Hard Truths: Examining How Students Spend Their Time in Our Classrooms

By Justin Minkel

Annie Dillard wrote, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

If you want to know a teacher’s philosophy, asking us is not the best way to find out. We could, of course, fill your ears with eloquent lines about “the whole child,” “high expectations,” or “helping students to live the lives they dream.” There’s no guarantee, though, that what you hear will line up with our actual practice.

If you want to know what we truly value, look at how the children we teach spend their hours in our care.

By the time summer comes, our students will have spent about 180 days with us. For elementary students, that adds up to more than 1,000 hours.

When I reflect on whether my actions line up with my beliefs, I just take a close look at the past day, week, or month in my classroom.

I often find gaps. Here’s an example from this week:

Philosophy: I believe teachers should be patient with children, treat them with respect, and try to make the many hours they spend with us as enjoyable as possible.

Action: I got frustrated when my Monday morning tutoring kids butchered their math problem, and I let that frustration show. As a result, five children who had to wake up 45 minutes early for extra math had a rough start to the school week.

Teaching is hard, complicated, abundantly human work. Minor failures like my grumpy tutoring session are inevitable, and berating ourselves for mistakes doesn’t do anything to improve our teaching.

But I keep trying to close those gaps between what I believe and what I do. Next Monday morning, I’ll think through the problem a little more carefully, anticipate concepts that might trip the kids up, and take a deep breath before annoyance creeps into my tone. As a result, those five struggling students will have a better start to the week.
When I look at how students are spending their time in my class, here are four balancing acts I scrutinize.

1. Teacher Talk vs. Kid Talk

Nobody likes a filibuster. I reflect on how much I talked in a given day or week compared to how much time the kids got to talk—in partners, small groups, or whole-class discussion.

I also pay attention to how much of my own talk was conversation—asking questions one-on-one or in a small group—and how much was lecture. If it took me more than ten minutes to teach a mini-lesson or launch a project, I make sure to talk less the following day so the kids can talk more.

2. My Choices vs. Their Choices

Humans love choices, whether it’s a “fully-loaded” option for a new pickup truck or a 37-syllable Starbucks order. My students are a lot happier and more engaged when they have choices in my classroom.

Sometimes these choices are significant—what topic to research, or what to write about during a writer’s workshop. Sometimes they’re simple—what book to read, and whether to sit in a bungee chair or sprawl out on the rug to read it.

I often have students choose a partner to work with on their writing or math problems, and I sometimes have them list three people they’d like to sit beside in the next seating chart. Just as the other teachers in our grade level or department make a huge difference in how effective and happy we are as teachers, the other kids in a table group shape the school day. Kids deserve some time to work with people they like.

3. Fun vs. Drudgery

Education is not entertainment, and there’s value in working hard at a difficult task to gain new knowledge. But most learning should feel good, even when it’s hard work. Ideally, it’s like a good run or bike ride—hard but thrilling effort, punctuated with brief intervals of misery balanced by moments of euphoria. You may be exhausted at the end, but you’ll be fulfilled.

That’s a very different feeling from the drudgery that comes when the work is boring or kids have too few choices about their work. When my dad was in the army, his sergeant sometimes made him dig a ditch and then fill it back in. When the work we give kids is devoid of enjoyment or a clear purpose, they recognize it for the ditch-digging it is.

My students need books that make them laugh, math games that teach fundamental concepts but are exciting to play, and plenty of projects where they build, perform, or create something. If the only thing a child in my class holds in her hand all week is a pencil, there’s a crisis-level shortage of fun in my classroom.

4. Complex Skills vs. Basic Skills

Sometimes I feel like a time traveler from the distant past, giving students a grade in ‘penmanship’ and watching them grind away at their wooden pencils at the sharpener. State standards often seem written for an agrarian age. Lots of emphasis on basic skills easily bubbled on a multiple-choice test, while all the important stuff—higher order thinking, creativity, design skills, inquiry—is largely seen as an extracurricular bonus.
Most basic skills can be folded into projects that teach all the important stuff, too. This month my 2nd graders did an economics simulation where they designed a product, purchased the raw materials to make it, calculated the total product cost, and set a price and profit margin. Then they advertised the product with print ads, radio spots, and skits, before holding a market day to sell and buy each other’s products.

The project integrated art, writing, and social studies, along with hitting several of our math standards for this quarter related to money and multiplication. It also provided the kids with a real-life context that made for plenty of complicated decisions, open-ended design problems, and experiences with success and failure that had nothing to do with grades.

It’s reassuring sometimes to teach a simple, useful skill like counting by tens or capitalizing the first word in a sentence. But when I find myself wondering how much of what I teach these eight-year-olds will still be relevant when they graduate college in the year 2030, I step back and plan some long-term projects with inquiry and creativity at their heart.

**Second Chances**

We all have days and moments when we know our teaching didn’t match up with our philosophy. The promising thing about teaching is that we always get another chance the next morning, next week, or next year.

As the author Mary Anne Radmacher wrote, “Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.’”

The kids forgive us a lot—probably more than they should. Flopped lessons, teacher temper tantrums, mini lessons that morph into not-so-mini soliloquies.

I apologize to them multiple times throughout the year. "I’m sorry I was so grumpy this morning.” "I didn’t explain that very well. Let me try again.”

But the real apology comes in actions instead of words. We owe our students our best, of course, but we also owe them our “better”—the reflection and effort it takes to be better tomorrow, next week, and next year.

That effort starts by paying very careful attention not just to the months and years, but to the days and hours.

Teachers have chosen to spend our lives making children’s days a little better—happier, safer, more meaningful, and more fun.

Whether we succeed in that work has everything to do with how our students spend their hours in the classrooms we create.

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