. luncheon, which enabled students to interact with community members in a formal setting. Students took two field trips to Chicago (175 miles away) to explore the world beyond their neighborhoods. They visited the DuSable Museum of African American History and the Museum of Science and Industry. They also walked past President Obama's Chicago home, visited one of the city's many beaches, and ate in several restaurants. Such opportunities, while common for middle-class students, are rare for low-income students like mine.

During the grant's second year, two other consultants worked with teachers on helping students learn self-control and how to better retain subject-matter information. We also began implementing restorative justice practices to give our students a voice and help them strengthen their relationships with each other and with teachers (for more on these practices, see page 39).

In August 2014, training in restorative practices took place for the entire staff; a team of seven teachers was also more intensively trained. We developed a schedule in which every student in the Contemporary School and the Safe School participated in peace circles (a restorative practice) at least once a week. The circles focus on having students tell the truth and listen to others and are

facilitated by adults on the school's restorative justice team. We also kicked off the culture change in both schools with a special assembly that included showing a video of students and staff expressing their desire for peace.

Soon after this assembly, a tragic death made us realize we were taking the right approach. One of our seventh-graders in the Safe School was shot in the head as he walked to a friend's house after school. We were in shock.

We turned to restorative practices to give our students a voice so they could heal. They expressed themselves in weekly peace circles, and the conversations were honest. Students shared their fears of neighborhood violence and their hurt over losing friends and family. Just the opportunity to articulate these feelings and hear that their peers felt the same way was empowering.

Peace circles were so effective that administrators eventually suggested they be used when students returned from a suspension or to resolve conflicts among students or between students and teachers. Sure, we had students reluctant to participate, but most appreciated the opportunity and often asked us when the next circle would be held.

Moving forward, our schools will work on building greater consensus among the staff. Changing the culture and climate around student discipline has not come easily for all educators at our school, a fact that is not surprising given the issue's fraught nature. Some staff members still believe that despite being largely ineffective, only punitive measures work. But with time, I hope they see that students are more likely to flourish if we handle discipline in constructive ways. With more training, we will continue to refine our restorative practices and ultimately take our relationship building within our school to another level.

Now more than ever, I realize the truth of my professor's words: teaching is not an exact science. When he sent me out into the teaching world that day, he should have added that it doesn't have to be. That's because teaching is based on relationships, however imperfect (and unscientific) they may be. Those relationships make a tremendous difference, and as a teacher I have learned, and will continue to learn, how to build them. ☐

Where Discipline and Racial Equity Intersect

By Kimberly Colbert

It was the second hour of the school day. Students filled with early morning energy darted through the halls in the mass rush to class. Dylan stood in front of me, eyes cast down, with Mr. D., an administrative intern in a training program to be a principal, at his side. "Dylan wanted to come and apologize for his behavior," Mr. D. explained.

After a prior confrontation, I had enlisted Mr. D.'s help in finding Dylan. Though I was not one of his classroom teachers, I knew he was a ninth-grader with a reputation. They approached me in the hall as I made my way to a meeting with colleagues.

"I'm sorry for the other day," Dylan said, extending his hand. As I studied his face, he appeared to be a different child than he was during our recent encounter.

It is said that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Hate requires you to see another, whereas indifference renders the other nonexistent. I believe Dylan's attitude changed when he realized that he was not invisible. I had identified him, and I had asked Mr. D. to help Dylan process his conflict with me. This desire to be seen, to exist, is at the heart of restorative practices. We begin to act and live restoratively when we prove to our students that they are worth the effort to make negative situations right.

Five days earlier, Dylan had been one of several students congregating in the hall near the stairwell. The bell had rung, and I was making my way to my classroom. The teenage energy was palpable, as it always is between classes. There were clusters of animated conversations and varying levels of swagger and silliness on display. I said to no one in particular, "The bell has rung. Please go to class." Most of the students moved along without incident, including Chris and John, two amiable hall "regulars" at whom I shot a playful "you heard me" look.

I then turned to Dylan, who seemed glued to the wall. "Somebody better get this [expletive] teacher out of my face," he said, surveying the corridor and purposely not making eye contact. His words hit me hard. I looked directly at him and said calmly, "I said please." As he turned and moved down the hallway as slowly as humanly possible, he repeated what he had just said.

I don't consider myself unusual when it comes to behavioral expectations. At 55 years of age, I can tell you that teachers, whether longtime veterans like me or novices of any age, take great offense when students swear at them. I was raised in a bicultural family—my mother is Japanese American, my late

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