How Our Assumptions Affect Our Expectations

Among the dangerous assumptions that a teacher can make is that all of her students are more or less like her... that her values are their values; that the way she learned best will be the way that they learn best. Most teachers have found their way out of this box. But as Jan Hillskemper reminds us, teachers can also drift into another set of misguided assumptions when they mistakenly believe that parents have some of the same values and expectations as they do.

Jan Hillskemper

Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.—Lisa Delpit

During my first stint as a primary teacher, I thought I knew what “parent involvement” was. Involved parents volunteered in the classroom, sent in snacks, and were active in the Parent-Teacher Association. They also attended parent-teacher conferences and supervised their children’s homework. Then, for four years, I left the classroom to raise my own children. When I came back to teaching, I believed I understood even better the parent’s role. After all, I was now a parent myself. This belief was based on the assumption that all parents had the same values and expectations for their children that I did. This is a study about how that view changed and why.

That was all before J.J. stepped off of the bus with his classmates. J.J. was one of twenty late enrollees to the district who, because of a reduction in class size and a temporary shortage of classrooms, attended kindergarten in a fire station located four miles up the mountain road from the main campus—with me as their teacher. J.J. was smaller than the other children, and his clothes were too big—as if they had been someone else’s. With muddy pants and a smudged face, he was definitely dirtier than his peers; his skin was sallow; and his eyes, rimmed with dark circles, did not shine. J.J.’s scratchy voice was accompanied by a cough that made me feel hollow inside when I heard it.

As a student, J.J. was wonderful. He sought out and nurtured the other children, and he loved animals. He constantly referred to stories that his mother read to him, and he shared amazing facts he had learned about animals on the Discovery Channel. I could always count on J.J. to bring a snack when it was his turn. He always checked out classroom books, and he always returned them.

J.J.’s appearance and apparent poor health made me wonder about his home situation, but I never dreamed that learning about his life would change mine. One day, J.J. had such a high fever that the school’s health clerk and I decided to send him home. When we discovered that the family’s phone had been disconnected, the principal and health clerk took him home themselves. The next day, they told me of the environment in which J.J.’s family lived, describing car parts, trash, chickens, and puppies scattered about the yard of a ramshackle mobile home. They also told me that the people in J.J.’s home had that drug-abused look. To me, this description of chaos seemed incongruous with J.J.’s gentle and loving demeanor and his desire to learn.

One morning, not long after the home visit, J.J.’s mother, Barbara, stepped off of the school bus with J.J. and his eighteen-month-old brother, Thomas. Barbara was pale, very thin, and had no teeth. Even though the family didn’t have a car, she had taken me up on my generic invitation
to all of my students’ parents to visit the classroom. I was taken aback. Although I had wanted parents to participate, and I had repeatedly invited them into the classroom to help out or even just observe, I am ashamed to admit that I had envisioned tidy, yuppie-type mommies but not Barbara. I was not prepared for what I would learn from her.

Barbara wanted to work with the children, and although I was hesitant at first, I discovered that she was very good with them. During recess, I began talking with her, and she told me stories about her life. She was separated from her family for whatever reason, and, thus, did not have the support of a community of any kind. Health care, groceries, social services, and the library were an expensive, full-day bus ride; further, the bus didn’t go to the hospital emergency room where her children received most of their health care. Even J.J.’s life was tied to a bus; if he missed the school bus, he missed school that day. There was no other way for him to get there.

**An Underground Culture**

How could I have missed the families like Barbara’s every time I had driven out of town and into the mountains? Slowly, I became aware of what I called an underground culture in our serene mountain community. I saw, too, that the educational community was not aware of either that culture or its needs. No wonder these parents were not attending the school’s open houses and conferences and were not responding to invitations such as mine. We were living in the world of the classroom, and they were living in the world of day-to-day survival.

Listening to Barbara, I began to understand how the larger community’s perception of “the poor” affected people like her and her family. “We don’t go to the doctor very often because they ask questions about our home environment and if we have food in the refrigerator,” Barbara told me. “One time, the hospital made me take a drug test because I was nursing Thomas, and he was sick. I’m afraid to get help for the boys because I’m afraid they will be taken away from me.”

Most of all, she said, she feared Child Protective Services and the schools because both watch the children so carefully.

Barbara began coming to school on the bus every Friday; often I gave her a ride home at the end of the day. As our lives entwined, I helped connect her with a state-funded dental program and took her and the children to well-child checkups at the clinic. I saw for myself how people make assumptions and treat people because of what they think it means to be poor. I was appalled at the way Barbara’s questions regarding her children were discounted by the doctors and nurses. She pointed out that because the medical personnel were always changing, there was no history between them and her children. Often, she and the children were run through medical exams and procedures as if they had no rights or feelings.

At the dentist’s office, for example, Barbara was not allowed to go into the examining room with J.J. and didn’t feel she had the right to question that. “He’s really afraid; I wish I could go with him,” she told me.

I began to think the only way to break this cycle of poverty and despair for Barbara and parents like her was to get them involved in educating their children and to help them see themselves as capable advocates for their children in the educational process. But how was I going to do this? Still looking at the problem through the lens of my values, I was convinced that parental participation in the classroom was the key. I didn’t know this about myself at the time, but what I really wanted was the parents to come to the school on my terms and I wanted to convert them to my middle-class values and views.

After teaching that year in the fire hall, I spent most of the summer thinking about ways to get the parents involved in the school. At the same time, I continued to visit with Barbara, and she continued to educate me about the families in the area and how their lives worked. Eventually, I thought I had figured it all out: most parents want their children to do well in school; some just don’t know how to go about helping them do that. My premise became that if I could give the parents a way to help their children, they would want to participate.

**An In-Class Workshop for Parents**

That’s when I thought of the in-class workshops for parents. I knew the upcoming school year would bring me to a new school that had a population of about three hundred students—a much larger group than the twenty in the fire station. The idea of teaching parents was new to me, but I thought if I held a workshop in the classroom and the parents attended, they would learn how to help their children with school work. Then they would be glad to volunteer at the school.

During the summer, I did a lot of reading. Being new to the idea of parent workshops, I was eager to learn anything I could about what other people had done. Unfortunately, many of the books I read
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were about urban children and schools with diverse ethnic makeups. In contrast, our school has an all-white student body and faces issues of poverty in a rural area. About 70 percent of the children are on free or reduced lunch, many have thirty-to forty-minute bus rides to school, and all of them live in single-family dwellings (although some have lived in shacks with no running water or electricity). English is the first language of all of the students, yet many have very low language skills. Transience is another challenge facing the school. The year of this study, I began with twenty students and finished with only thirteen of the original group, but over the course of the year I had a roll that included thirty-one different names.

At the beginning of the new school year, I began talking with the parents of my students, and they confirmed my intuition: many were concerned with their children's educational success but were not sure how to go about helping their kids. In discussing the situation with me, many talked about their own struggles in school. "I had a hard time in school all the way through, and I'm still not a good reader," one mother commented. Knowing there was an interest, I began planning an in-class parent workshop.

At the parent-teacher conferences in October, I shared with the parents the date, time, and idea behind the workshop. Most agreed to be there, and many said they would find a partner for their child if they could not attend. We arranged transportation for the families who needed it: the principal offered to pick up one mother, I connected two families so that they could come together in one car, and one parent arranged to ride the school bus with her child and stay for the day. I was amazed at the interest the families showed. As well, I was thrilled with the bond I was building with the parents, even though I wasn't sure of where it would lead me. At this point, I still believed my goal was to bring parent helpers into the classroom.

Ultimately, several colleagues and I hosted four different workshops that year, each one on writing, reading, and math, and another on what to do with children over the summer to keep their school skills sharp. The format for each workshop was the same: the teacher-leaders modeled what we wanted the parents to know, and then we gave the parents time to practice the skills with their children right there in the classroom. In this way, we could be there to answer questions immediately, and we could also offer suggestions when appropriate.

Attendance at the first workshop was over 50 percent. Out of seventeen children at school that day, thirteen had an adult partner. At the end of that and each subsequent workshop, the parents were appreciative and made comments like, "I thought they were just drawing," or "I didn't know what to expect from him and now I do." One father commented after the reading workshop, "I didn't know to sit by my child when I was reading to him. I didn't know it was okay to make this a family time." A mother remarked, "I've been choosing the wrong books for my son. He's not ready for chapter books." All were excited to try their newly learned techniques at home with their children.

As the parents learned some ways to begin working with their children, we teachers learned about the families with whom we were working. We were inspired by the families' sense of survival and their desire to make life better for their children. I personally came away with a whole new view of the parents; my view of poor families with little interest in their children's education was dispelled. But I had more yet to learn.

Change from an Unexpected Direction

I had believed until this point that if the workshops were a success, the parents would come to the classroom. I was wrong. The parents did not participate in the classroom any more than before. But over time, I realized that the stories the children told about what was happening at home were changing. Simultaneously, the amount of homework the children were turning in increased by 25 percent, the take-home read-aloud logs were being filled out, and the children were excited about taking books home to read. Even when the homework level decreased after a short time, the children continued to relate stories about being read to and talking to their parents about school. "My mom and I read Dr. Seuss last night," offered Sam. "I helped my mom cook dinner last night, and I got to measure," said Katy.

The shift in my classroom was coming from a different kind of parent participation than I had expected, but I was beginning to understand that this kind of participation is more valuable than a parent dutifully coming in once a week to work with the children. The parents were working with the children at home—and for many of them, this was a first. My goal had been for the parents to take what they had learned in the workshop and continually support their child's schooling with it. Although the venue was different, that's what they were doing. This realization, though simple, was huge for me. When I thought about it, I realized that the support most children receive is in the
privacy of their homes. The children who are doing well and coming from average homes are getting encouragement at home. Why hadn't I seen that before?

Teaching the parents to work with their children at home was offering them the knowledge they needed to be an ongoing support for their children. They were able to have some pride in their help and some confidence in their abilities. The parents were talking to me and other teachers about their children, and they were connecting with each other. More of the children were getting feedback from their parents about what they were doing at school, and the parents were getting feedback about how they could support their children. My students now had the benefit of a team effort, but the team was not just the school professionals; it included their families.

At the end of the school year, I invited the parents into the classroom to discuss the workshops with me. I asked them what they liked about the workshops, what other subjects they would like to see covered, how I could make the workshops more effective, and if they wanted the workshops to continue. The answers? The parents wanted more information about teaching their children to read, they felt the format of the workshops was helpful, and they definitely wanted the workshops to continue in the first grade.

That year, I learned that much of teaching is making connections. As a teacher, I had become hardened to the lives of my students; in essence, I made assumptions about them based on the way their parents participated, on the way they looked, and sometimes on the way they behaved. As teachers, we need to think about how we let parents in, decide if we truly want their support, and define what that support looks like at a public school. First impressions, I realized, are not always what they seem. To help my students, I have learned that I must believe each family wants the best for its children. Barbara taught me that. And she continues to be an inspiration; she rides the bus to school with JJ every day; her younger son is now in school, too; and just recently, Barbara asked me for a letter of recommendation because she had applied for a position as a substitute instructional aide in the school district. I was excited to know she was still making connections in the school . . . and I am grateful she taught me that teaching is letting go of assumptions and excuses and just expecting the best from every student.

References