

Chalk Talk: In a teacher's voice

By KATIE RICHARDSON

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Organizational development expert Margaret Wheatley writes, “We live in a complex world, we often don’t know what’s going on, and we won’t be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time in not knowing.”



I return to this idea again and again, as an educator, an artist and community member. She says we must be “willing to be disturbed.” We must be willing to truly listen, to allow our foundation to be shaken, to be confused, to admit that we do not know. She suggests that when we are surprised or uncomfortable, we’ve just been handed an opportunity.

I pondered what to write for this column during a recent winter storms when I was snowshoeing through an open field. Upon reaching the forest edge, I turned around to see that I had mindlessly followed a previously broken-in path, a trail sunken about a foot down into the snowdrifts.

It would have been much harder to break a new trail, sinking deep with each step, so I hadn’t even considered it. But looking back, the path had no intention; it just meandered without purpose.

It made me reflect on the ease with which, as educators, we follow the path that is already broken in. That path may not be the most efficient or effective, but its easier to follow an existing path than to break a new ground.

As a professional development facilitator, I found myself asking teachers to try creating new paths, and to be “willing to be disturbed.”

Let me explain why. According to a 2011 Boston Globe article, “At least 45,000 teachers ... across Massachusetts lack adequate training to instruct students who speak limited English, potentially impeding thousands of students from advancing academically...”

Essentially, teacher preparation programs have failed to adequately prepare teachers to work with English Learners (ELLs), and the Department of Justice made it clear that this failure is unacceptable. ELLs are one of the state’s fastest growing groups of students; between 2001 and 2012, the number of ELLs in Massachusetts districts increased 64 percent, and this number is expected to continue rising. Furthermore, ELL students experience a significant achievement gap as compared with their peers.

Based on these findings, the RETELL Initiative — Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners — was created with the goal of improving instruction and achievement for ELLs across the state. One aspect of the initiative requires all teachers of ELLs to obtain an endorsement by successfully completing a state mandated course.

As a facilitator of this course, I've worked with 180 area teachers in the last two years. I'd like to honor their hard work, expertise, and "willingness to be disturbed."

If you know any teachers in this state, you may have heard the gripes about being forced to take this intensive graduate level course. Like many state programs, intentions are good, but execution complicated. Much of the content is worthwhile, but the workload is enormous and confusing. Understandably, teachers feel pressured, overworked and frustrated.

Despite numerous problems with the course design and workload, most teachers tackled the course thoughtfully, creatively, and (once they realized my intention really was to make it meaningful) with open minds.

As they exhaled and looked into the bright, eager eyes of their students, most acknowledged the benefits of adding some new strategies to their instructional tool kits. Most could accept that as the demographics of their students change, they might need to adapt their practice, and try something new.

These teachers emphatically saw the complicated needs of their increasingly diverse students, and embraced the opportunity for growth.

I learned so much from their collective expertise, and from witnessing their reflection and collaboration. I did my best to be honest and compassionate. Though the course is imperfect, I am an absolute advocate for the idea that as teachers we should always be learning and improving — and that we could be doing a better job teaching our ELLs.

It's too early to determine whether this required course for teachers across the state will achieve the intended outcome of improved achievement for ELLs in our state. I'm cautiously hopeful, as the ethical imperative is great. These students deserve an equal opportunity to succeed, and our investment in them now is essential for our future, as they will make up an increasingly large portion of our future society. However, adjustments to teaching practices take time. It is essential that the work to improve teaching for ELLs not end with one training course, but be continually integrated into professional practice.

We constantly expect our ELL students, who come from all over the world to a completely different way of thinking, speaking and acting, to embrace a new culture and school, to be "willing to be disturbed." The way I see it, we should be willing to do the same.

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