Authentically Connecting Students' Home Lives with the Classroom

When you leave work and go home, are there challenges that you are dealing with in your life? Are there aspects of your life that are less than the mythological "perfect?" Of course. Maybe your child is struggling with school, you got in a fight with your partner, or a loved one is experiencing major health challenges. Do you think about those things when you show up to work the next day? Of course. This is certainly true in my role as an educator. While it may not be at the forefront of my mind as I begin the performance of shaping young minds, it is certainly present and impacts my mood, my concentration, how I respond to students, how I engage with colleagues, and how I grade. While all of these scenarios could be their own story, it is important to note that they are all connected. Educators would be naive to think that their students do not enter our classroom with some form of challenge impacting how they show up for us. These challenges could be relationship troubles, worrying about the next meal, or dealing with parental separation, to name a few among an endless list of life's scenarios.The challenges

vary in number, severity and complexity, not to mention that they can fluctuate from day to day. Regardless, they are most certainly there.

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Let's examine the life of a student, as told by him years after these experiences. He moved to a new state after his parents lost the first home they ever purchased only two years into the mortgage. Financial hardship is a common cause for divorce, as was the case here, with his parents separating a few months after losing the home. While he tried to find stability in this new land, the student moved from house to house, never staying more than a year. Not only did he come from a "broken home," but also so did everyone in his extended family. That's all he knew. But they were family—so he hung out with older relatives who distracted him from the woes of his life with drugs. At that time, he was only 10. It started off light, but then quickly grew into much stronger substance abuse. How does a fifth grader doing cocaine outside of school show up in the classroom? The student performs above average by all academic measures. But when returning to school from weekends or holiday breaks, he doesn't have anything to write about for "What traditions does your family have over the holidays?" or "What did you do over the weekend/break?" An upper elementary student doesn't just write "I took bong hits of weed laced with cocaine" in his school's writing journal or bring it up in the small group or whole class discussion. So what does he do?—Lie. He tells a story that has elements of truth: "I hung out with my cousins and friends and cracked jokes about each other." Technically, that was true—just incomplete. Should anyone have asked to know more, the story would have certainly turned to fiction.

That was fifth grade. In the years to come, he continued on this path that seemed to almost be a dichotomous relationship—doing drugs, selling drugs, and engaging in various criminal acts outside of school, all while performing at the top

of his class every year. Then the anger and resentment would build up, leading to hostility inside of school. The student got in multiple fights, was suspended several times, and was denied entry to the National Honor Society because he "had an attitude problem and rejected authority" as the club advisor put it.

What this story illuminates is the varying worlds that can coexist within our students—one at school and one at home. These worlds are not completely separate, as what happens at their homes affects how they show up in the classroom. In this student's case, how could he show up to school as his full authentic self? It was not possible. The lifestyle outside of school caused challenges inside of school. How could he be open and trusting when doing so could separate him from his family and put both him and his loved ones in jail? How could he build relationships with other students or even staff members? Because he was a top academic performer, he was often tracked into classes in which the classmates were not people he associated with outside of school. How does he show up authentically in that space? In short, he doesn't.

By authentically engaging students, we help them to tackle this endeavor of showing up as their authentic selves, rather than navigating that dilemma on their own. I know that would have helped me, as the student story outlined above is my story. Had I had this particular support, maybe I could have had something to write about in my fifth-grade writing journal that wasn't incomplete. But having lived through it and since becoming an educator, this part of my identity allows me to interrogate my own practice through a different lens.

The school system isn't designed to support a dynamic such as the one I lived through. I'm not advocating that we should condone 11 year olds abusing hard drugs, but I am saying that educators can examine our own beliefs and practices around how we invite students to authentically show up in the classroom. This is important because life is very much a collection of relational experiences. These experiences do not reside in a vacuum. We can, and must, interrogate our own beliefs about why a student might present themselves a certain way inside the school building.

While every child will show up differently based on what they are experiencing at

home, it is illogical to ask secondary teachers, who often have large student loads, to navigate this for every single student each day they show up to class, in addition to the already over-demanding role we play. While most teachers I know would love to be able to help all their students through such a complex task, we could not possibly do so and live healthy lives ourselves. However, we can reflect on how we invite students to show up as their authentic selves and create space to navigate those various identities that they may hold, and at times, hold in conflict.

The notion of "authentically engaging students" (a strategy) to show up as their authentic selves (the goal for students) seems vague. And it is. But that may be because there is not a one size fits all solution. Students, and people in general, are unique. So when I think about this dilemma, I think about student choice and voice—not just "What problem do you want to do first?" but "What problem matters to you? What is it you are looking to change?" and "What do you enjoy and how does that relate to the work we are doing?"

For instance, I teach multiple sections of a ninth-grade engineering class in a public community school in a large school district in California. I ask my ninth-grade engineering students, "What is a problem in your life, family, or community that you would like to see fixed?" Before students begin to design a solution, they individually brainstorm answers to this question. This is followed by sharing their ideas in their teams so they can collectively determine what is the problem they want to address. Some individuals and teams struggle to generate a list, but others have extensive lists that include everything from people barging in their room while they are trying to work or not wanting to clean their room, to forest fires or trash on their block, and even national and global issues, such as racism, poverty, unemployment, and COVID-19.

At this point, I ask a series of questions for students to reflect upon both individually and collectively. They include "Why did your team select this challenge as the one for which you want to design a solution?" and "Is your team choosing a challenge that you think would be easy to address, or one that is important to you?" I join each group and ask them to share out some of their

responses. Depending on their answers, I may push them to think more critically, think about what they would say if I wasn't here, or simply dig deeper in their reflection. This takes many different forms. One example involved students creating a mask sanitizing station for stores. I asked them why that was important and the initial response was that they wanted to make sure their mask was sanitized and safe. I challenged them by saying it is a great idea, but is it necessary if they could just put on a fresh mask. Members of the group shared that buying additional masks can really add up when you have several people in a household and the pandemic is already impacting families financially, particularly in their neighborhood. I shared that they need to use this justification when presenting their design brief. The students' first response was surface level, but after further questioning, they shared one that hit closer to home.

In considering my approach to challenging students' surface-level responses, it is important to recognize how well I have developed relationships with the students at this point. If they are still not sure if they can be authentic, I might invite them to dig deeper, but then leave the group to allow them to answer those questions without me around and then I can return later. If I have a good relationship, I can press a little harder in the moment to tease out more of the reasoning behind the project choice. This little step is crucial to helping breakdown the barrier between the students' world outside the classroom and how they show up in the classroom.

As the project progressed, students created multiple design sketches, decision matrices, 3D models and technical drawings, which finally culminated in a final presentation in which they not only shared their design solution, but also their entire learning journey both individually and collectively. The built-in reflection outlined above is implemented after each step throughout the entire project.

Students have always impressed me, but this particular project exceeded my expectations. While project implementation was far from perfect, the students still created designs that I would not have expected in a first-year engineering course. The mask sanitizing station mentioned earlier was carefully thought out with respect to how the individual pieces fit together and how the sanitizer can be refilled. A forest fire early detection sensor was beautifully designed using design

techniques that we did not even cover in class, but students chose to look up because they were invested in the project.

Students told their other teachers about the project and those teachers wanted to see their work. This led to a showcase that was shared with all staff. Most importantly, students told me how proud they were of what they accomplished. They stayed after class (on Zoom) to talk to me about their projects, and the process. They told me that they felt the work was important and it didn't always seem like "work." I told them that while the designs were important and I cared about the content, I was more interested in them reflecting on their journey with respect to what they took away from the project and how it was important in their lives outside of the classroom. Several students stated that is what they liked most—that I cared about what it meant beyond the academic space.

While this scenario is specific to my Intro to Engineering Design class, the approach is universal. Reflection, and more specifically, reflection that connects to students' lives outside of the classroom, is just one strategy that creates the opportunity for students to sincerely engage with the content. However, for reflection to be an effective tool for genuine engagement, students must be shown that they can be themselves. This can be done a few ways; teachers can share examples from their own lives or even share examples from current or previous classes (excluding student names). The more "real" educators get with the students, the more "real" students will show up in the class. When this happens, students will engage with the teacher and the class, even if they don't like the content. I have had multiple students who say "I hate engineering, but I love your class." While I can't say for certain, I believe it is the opportunity to be authentic that they enjoy. How they move through the world outside of our classroom becomes the same as how they show up inside our classroom.

Creating opportunities for students to explore the complex identities that they hold and the things that matter to them most is a starting point. This helps invite authenticity into the academic aspect of the classroom, but it also comes down to not policing behavior. If we want them to truly engage we can't get upset, reprimand, etc. when they actually do. So while I may not be able to offer a catch-

all solution, I hope that this allows us to question what we do in hopes that we do find a solution that fits our context. We, as educators, must ask ourselves, “What is it that we ‘deem acceptable?’ Do we actually allow students to show up authentically or do we punish them for doing so? Do we, ourselves, show up authentically, or do we put on a front of professionalism?” Let’s choose authenticity.

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